

THE FOOD OF

VIETNAM

LUKE
NGUYEN





I dedicate this book to all the wonderful street vendors, home cooks and chefs I had the pleasure of meeting and cooking with throughout Vietnam.

Thank you for sharing your stories and family recipes with me.

This book would not have been possible without the great work of some very special and extremely talented people, who all make up the 'Dream Team': Alan Benson, Suzanna Boyd, Leanne Kitchen, Michelle Noerianto, Sarah Hobbs, Chris Nair, Sarah Odgers and Katri Hilden.

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A journey to discover food & heritage

Growing up in Australia, food was an intrinsic link to my Vietnamese heritage and culture. Everything ‘Vietnamese’ I’d learnt as a child was passed on to me through the memories and knowledge of my parents, and the other families in my Vietnamese community. They shared these gifts with us, within our own ‘little Vietnam’ in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta. Our lifestyle, cooking and language were a version of our parents’ own upbringing.

Through all this, I was inspired to go to Vietnam. I felt a pull to discover the country and people of my own, and to hopefully understand more about the lives of my parents and my own life in Australia. But first I needed to follow the strongest of my passions — my dream of opening my own restaurant where I could showcase traditional Vietnamese food within the contemporary Sydney dining scene. My restaurant, Red Lantern, is more than a restaurant to me. It has been my dream fulfilled, but it has also taken me beyond my dreams and around the world, to expand my life and love of food and culture — far more than I ever could have asked for.

It brought to me Vietnam, where my journey to further understand my heritage, history and culture still continues, years later. Heavily schooled in southern cuisine, I wanted to learn about the country’s regional specialties, travelling not only to particular spots to visit my family, but also to areas where I had no relatives, links or knowledge: a discovery for the soul and the stomach!

In this book I begin my culinary discovery in southern Vietnam, where I trace my extended family. I meet my mother’s sisters — Aunties Eight and Nine, who show me where they, and my Mum, were brought up. After sharing their favourite family recipes and street-food spots, they introduce me to my cousins from the Mekong Delta.

Meeting my huge family who live along the mighty Mekong River was truly life-changing. I relearned their river lifestyle, and remember this experience so fondly; it is the first time that I have felt such a connection to the land — catching our own fish, prawns (shrimp), bush rats and snakes, and harvesting our own rice, herbs and vegetables. Growing our own food, knowing the smell of rain moving close by, raking the water to retrieve our catch, nurturing the livestock and plants — all these things made every plate of food we ate together ever so rewarding, and at the same time made me appreciate the interplay of generations of people, animal and plants.

Returning to Vietnam coincided with a period of change and development throughout the country. Vietnam had recently opened its doors to the global market, and international trade and business flooded in. The traditional and sometimes ancient ways of life — farming, producing, cooking, selling — were now being challenged to stay relevant, or be updated to suit the modern, developing world.

I am fascinated and in awe of the deftness the people display in much of their daily work — skills and knowledge handed down from generations before. Literally hundreds of years of knowledge accumulate through each person, and I’m conscious how lucky I was to be experiencing and recording

practices that may well be lost to future generations.

Later I visit the fishing folk of Mui Ne, who work the ocean waters by night, and in the early morning, prepare tonnes of seafood by hand, expertly cutting, slicing, drying and packing their catch for sale right along the beachfront. In the quiet fishing town of Quy Nhon, I learn the ancient art of handmaking tofu, and visit the famous Thien Huong Pagoda, where I am taught age-old vegetarian dishes, before being blessed by the pagoda's revered Buddhist monk.

The terrace fields of Da Lat, filled with exotic vegetables, local flowers and herbs, reflect the colonial influences of the French, who introduced the coffee plantations that now flourish under local hands and satisfy the country's own huge appetite for coffee drinking, their coffee also exported around the world.

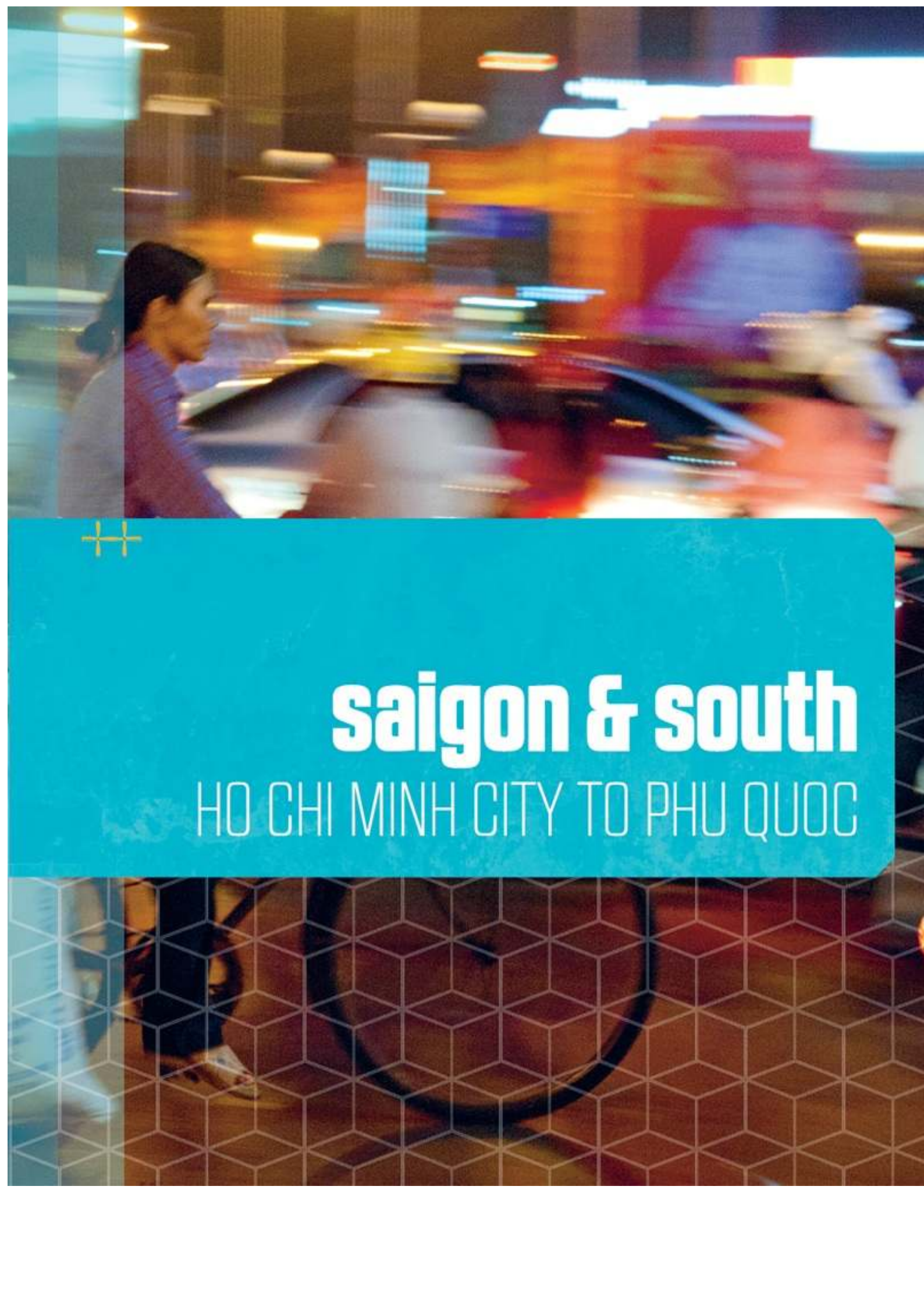
This first journey through Vietnam taught me so much, and I'm still learning something new every day. A lifetime of travelling, talking and eating throughout the country may not be enough to discover all that Vietnam has to share, but the people's stories and their memories are all in some way tied up in a single dish that is prepared; each technique is the word and practice of someone before them. I love to listen and watch as knowledge, history and culture is told through the form of food.

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Each place I visit, I meet people who are hospitable, welcoming and sharing. The Vietnamese never miss an opportunity to have a laugh. Their ability to make fun of themselves is the key to their resilience.



Hugged by the Gulf of Tonkin, Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea, Vietnam is part of South-East Asia. Influences from its nearest neighbours, China, Laos and Cambodia, have enriched Vietnamese cuisine, contributing to great regional diversity.



saigon & south

HO CHI MINH CITY TO PHU QUOC

HO CHI MINH CITY

Ho Chi Minh City, once known as Saigon, is Vietnam's largest city. It lies along the Saigon River some 80 kilometres (50 miles) from the South China Sea. With 9 million people and over 6 million motorbikes, this bustling, chaotic, cosmopolitan city always fills me with so much excitement and energy.

I head directly to Ben Thanh Market, a must-see for any visitor. Built by the French in 1912, it is surely Saigon's most colourful and vibrant market and has everything you need, from fabrics and cooking gear to souvenirs, dry goods and fake Gucci bags. But I'm here specifically for the street food and fresh produce, and to cook one of Saigon's most loved dishes: 'Canh chua ca', a tamarind and pineapple soup with fish, okra, tomato, elephant ear stems and fresh herbs.

I'm blown away by how fresh and cheap everything is. Pineapples, three for \$1; tomatoes, 50 cents a kilo; herbs, a ridiculous 10 cents a bunch! With a spring in my step I move on to the seafood section where most species are still kicking. Vietnamese love their produce super-fresh — alive whenever possible. My soup calls for mudfish, a fatty freshwater fish with great texture. The elderly lady selling them has no teeth and a great big smile, so I am drawn to her. She scales the big fish and chops it into thick cutlets, bone on. It costs \$3 — a bargain!

Finding the soup ingredients is easy, but the market is so busy it takes two hours to find a spot where we are not in anyone's way. The soup-making takes five hours to film, with locals demanding I make enough for them to all have a taste (you'll find a similar [tamarind seafood soup](#)).

One of the locals tells me of a street-food dish I have to try. The only details she gives are: 'It's called Hai Ba Trung in District 1, just past Dien Bien Phu Street. She makes the best green papaya salad in town!' So off I go in search of the Green Papaya Lady — but Hai Ba Trung is one of the longest streets in Saigon, so I'm not going to get my hopes up. As I pass Dien Bien Phu, I notice motorbikes pulling to the kerbside, all lined up in front of a cart with a cabinet filled with shredded green papaya. This has to be her!

As I approach her cart, she asks if I want to eat in or take away. Eat in? How do I do that, I ask. She points across the road, where her daughter is waving at me, directing me to cross the road. The street is busy, three lanes on either side, and the traffic is thick, so it takes a while to get through. The daughter hands me a plastic mat and tells me to sit under a tree, where many other locals sit waiting for their salad. She takes multiple orders and shouts out to her mother, 'Ten portions!' Mum is busy

working frantically to serve the motorbikes that are lined up for takeaways. Five minutes later, she carries ten portions of green papaya salad on a tray, crossing the road dodging traffic, trying not to get run over.

This is Saigon street food at its best: raw, chaotic, fun, quirky and delicious. I sit for hours watching the mother and daughter teamwork: the shouting of orders across the road and the weaving through the traffic is enthralling to observe.

As the sun fades and Saigon lights up, the energy of the city reaches another level. More street-food vendors appear as locals finish work, looking for a light snack before dinner. I notice a great-looking cart selling beef skewers, fish balls, wok-tossed corn with chilli, and beef rolled in betel leaves.

I've always wanted to cook on one of those classic food carts, so I chase after it as it is wheeled down the street. Tuan, the owner, kindly allows me to use it, and even volunteers to help me. Together we wok-toss thin slices of beef with lemongrass, garlic, chilli and wild betel leaf. The aroma of the lemongrass and garlic and the sweet scent of the betel leaf wafting through the streets attracts a queue of locals, who want to buy our dish. It is a winner, they love it!

The next morning we make our way to Cau Ong Lanh, a market neighbourhood in which both my parents grew up. Both sides of the family owned wholesale fruit stalls — Mum's side selling mangoes, durian, jackfruit and dragon fruit, Dad's side selling custard apples, rambutans, longans and lychees. The stalls were passed on to them from their parents, and my parents then passed the stalls over to their siblings when they left Vietnam. My grandmother, cousins, aunties and uncles still live there today and the market is still active, but on a much smaller scale. This area is my favourite place to visit in all of Saigon.

To me, Cau Ong Lanh is the 'real Saigon'; it feels as though nothing has changed for hundreds of years. The locals experience a lifestyle similar to the generation before them. The closeness of the community here — both in proximity and in kind — can be shocking at first, but for me always admirable and unique. The bond these people share relies heavily on the cramped environments in which they live. And as much as this style of living is based in poverty, the richness of the relationships within the community cannot be replicated. Walking through its narrow laneways gives me a true sense of the lifestyle of the Vietnamese people. Every time I return to visit my family here I imagine a life I might have had if my family didn't flee Vietnam. I may have run my own noodle cart or stayed within the family business of selling fruit; maybe I would've still ended up in the restaurant industry, and worked my way up to having my own place. Cooking, eating and spending time with my family in Cau Ong Lanh makes me appreciate the simpler things in life. We focus conversation on food, family and neighbourhood gossip and life feels a little less complicated for a moment.

Another area I love to visit is Hoc Mon, an hour's drive from the city, where my Auntie Eight lives. I actually don't know my aunty's real name; I've only ever addressed her by the number eight.

In Vietnamese culture, your parents are always regarded as number one, and the first child as number two, the second as number three and so on. It is rude to address your elders with their name; you must only address them by the position they are in the family. On my mother's side there are twelve children, and on my father's side there are ten, so growing up trying to remember each uncle and

aunty's number was a little tricky.

Aunty Eight runs a wholesale corn business; she receives truckloads of corn each day from Da Lat, the central highlands. Her team sorts the corn into eight different grades, the lowest grade sold make corn flour and the highest for grilling or making sweet puddings. My aunt kindly shares a recipe using the first grade corn when it is young and still white. Using it unripened releases a milky sap which results in the pudding being slightly thickened, with great texture. My Aunty Eight is fun, loud and is always the life of the party, but she is extremely shy in front of the camera. This side of her I just adore watching.



Every time I return I imagine a life I might have had if my family didn't flee Vietnam. I may have run my own noodle cart, or stayed within the family business of selling fruit.

GREEN PAPAYA SALAD WITH PRAWN & PORK

Green papaya is a very versatile ‘vegetable’. It can be pickled, poached in soups, or simply shredded and tossed in fresh salads. When choosing a green papaya, pick out the firmest one, and make sure it has no blotchy areas. If green papaya is left to ripen, it simply becomes a papaya fruit.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

- 1 small green papaya, about 180 g (6½ oz)
- 200 g (7 oz) Cooked pork belly (see [Basics](#)), thinly sliced
- 200 g (7 oz) cooked tiger prawns (shrimp), peeled and deveined, then sliced in half lengthways
- 5 mint leaves, thinly sliced
- 5 Asian basil leaves, thinly sliced
- 5 perilla leaves, thinly sliced
- 5 coriander (cilantro) leaves, thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons Nuoc mam cham dipping sauce (see [Basics](#))
- 1 tablespoon Fried red Asian shallots (see [Basics](#))
- 1 tablespoon crushed roasted peanuts
- ½ teaspoon Fried garlic chips (see [Basics](#))
- 1 red chilli, sliced

preparation

Peel the papaya, then cut into fine julienne strips. Submerge the papaya in cold water for 4 minutes then drain. (This keeps the crisp texture of the papaya.)

In a large bowl, combine the papaya, pork belly, prawns, sliced herbs and nuoc mam cham. Toss together well.

Turn the salad out onto a serving platter. Garnish with the fried shallots, peanuts, garlic chips and chilli.

Garnish with extra herb leaves if desired and serve.



CHARGRILLED SALMON SALAD

This is one of my favourite summer salads. It is colourful, textural and has such complex flavours. Salmon is not native to Vietnam, but has become very popular in the last few years. Most of the salmon served in Saigon comes from either Norway or Australia, although salmon is now being farmed in the northern mountains of Sapa, where low water temperatures are ideal for raising salmon.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

200 g (7 oz) salmon fillet, skin and bones removed
150 g (5½ oz/½ cup) Pickled vegetables (see [Basics](#))
1 handful watercress sprigs
5 perilla leaves, roughly sliced
5 mint leaves, roughly sliced
5 Vietnamese mint leaves, roughly sliced
1 teaspoon Fried garlic chips (see [Basics](#))
3 tablespoons Nuoc mam cham dipping sauce (see [Basics](#))
1 tablespoon crushed roasted peanuts
1 tablespoon Fried red Asian shallots (see [Basics](#))
1 red bird's eye chilli, sliced

SALMON MARINADE

1 garlic clove, crushed
2 teaspoons caster (superfine) sugar
1½ tablespoons fish sauce
1 red bird's eye chilli, sliced

preparation

Combine all the marinade ingredients in a bowl, stirring until the sugar has dissolved. Add the salmon and turn to coat. Cover and marinate for 30 minutes.

Chargrill the salmon over medium–high heat for 3 minutes, or until mediumrare, making sure it is well coloured on the outside. Remove from the heat and allow the salmon to rest for 5 minutes.

Flake the salmon flesh into a bowl, removing any small bones. Add the pickled vegetables, watercress, herbs, garlic chips and dipping sauce. Mix together well, then turn out onto a serving platter.

Garnish with the peanuts, fried shallots and chilli and serve.



STEAMED MUDFISH ROLLS WITH PORK & NOODLES

This recipe belongs to my Aunty Nine. We cooked and filmed this dish together just outside her house in Saigon. Her recipe calls for mudfish, but barramundi would also work well. Mudfish is a species of fish that lives and thrives in mud or muddy waters. Snakehead fish is also a type of mudfish.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

150 g (5½ oz) minced (ground) pork
2 fresh black fungus (wood ears), finely diced
1 garlic clove, finely diced
1 red Asian shallot, finely diced
1 teaspoon sugar
2 teaspoons fish sauce
½ teaspoon freshly ground white pepper
1 whole barramundi, about 700 g (1 lb 9 oz), cleaned and gutted
2 tablespoons Spring onion oil (see [Basics](#))
1 bunch coriander (cilantro), roots trimmed
2 tablespoons crushed roasted peanuts
12 dried round rice paper sheets, about 22 cm (8¾ inches) in diameter
150 g (5½ oz) rice vermicelli noodles, cooked according to packet instructions
1 bunch perilla, leaves picked
1 bunch mint, leaves picked
1 Lebanese (short) cucumber, cut into 3 cm (1¼ inch) batons
Nuoc mam cham dipping sauce (see [Basics](#)), to serve

preparation

In a mixing bowl, combine the pork, mushroom, garlic, shallot, sugar, fish sauce and white pepper. Mix together well, then set aside.

Make two deep, sharp incisions down both sides of the fish along the rib cage, following the backbone from the tail up towards the head. Cut where the backbone meets the head and where it meets the tail. Now carefully lift out the rib cage, leaving a boneless pocket to stuff the fish.

Using your hands, stuff the pork mixture into the pocket, then tie the fish up with kitchen string.

Half-fill a steamer, wok or large saucepan with water and bring to a rapid boil over high heat. Place the fish in the steamer, then cover and steam for 30 minutes.

Remove the fish from the steamer and place on a serving plate. Drizzle with the spring onion oil, then garnish with the coriander and crushed peanuts. Place the fish on the table for serving, along with the remaining ingredients.

Each diner then dips the rice paper sheets, one sheet at a time, in a large bowl of warm water until the sheets soften. Diners then roll the rice paper sheets around some steamed fish, noodles, perilla, mint, and cucumber, before dipping them into some nuoc mam cham.





The Green Paper Lady and her colleagues prepare and distribute every kind of snacks every day in the market. Soft, savoury, condensed cream and nut-like filling are delicious.

BEEF TOSSED WITH WILD BETEL LEAF & LEMONGRASS

It was so much fun cooking this dish on the streets of Saigon in District 1. Every time I walk past Hai Ba Trung Street, I always look out for Tuan, the street vendor who kindly let me borrow his cart to cook this dish. He is there every night without fail, and always with a great big smile on his face.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 lemongrass stem, white part only, finely diced
2 garlic cloves, finely diced
2 chillies, finely diced, plus extra to garnish
300 g (10½ oz) lean beef sirloin, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon fish sauce
1 tablespoon soy sauce
2 teaspoons sugar
15 betel leaves, roughly sliced
coriander (cilantro) sprigs, to garnish

preparation

Add the oil and lemongrass to a smoking-hot frying pan or wok. Cook for 5–10 seconds, or until fragrant, then add the garlic and chilli.

Now add the beef and stir-fry for 2 minutes. Season with the fish sauce, soy sauce and sugar, add the betel leaves and stir-fry for a further minute.

Transfer to a plate and garnish with the coriander and extra chilli. Serve with steamed jasmine rice.

‡ TIP

When dicing lemongrass, always use a sharp heavy knife. Don't discard the green tips of a lemongrass stem — steep them in hot water and enjoy as lemongrass tea.

CHARGRILLED PORK NECK WITH VERMICELLI NOODLES

This is a very popular dish throughout southern Vietnam. You can serve it all mixed up in a noodle bowl, or you could arrange the ingredients on a platter and let diners wrap the ingredients in fresh lettuce leaves or rice paper sheets. My favourite street vendor who serves this dish is found in my parents' old neighbourhood in District 1, called Cau Ong Lanh.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

2 tablespoons sugar
4 tablespoons fish sauce
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
6 spring onions (scallions), white part only, thinly sliced and pounded to a paste using a mortar and pestle, plus some sliced green ends to garnish
2 garlic cloves, finely diced
500 g (1 lb 2 oz) pork neck, thinly cut across the grain into slices 3 mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ inch) thick
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
12 bamboo skewers, or 6 disposable wooden chopsticks sliced lengthways down the middle
250 g (9 oz) rice vermicelli noodles, cooked according to packet instructions
5 mint leaves, roughly sliced
5 perilla leaves, roughly sliced
5 Vietnamese mint leaves, roughly sliced
1 Lebanese (short) cucumber, halved lengthways and sliced
2 handfuls bean sprouts
125 ml (4 fl oz/ $\frac{1}{2}$ cup) Nuoc mam cham dipping sauce (see [Basics](#))
4 tablespoons Spring onion oil (see [Basics](#))
4 tablespoons Fried red Asian shallots (see [Basics](#))
4 tablespoons crushed roasted peanuts

preparation

In a large mixing bowl, combine the sugar, fish sauce, honey and pepper. Mix until the sugar has dissolved, then add the bashed spring onion, garlic and pork.

Toss to coat the pork well, then pour the vegetable oil over the top. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for 2 hours, or overnight for an even tastier result.

When you're nearly ready to cook, soak the skewers in water for 20 minutes to prevent scorching.

Thread the pork onto the skewers, discarding the remaining marinade.

Chargrill the skewers over medium–high heat for 1–2 minutes on each side, or until cooked through and nicely browned.

Divide the noodles among serving bowls. Top with the herbs, cucumber and bean sprouts, then sit the pork skewers on top.

Drizzle each bowl with the nuoc mam cham and spring onion oil. Sprinkle with the fried shallots, crushed peanuts and green spring onion slices and serve.



POMELO & MUD CRAB SALAD

Native to South-East Asia, pomelo is found all through Vietnam. It is the largest citrus fruit in the world and I absolutely love it for its sweet, tangy tones, and its juicy flesh and pulp. Don't mistake pomelos for grapefruit, as they are far superior, although you can substitute them here. If you have any pomelo left over, do what Vietnamese do — dip it into salt and chilli for a snack.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

- 50 g (1¾ oz) dried shrimp
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 garlic clove, finely diced
- 1 large pink pomelo, or 2 small pink pomelos (see [Tips](#))
- 200 g (7 oz) picked mud crab meat (see [Tips](#))
- 5 mint leaves, sliced
- 5 perilla leaves, sliced
- 5 Vietnamese mint leaves, sliced
- 5 Asian basil leaves, sliced
- 1 tablespoon Fried red Asian shallots (see [Basics](#))
- 2 teaspoons Fried garlic chips (see [Basics](#))
- 3 tablespoons Nuoc mam cham dipping sauce (see [Basics](#))
- 1 large red chilli, sliced
- crushed roasted peanuts, to garnish

preparation

Soak the dried shrimp in water for 1 hour, then drain and set aside.

Add the oil to a hot frying pan. Add the garlic and cook for 5–10 seconds, or until fragrant.

Add the dried shrimp and stir-fry for 3 minutes, or until crispy and golden brown. Remove from the pan and allow to cool.

Peel and segment the pomelo. Break into bite-sized pieces, then place in a large mixing bowl. Add the cooled garlic and shrimp mixture, the crabmeat, herbs, fried shallots, garlic chips and nuoc mam cham. Toss together well.

Transfer to a dish, garnish with the chilli and peanuts. Serve garnished with extra herbs if desired.

‡ TIPS

The pomelo can be substituted with grapefruit.

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Instead of mud crab you can use blue swimmer or spanner crab.



SWAMP CABBAGE WOK-TOSSED WITH GINGER & PRESERVED BEAN CURD

Swamp cabbage is also known as water spinach or morning glory, but I always find it strange calling my favourite green vegetable morning glory. I have had this dish on my Red Lantern restaurant menu for the last ten years. Guests love it as it is simple and so incredibly flavoursome.

SERVES 4–6 as part of a shared meal

ingredients

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 tablespoon julienned fresh ginger

1 garlic clove, finely diced

200 g (7 oz) swamp cabbage (water spinach), torn into 5 cm (2 inch) lengths, discarding the bottom 3
5 cm (1¼–2 inches) of the stems

1 tablespoon fermented red bean curd, mashed

2 teaspoons sugar

½ teaspoon toasted sesame seeds

Fried garlic chips (see [Basics](#)), to garnish

preparation

Heat a wok over high heat. Add the oil, then add the ginger and garlic and stir-fry for 5–10 seconds, until fragrant. Add the swamp cabbage and, using a wooden spoon, work the greens around in the wok until they start to wilt.

Add the bean curd, sugar and a pinch of sea salt and stir-fry for a further 3 minutes.

Turn out onto a plate and garnish with the sesame seeds and garlic chips. Serve with steamed jasmine rice.



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