

FINANCIAL TIMES
March 18 2005

Hungry for more of Vietnam

By Anthony Bourdain

Nearly five weeks of hotel rooms, airport lounges, pressurised cabins, mammoth meals and equally mammoth amounts of drink and yet, only a few minutes out of Hanoi's Noi Ba Airport, I'm all but levitating – absolutely giddy with delight. I'm no longer jet-lagged, burned out, cynical or jaded. I'm alive. I'm hungry. And back in Vietnam.

I look out the window of the car taking me into Hanoi, see lush, green rice paddies, water buffalo, the women in their peaked hats bent at the hip, standing in calf-deep water. Motorbikes crowded with families, the children masked and dressed in bright colours, whizz by on both sides. The narrow, two-floor homes are decorated with rows of drying corn and though the sky is grey, the bright, bright red banners everywhere pop right out of the landscape with their New Year's greetings: Chuc Mung Nam Moi. There are also flags emblazoned with a yellow star on a bright red field, anticipating Monday's anniversary of the founding of the Vietnamese Communist party. The roads are crowded, more so than usual, with pedestrians and cyclists alike dressed in their Tet best; jackets and ties, babies swaddled in blankets or netting, women with scarves or face-masks covering everything below the eyes. Everyone is smiling and loaded with holiday goodies. They carry fruit, flowers, traditional chung cakes wrapped in artfully tied leaves, shimmering gold paper trees, bundles of bright red joss sticks as gifts, or offerings. The centre of the road is for four-wheeled vehicles – the cars and trucks barrelling at full speed headlong into each other's paths, then pulling aside at the very last second. There's the constant honking of horns that announces: "I'm here, keep doing what you're doing."

We were supposed to head straight to the Metropole Hotel, me, my friend Linh, and Chris and Lydia, the married, two-person camera team who follow me everywhere to shoot material for my television series. Because of the Tet holiday, most businesses are closed, but Linh is a Hanoi native and the three Americans are in tears at this point because we're so happy to be back. So, perhaps to give us time to compose ourselves before checking in to the hotel, we pull over at an open Bia Hoi joint as soon as we've crossed the long, Russian-built Dragon Bridge over the Red River.

Eight or nine people sit at low tables on tiny plastic chairs outside what looks like a former garage, with a large square keg of Bia Hoi, the legendary, fresh draft "bubble beer" of Hanoi prominently displayed on the kerb. You don't find this stuff in Saigon. The beer is made daily, dispatched to the shops and quickly consumed. Most places serving it run out by 4pm – and what's trucked outside the city seldom makes it too far south. We haven't even sat down yet and the proprietor hurries over to fill two glasses, challenging me to a "chug-a-lug". I drain my glass and we repeat the process two more times before I settle into my little chair.

He doesn't know me. There are no TV cameras present. He only knows there's a tall, enthusiastic-looking westerner in his place who seems interested in his beer and he wants me to

taste how good it is. His wife shows us her child, dressed in his holiday clothes. An ancient Vietnamese gentleman in a weathered tweed jacket and jaunty beret, smoking from a bamboo pipe at the next table, offers me a puff and another beer.

“Je suis un cinéaste,” he says. “Nous sommes tous cinéastes ici,” he adds, indicating a few other smiling septuagenarians around him. Soon the beer is coming fast and furious. The owner insists we wait while he changes to a fresh keg. I’m smiling – we’re all smiling so hard our faces hurt.

I love Vietnam. I love it now. I loved it from the minute I arrived for the first time, a few years ago. A year from now, I plan to live here. I will move to a small fishing village in a coastal area of Vietnam near Hoi An. I have no idea what I’m going to do there, other than write

about the experience. I plan only on being a visual curiosity, the lone westerner in a Vietnamese community; to rent a house, move in with few, if any, expectations and let the experience wash over me. Whatever happens, happens.

There are other beautiful places in the world. And there are other places – just like Vietnam – where the people are nice, the scenery beautiful, the food extraordinary. But Vietnam always feels so right. I have a theory that it’s to do with pheromones for me. Like when you meet the love of your life for the first time. Later, trying to describe why you love her, you struggle: sure, she’s beautiful, she’s brilliant, she’s funny, she can take apart and rebuild a 1967 Mustang to original factory spec. Yet that’s not why you love her. It’s something else. Maybe she just smells right. You sense, you know, that this is a woman you want to spend the rest of your life with. Reason and logic fly out the window. A more primal, uncontrollable and unquantifiable force is at work. This is the place you knew you always wanted to be. Even before you knew it.

As I sip my beer and chat with Linh and my fellow drinkers, beyond the kerb are passing vignettes of colour and beauty, the usual mad patterns of bicycles and mopeds miraculously weaving through crowded, yet fast moving streets. It’s a grey city, Hanoi. The infamous crachin of February, a constant, spitting rain, may not have officially begun, but the air is chilly and it’s drizzling ever so slightly. “Good luck for Tet,” Linh assures me. The rain and monochrome of the old city seem to highlight the supersaturated colours of the flags and banners, the clothes and packages. Old French colonial buildings sit side-by-side with the grim, socialist monoliths, ornate pagodas, and the ultra-narrow, multi-storey and at times wackily ornate homes of the new, not-so-underground economy. An hour in town, and already I’m tipsy, elated, goofily high and wanting to do everything at once.

“I eat here every day,” says Linh, breaking into a smile. It’s the next day and we’re sitting in Hanoi’s Old Quarter, greedily slurping down bowls of bun cha. An old man grills morsels of pork and pork meatballs over a small, homemade charcoal grill on the sidewalk. He squats on his haunches, turning the meat with bamboo splints, small plumes of smoke issuing from the coals as juice from the meat hits them. Just inside an open-to-the-street storefront, a hollow, charcoal-blackened space with a few communal tables and a worktable, the man’s wife ladles a mix of room temperature vinegar, nuoc mam (fish sauce), green papaya juice with sugar, pepper, garlic and chillies into bowls – a few slices of cucumber at the bottom of each. The still-sizzling meat hits the table at the same time as the “soup”, plus plates of lettuce, sweet basil, mint, cilantro and

raw vegetables. There are side plates of sliced red chillies, salt, pepper and lime – and a big plate of cold rice noodles. We drop some of the pork into our bowls, the meat releasing a thin slick of juice into the clear liquid, then, grabbing a bit of green and herb, a healthy ball of the cold noodles, we begin to dunk and slurp. The place is dark, cold and dirty – the floor littered with the detritus of Vietnamese post-lunch rush: papers, cigarette butts, empty beer bottles. (The Vietnamese drop litter with abandon – but always clean up scrupulously after.) The cooking equipment is rudimentary, the chopsticks look decades old, but the bun cha is amazing. Sweet, sour, meaty, crunchy, forceful yet clean-tasting and fresh. Caramelised just enough from the low temperature grilling. The cold rice noodles separate perfectly when dipped in the liquid. The owner's wife brings over some fried spring rolls and puffy shrimp cakes – also good to dip when the pork runs out.

You don't have to go looking for great food in Vietnam. Great food finds you. It's everywhere. In restaurants, cafes, little storefronts, in the streets; carried in makeshift portable kitchens on yokes borne by women vendors. Your cyclo-driver will invite you to his home; your guide will want to bring you to his favourite place. Strangers will rush up and offer you a taste of something they're proud of and think you should know about. It's a country filled with proud cooks – and passionate eaters.

By Hanoi's West Lake, families pull up in their scooters and file out on to the narrow spit of land extending into the water to the Cha Quoc temple. They're here to make Tet offerings to their gods and their ancestors, to burn incense, to reflect, to hope for good luck, good health and prosperity for the year to come. They carry offerings of fake cash and small cards depicting household appliances, cars, television sets, washing machines – all the things they can't afford but would like to pass over to their ancestors in the next world.

By the temple entrance, under a tarpaulin by the water's edge, an old woman carefully arranges two kinds of freshwater snails in bowls with crabmeat, noodles and tomatoes before ladling steaming hot pork broth over them. The smell coming off the broth is maddeningly good – and she's doing monster business from the crowds coming out of the temple, so, even though I'm not really hungry, I can't resist. I duck under the tarpaulin, squeeze through and scrunch down at a long, oilcloth-covered picnic table and try to find some place for my knees among a large, extended Vietnamese family. Linh just smiles and shakes his head. He understands. I catch the woman's eyes, point to the person sitting next to me, already slurping down the last of his noodles, point and smile. She beams back at me. She knows what I want.

You know – anywhere there are cooks, but especially in Vietnam – that when a proprietor or server smiles proudly at you like that, when locals are clamouring to get at what they're selling, when your fellow diners' expressions mirror your own, that good food is on the way. They do fast food just right in Vietnam. The glorious tradition of "one cook – one dish" ensures that the person making pho or spring rolls, or bun cha – or whatever they're selling – has likely been making it, and only it, for years and years. Often the skill has passed down from a previous generation. That kind of close identification with a single dish makes almost everything an expression of family pride, local spirit, even national identity.

The next day provides a typical example. Linh pulls the car over unexpectedly on the side of a main road. He leads me down an embankment to a shabby, litter-strewn neighbourhood, a slum. Down a long, forlorn looking alleyway to the smoky back entrance of Luong Nong Ong Tre – the Eel Shop. Two big pots steam on an outdoor grill. A few hard-drinking Vietnamese men are way over their limit inside, singing and shouting happily. On worn, bamboo matting outside, facing an unpaved intersection of alleyways and disused heavy machinery, are a few low plastic chairs and two wobbly, wooden tables. Mischievous street kids hurl unripe oranges at each other that they've pilfered from an anaemic looking tree.

“What do you eat here?” I ask Linh, foolishly.

“Eel,” he replies. “This is the Eel Shop. Only eel.”

As we wait for our food, we watch the comings and goings of the area, a small, poor, rural village in the middle of a big city. A trash collector in peaked round hat, face mask and gloves picks up rubbish bags and piles them into an overloaded handcart. Bicycles containing improbably balanced display racks of house wares, notions and nostrums pedals slowly by. The women are carrying yokes of fresh vegetables and fruit; men are selling lottery tickets; and someone pulls up on a motorbike to collect spent cooking oil from the Eel Shop. Another man takes away edible waste – to sell on to a pig farm.

Aluminum cans are picked up, whisked away to be processed in a growing underground industry: makeshift recycling operations in rice paddies outside town where the cans will be melted down in woks, stamped on by sandalled feet, the impurities that come to the surface skimmed off and sold for paint, the metal reformed, reshaped, reused. I'm told later that a number of Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese who've returned) and their partners are becoming wealthy on the unofficial recycling trade. One account of a Central Committee meeting has a member asking his comrades, “Why do we – all of us – always ask only the big questions? It took just one foreigner to ask a small question: Where does the garbage go?” It's a good question as everything is used – and nothing wasted in Vietnam.

In the kitchen, live eels are quickly divested of their bones (to be used for stock), sauced lightly and stuffed into lengths of hollow bamboo with garlic. The ends of the shoots are plugged with morning glory leaves and the bamboo is then charred slowly over the outdoor grill. When done, the bamboo is split lengthwise and served. I dig out tender hunks of smoky sweet eel – straight from the bamboo troughs, washing it down with Hanoi beer. Magnificent.

Wherever there are Vietnamese, whether it be Minneapolis or Melbourne, Vietnamese food tastes good. But Vietnamese food in Vietnam, when across the street it's Hanoi – a slice of apartment building, a faded, peeling façade, women hanging out their laundry, girls in their long ao dais pedalling by, the chatter of fruit vendors in the distance, the high, throaty vibrations of a thousand motorbikes, somewhere nearby two women giggling (perhaps at the freakishly tall, unbelievably hungry American who sits at the Eel Shop, ineptly struggling to eat with chopsticks) – when it's like that; the food tastes better.

I meet up with my camera crew later at the Metropole. We sit in comfortable rattan chairs at the Bamboo Bar, drenching in history. We drink vermouth cassis and review the day's events. Then we smile and when the conversation flags we just nod silently to one another – maybe an occasional “Oh yeah...” to commemorate how we're feeling.

We know we've got it good. We're happy to be alive. And still in Vietnam.

Anthony Bourdain is the bestselling author of 'Kitchen Confidential', 'A Cook's Tour' and Anthony Bourdain's Les Halles Cookbook'. His latest book, 'Typhoid Mary' is out now in paperback. All are published by Bloomsbury