

A STORY OF NUOC MAM.

ROMANCING THE EVOLUTION OF VIETNAMESE STREET FOOD IN NZ

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This is a story about how *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) from Phu Quoc Island, off the south west coast of Vietnam came to Shortland Street, Auckland. It is a story of a condiment and seasoning ingredient that really didn't exist in kiwi pantries until the millennium.

You hear the distinctive sound of a noodle knocker, the clap of bamboo on a wooden block echoing in rhythm to the street hawker calling out that her fresh, fragrant *pho bò* (beef noodle soup) is ready for you to inhale.

My Vietnamese love affair began in September 2000. It proved to be a profound and steamy mix of food, chefs, books and culture. I took many lovers of Vietnamese cuisine. It shook my very being, they appeared from nowhere. I was completely seduced by the exotic headiness that Graeme Greene wrote of so intricately in the *Quiet American*. I set up my office in the courtyard of the Hotel Continental in the middle of Saigon, and so my journey to understand Vietnamese taste and flavour dynamics began. Friends and family were still asking whether the country was a safe place to visit. I was more worried about whether I had left it too late to discover the essence of its cuisine before it was buggerised by the introduction of Western fast foods. When I arrived, McDonald's and K.F.C. didn't exist there. Boy has it changed and the rate of change extreme.

My aunt Helen was born in Pasteur Street in District 1 in the 1940's and her father was a very successful Chinese trader dividing his time between Vietnam and Hong Kong. It was in her kitchen in Hong Kong that I tasted my first bowl of *pho bò* and so began my quest to experience this in the country that had long fascinated me.

A chance introduction to well-known Australian Chinese cookbook author *Elizabeth Chong* by *Sue Fairlie-Cunninghame* at Tasting Australia followed, with Elizabeth and I conceiving a plan to run culinary tours in Vietnam. This also coincided with a commission by Random House to write my first handbook—an A to Z called *Discovering Asian Ingredients*.¹ Elizabeth decided after our reconnaissance trip that the pace and demands of taking gastronomic tours to Vietnam would be too much for her—she was turning 70. I decided then to do these on my own and still continue these culinary journeys today.

My chef friends in Vietnam and I fondly recall the 'glory days'. I witnessed the evolution of a dish that was unique to a suburb located in west Hanoi that became an overnight tourism story. *Pho cuốn*, did not exist in any other part of the country until the mid-2000s. It was a street stall dish, served from a corner at a cross-road, to workers in a former industrial enclave on the tiny Ngu Xa island village on Trúc Bach lake. The ingredients were readily available and in summer it was too hot to serve soup, so this humble fresh roll was invented. Consisting of steamed rice sheet, filled with butter-crunch lettuce, coriander, mint, Vietnamese hot-mint and stir-fried beef rump that you dunked into *nuoc mam chấm*, the fish sauce dipping sauce. Its beginnings were humble. A visit one year later and every man and his dog in this neighbourhood was serving it and it's not always as good as from that street corner where it began and where every lunch hour the young male cooks would compete with their flaming woks. A year after that, I see a swanky new café behind the

¹ Jennifer Yee, *Discovering Asian Ingredients*, (Auckland, Random House), 2002.

Opera House in Ho Chi Minh City, called *Wrap & Roll* with *pho cuon* on its shiny menu above a counter attended by hip young uniformed staff. The slick fit-out was a million years away from the plastic stools I'd sat on when chef friend *Bobby Chinn* and I ate these in the early 2000's. I knew then that this was Vietnamese street food at its best. Now there are over 60 vendors and cafés alone in that village selling *pho cuon*.

Barbara Santich was invited to give a key note address some years ago at the New Zealand Guild of Food Writers' conference and it was timed to coincide with the launch of her book *Looking for Flavour*.² Here she clearly describes how the evolution of a recipe becomes locally recognised and then later a regional dish. This was what I had witnessed in Hanoi. It has made a very lasting impression and I almost wished I hadn't discovered *pho cuon* as a culinary tourist nor taken my group of foreign guests there on xe ôm (motor-bike taxis). That island will never be the same. The Vietnamese are all too quick to grab a good commercial opportunity.

Nuoc mam is at the heart of nearly every meal in Vietnam. It is the salt equivalent in the Vietnamese kitchen. Throughout history many cultures have used a version of fish sauce as a flavouring ingredient, for example aquamen or garum in ancient Roman times. Vietnamese fish sauce is largely produced in either Phan Thiet or Phú Quốc, a Vietnamese island off the coast of Cambodia. The gold standard fish sauce is the colour of a good single malt whisky and produced by fermenting anchovies and salt in large wooden vats banded with heavy rattan. Arriving in either Phan Thiet or Phú Quốc, the air is unmistakably scented with a distinctive savoury, umami character. Phú Quốc is also famous for its peppercorns and I recall my late husband David being struck by the beauty of two young Vietnamese women harvesting clusters of verdant green peppercorns from lush vines. I bought back to Saigon a kilo each of fresh green and dried black peppercorns. The green peppercorns were used to prepare

beef steak au poivre for the family of a Vietnamese photographer friend who grew up in Paris. These Phú Quốc black peppercorns I still use in my own kitchen.

Now to consider how *nuoc mam* may have been introduced into the New Zealand pantry—was it the quintessential flavouring that was carried by early Vietnamese migrants to be used in home cooking? Vietnamese migration to New Zealand began with the first settlement of Vietnam war refugees being granted approval in 1976, a year after the fall of Saigon. Those initial approvals were to diplomats, their families and staff already in New Zealand, and to Vietnamese students. 'The greatest intake of Vietnamese refugees occurred between 1979 and 1980 when approximately 1,500 arrived. The following year approvals declined significantly, and ever since have fluctuated at much lower levels.'³ As a comparison, in the 2011 Australian census more than 180,000 Australians indicated Vietnam was their place of birth but it is estimated that it is likely to be more than 200,000 as many do not declare their place of birth in the survey.⁴

The New Zealand census figures from 1976 show the number of residents born in Vietnam:

- 1976 236
- 2001 3,948
- 2006 4,875
- 2013 6,153

This migration was to eventually have an effect on the introduction of Vietnamese owned and operated small businesses such as bakeries and fast food outlets as these allowed families to work together in a supportive environment. Vietnamese cuisine began to flourish as simple family operated cafés and restaurants and gained popularity. These early restaurants

³ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/vietnamese/page-1>

⁴ Table 8.23 Population, sex and country of birth, states and territories, 2011 Census. Australian Bureau of statistics. www.ausstats.abs.gov.au

² Barbara Santich, *Looking for Flavour*. Wakefield Press, Adelaide. 1996.

served somewhat toned down versions of Vietnamese dishes but there was no doubt that *nuoc mam* was used in marinades, sauces and dressings.

Back in the 1980's, the iconic *Mekong* on Upper Queen Street was one of the early restaurants in Auckland's CBD to bring Vietnamese flavours to kiwi palates. There was still the lack of herbs that represented the essence of true Vietnamese dishes, as locals were not so familiar with fragrant purple Asian basil and the peppery Vietnamese mint that we can now buy in almost every supermarket or garden centre. Over the next decades, these simple Vietnamese restaurants, serving popular staples such as spring rolls, lemongrass chicken and beef noodle soup, appeared in several suburbs with a cluster still concentrated in Otahuhu, 13km from central Auckland. Otahuhu is largely where the Vietnamese community have established businesses, and it is also where the Vietnamese Buddhist temple is located. Unfortunately most served food lacking the flavours and vibrancy of true Vietnamese recipes. I have lost count of the number of times, when previously asked where to find authentic Vietnamese food in New Zealand, I'd automatically reply 'at home or you need to take a trip to Footscray Melbourne or Cabramatta in Sydney, Australia.'

I spoke to *Chris Hutton*, general manager of *Oriental Merchants*, an Australasian importer of Asian ingredients to gain an understanding of when fish sauce became 'mainstream' or available in supermarkets.⁵ *Oriental Merchant* entered the New Zealand market in 2000 and has had fish sauce listed on their inventory since then, however it wasn't until *Progressive* owned supermarket chain *Countdown* introduced fish sauce under their *Signature* brand approximately 4 years ago that the *Oriental Merchant* brand *Ponsoon* also became readily available to shoppers in the international and delicatessen sections. *Squid Brand* is their popular label for food service. Chris still sees potential for fish sauce as a condiment to become as mainstream as *Thai sweet chilli sauce*, however she agrees that

5 Chris Hutton, interview by author, 22 November, 2014

Vietnamese cuisine has grown in popularity tremendously in recent times. In the Australian market, fish sauce sales have long been mainstream.

Oriental Merchant also sells *nuoc mam cham*, fish sauce based Vietnamese dipping sauce for *goi cuon* summer rolls and fried spring rolls (*cha giò*). Chris comments that Vietnamese food here is perceived as good value, fresh and reasonably healthy. Other Vietnamese ingredients that have emerged in our pantry are *bánh tráng* (rice paper sheets) and *bún* (rice stick noodles). The popularity of *goi cuon* rice paper rolls and fresh herbaceous Vietnamese green papaya or mango salads with a hot, sweet, sour and savoury *nuoc mam* dressing has seen a boost in its usage as has the evolution of Vietnamese eateries from 'cheap and cheerful' to more modern, mid-priced to upscale restaurants with improved table service.

In an attempt to find further evidence of Vietnamese ingredients being added to our shopping baskets, I trolled the NZ Statistics consumer price index (CPI) basket.⁶ This shoppers' basket reflects changes in consumer spending patterns over the last 100 years, however the closest I found were the additions of soy sauce in 2006 and frozen prawns in 2014. Of the listing of food imports from Vietnam from 2012-14, only coconut, cashew nuts, crustaceans and coffee were mentioned.⁷

In 2009, I was invited by hospitality veteran *Krishna Botica* and her business partners *Tony McGeorge* and their head chef *Jason van Dorsten* to assist them on their *Café Hanoi* concept focusing on northern regional Vietnamese cuisine. I designed a trip for this team of restaurant professionals which took them to Vietnam to experience authentic Vietnamese food and culture. *Café Hanoi* restaurant was the first to open in the new Britomart precinct in downtown Auckland in August 2010. It has been at the forefront of a new wave of Auckland based Vietnamese cafés and restaurants including modern Vietnamese inspired menus that have

6 <http://www.stats.govt.nz/cpichanges/cpibasketchanges/index.html>

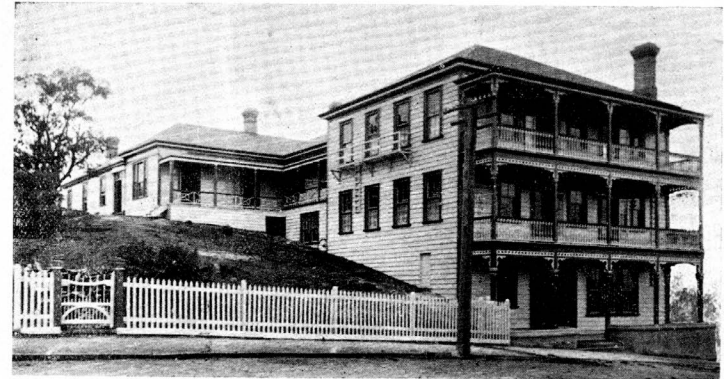
7 [http://www.stats.govt.nz/~media/Stat...s/global-nz/jun-13/Global NZ 2013.pdf](http://www.stats.govt.nz/~media/Stat...s/global-nz/jun-13/Global%20NZ%2013.pdf)

emerged over the last 5 years— *Café Viet*, *Mekong Baby*, *Parkside*, *Le Vietnamese*, *Peasant* and recently *Sen* in the old Colonial Ammunition Company C.A.C. building. They have certainly raised the bar from the familiar mum and pop joints serving cheap and cheerful basics.

On Monday 10 November 2014, a young entrepreneurial Vietnamese woman *Joni Hong Hoang*, who grew up in the historic Cholon Chinese District 5, opened a ‘hole in the wall’ called *District 5* on Shortland Street—a café selling Vietnamese street food including *pho bò* and *bánh mì* (sandwiches). Yes, it’s true, *Nuoc mam* now pervades the streets of downtown Auckland.



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