

# Food for Thought: Noodle Revolution --- It's Not Just Broth And Noodles; Pho Is Passion in a Bowl

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Everything changes, even in Hanoi. For years this city evaded the forces of culinary globalization as people were more concerned about getting enough to eat than what they ate. A place where the proudest boast of food stalls was that they pre-dated the 1945 revolution and where new restaurants appeared at the rate of one a decade is now caught in the spinning wheels of fashion. It's not just the fleeting appearance of California cuisine, restaurants du jour, wasabi-flavored mashed potatoes or other dishes of the moment. Change has been sweeping through the basic staple dish, the one thing all Hanoians eat -- pho.

Pho (approximately pronounced "fuh") may just be soup noodles, a dish of broth, meat and noodles not much different than that found across Asia. But in Vietnam it arouses considerable passions, even political debate. In the 1950s, writer Nguyen Tuan was condemned as a bourgeois reactionary and banned from publishing after he wrote an elegy to pho. Writers were supposed to focus on the glorious onward march of the revolution, not trivialities such as food. Mr. Tuan's essay was in fact a sly criticism of the Communist Party and the damage its thought police were inflicting on Vietnamese culture. Framing his attack in terms of pho was an effective way to tap into a deep vein of Vietnamese identity.

The communist government closed most pho stalls back in the 1950s when they represented the insidious force of private enterprise. In the 1970s and 1980s, food was so scarce in Hanoi that most of the speakeasy soup joints that served pho in a semi-clandestine way closed down. State-owned restaurants served the dish but it was often thin and watery, the cheap noodles draped not with slices of rare meat but with gritty pickled vegetables.

## FULL TEXT

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With a return to relative economic health over the past decade, pho is once again part of the rhythm of life. In any street in Hanoi you are likely to be awoken before dawn by the clattering of pans as the stalls are set up.

But today's pho is not necessarily the pho of old. The same kinds of food scares that are common throughout Asia have made their mark on Vietnam's staple noodle. In Hanoi, rumors about the toxic effects of certain meats and vegetables regularly swirl through the many markets. Beef pho -- known as pho bo -- is back in style because of fears about viruses spread by chicken.

Growing health consciousness also plays out in the country's pho stalls. White chicken and less-fatty beef are in greater demand, while MSG, which surged in popularity in the early 1990s when it first became affordable for most people, is now rarely sprinkled on pho with such abandon.

Everyone in the city has a favorite pho stall and beliefs about what exactly constitutes good pho. There's general agreement that pho requires a rich, steaming broth kept at a low simmer, often for as long as 12 hours. Fresh, thick rice noodles are the other main ingredient, although dried noodles in a packet have made their dismal presence felt. But after the broth and the noodles, the debate begins. The simplest variety of pho has only slices of beef or chicken, while more intricate versions have everything from meatballs to beef tendon to tripe to raw eggs.

Diners add their own fish and chili sauces, garlic pickled in weak vinegar and lime juice. Sprinkled on top are spring onions, chilis and, in the south, bean sprouts. Handfuls of herbs, such as varieties of mint and basil, give off a powerful scent when they hit the hot broth.

North Vietnam may have conquered the South, but southern pho is getting revenge. Traditionally, northern pho, which purists maintain is the original dish, tends to be simpler with a plain broth poured over meat and noodles. Southern pho comes with more embellishments, a spicier soup and more herbs and vegetables, reflecting the better produce in the warmer south.

The bracing, hotter pho of the south, laced with star anise and cardamom, is now increasingly popular in Hanoi. Pho used to come in irregular, rough bowls that looked like something from a child's pottery class. Now the Saigon influence has forced everyone to upgrade to imported china and plastic chopsticks.

Mr. Hoang's stall at 23C Hai Ba Trung Street in central Hanoi has been serving pho for three generations, and it's one of the few stalls that stays open morning and night. Unusually for a venerable Hanoi stall, it has both pho bo and pho ga (chicken). Mr. Hoang's also has two new types of pho that it claims to have invented including pho sot vang, beef chunks cooked in a wine sauce. It's a dish that made one Hanoian raised on pho crinkle her nose in horror ("disgusting," is how she described it).

The stall also has a variant on the popular pho bo, called pho bo tai. This dish normally has thin slices of beef cooked briefly by dunking it in hot broth. Mr. Hoang's minces the beef and then blanches it just for a moment, leaving the beef very rare.

At 7 Nam Ngu Street, Pho Lam also has been doling out bowls of soup since the 1950s. It's reputed to be one of the best places for pho ga. Mrs. Huong, the founder, is now retired and the shop is run by her two daughters. Mrs. Lam,

one of the two pho sisters, maintains she is a high priestess of real pho ga. "I'd rather close my shop than serve southern pho," she says when asked about habits imported from the south.

But even Pho Lam hasn't been able to resist the tide of change. With markets full of cheap Chinese eggs, most diners are choosing to add one to their pho -- heresy for some. A dish of beef was recently spotted at the stall, another indication that Mrs. Lam may be bending in the gusty winds of commercial pressure.

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| Finding Pho                                                             |
| Where to eat pho in Hanoi:                                              |
| Pho Lam: 7 Nam Ngu Street                                               |
| Mr Hoang's: 23C Hai Ba Trung                                            |
| Pho Hang Dong: Hang Dong Street                                         |
| Pho Tu Do: Cau Go Street                                                |
| A pho glossary:                                                         |
| Vietnam is a tonal language with six ways to pronounce most words. This |
| won't help you say what you want, but it will allow you to read the     |
| signs:                                                                  |
| pho bo -- beef soup noodles                                             |
| pho ga -- chicken soup noodles                                          |
| pho bo tai -- rare beef soup noodles                                    |
| bo vien -- meatballs                                                    |
| gan -- tendon                                                           |
| gau -- brisket                                                          |
| nam -- flank steak                                                      |

|                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------|
| sach -- tripe                                     |
| dan -- egg                                        |
| bun bo Hue -- Hue-style pork and beef noodle soup |
| dua -- chopsticks                                 |
| cai thia -- soup spoon                            |
| nuoc mam -- fish sauce                            |
| tuong ot -- chili sauce                           |
| chanh -- lime                                     |

## DETAILS

|                                |                                                                             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Business indexing term:</b> | Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places |
| <b>Subject:</b>                | Restaurants; Beef; Eggs; Herbs; Food                                        |
| <b>Publication title:</b>      | Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong                              |
| <b>Pages:</b>                  | P8                                                                          |
| <b>Number of pages:</b>        | 0                                                                           |
| <b>Publication year:</b>       | 1999                                                                        |
| <b>Publication date:</b>       | Jun 18, 1999                                                                |
| <b>Section:</b>                | Personal Journal                                                            |
| <b>Publisher:</b>              | Dow Jones & Company Inc.                                                    |
| <b>Place of publication:</b>   | Victoria, Hong Kong                                                         |
| <b>Country of publication:</b> | United States, Victoria, Hong Kong                                          |
| <b>Publication subject:</b>    | Business And Economics--Banking And Finance                                 |
| <b>ISSN:</b>                   | 03779920                                                                    |
| <b>Source type:</b>            | Newspaper                                                                   |

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Language of publication:</b> | English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Document type:</b>           | NEWSPAPER                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>ProQuest document ID:</b>    | 315521646                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Document URL:</b>            | <a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-noodle-revolution-not-just-broth/docview/315521646/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-noodle-revolution-not-just-broth/docview/315521646/se-2?accountid=11311</a> |
| <b>Copyright:</b>               | Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Jun 18, 1999                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Last updated:</b>            | 2023-11-20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Database:</b>                | ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

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