

Food for Thought: A Loaf of Bread, a Jug of Wine --- Asian Cuisine Retains Few French Influences, Save Vietnam's Banh Mi

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

These almond-shaped loaves, about a third the length of an average baguette, are the most enduring legacy of the French rule of Vietnam. But even these loaves are now far more distinctly Vietnamese than French. Cooked without salt, normally used to slow the yeast's leavening of the dough, they're generally more airy and oily, and less sweet than anything found in France. Variations in flour and yeast mean that French bread always tastes different around the world, but these loaves have taken on an identity apart from their origins. Indeed, overseas Vietnamese communities set up bakeries to reproduce this bread rather than buying local variants of French loaves.

Bread, coffee and a few other legacies of French colonialism may be ubiquitous again in Vietnam, but what is surprising is how little the French really left behind in Asia given the global standing of their cuisine. French restaurants have sprung up across Indochina, but they cater mostly to tourists and expatriates. Otherwise, much of the taste for French food has evaporated over the years of war, political turmoil and economic chaos that afflicted Indochina.

So now that food shortages are a thing of the past, at least for Vietnamese living in cities, and the country is more open to the world, has the French influence returned? Well, the answer is yes and no. The new French restaurants in Vietnam have revived the growing of European produce, particularly in the temperate highlands around Dalat in southern Vietnam. Hanoi is one of the best places in Asia to buy French cheese and wine at reasonable prices, and Ho Chi Minh City, which always retained more the influences of France than Hanoi, now has some of the best French food in Asia.

FULL TEXT

In Hanoi, late at night when darkness and its accompanying damp mist have settled over the city and the angry swarming traffic dies away, you can hear the plaintive cries of bread sellers wandering the streets. Elongated calls of "banh mi," the final syllable drawn out so it carries through the dark streets, rise and fall as the vendors pass, wheeling bicycles loaded with panniers of warm loaves.

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All the French restaurants closed in Hanoi after independence in 1954; the grand hotels that once imported the best foods and wines from France were handed over to the austere socialist government. Bread persisted as a staple, handed out to those with ration cards, but there was little in the way of butter, cheese, pate or wine, the quintessential components of the Gallic diet.

Vietnamese eat the bread, not for breakfast with jam, but with a dash of fish sauce.

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Economic reforms have led to a resurgence in new foods and a desire for novel tastes, but even wealthier urban Vietnamese have not migrated back to French food in any great numbers. A liking for foreign cuisine is still regarded as sophisticated and thus lends itself to accusations of pretentiousness. The 1930s writer Vu Trong Phung has a character in his novel "Dumb Luck" who eats bread and chocolate for breakfast while powdering his face white. The message is clear and still carries some weight.

Annabel Jackson, author of several books on Vietnamese food, has noted this resurgence of French restaurants and believes they are having an influence on the design and service of Vietnamese restaurants, both of which have improved markedly in the past decade. But on the food itself, she adds: "I see no particular new French influence."

Some dishes have endured and even become more popular in recent years. Unusually for Asians, many Vietnamese have a fondness for slabs of beef. Bit tet -- a Vietnamese version of France's most popular dish of steak frites -- has come back in Hanoi. There is also a widespread taste for various types of pate. One Vietnamese saying goes something like: "Best is forbidden sex, next best is pork pate."

But the culinary connection to the French lingered mostly in the language. Vietnamese cuisine has many dishes where one ingredient is chopped finely and stuffed inside another. A typical dish of this kind is squid stuffed with spiced minced pork. In Vietnamese the technique is known as pha xi; in French it is farcie. Kem karamen (creme caramel), bo (beurre) and pho mat (fromage) all endured in the mind, even if they rarely appeared on the tongue in those long decades of rationing.

Around Asia, French food is widely recognized as a great cuisine but it hasn't much integrated into local tastes. The Portuguese are responsible for the spread of chilis, tomatoes, corn and potatoes and for the popularity of deep-fried foods such as tempura. They spread spices and tea to Europe and brought a range of ingredients back. They took their wines around the world and created unique and enduring culinary blends in such places as Goa, Macau and Malacca.

The French seemed to have much less impact on food in Asia. Outside of Indochina, they only had small colonies in China and India. Pondicherry, which joined India formally in 1962 after nearly 300 years as a French colony, has some Gallic touches such as the red kepis worn by policemen. But it's known more for its yoga ashram than any

hybrid culinary tradition.

Coming from a country with its own rich agricultural bounty, the French seemed less interested than other colonists in setting up trading routes for food, although this has of course changed today. French ingredients, particularly dairy products, didn't lend themselves to deep penetration into the cuisines of mostly lactose-intolerant people.

Vietnamese do eat some mild cheeses -- foil-wrapped triangles of Laughing Cow are popular -- but most people recoil from anything more pungent.

Political upheavals and war in Indochina erased much of the remaining influence of the French. King Sihanouk may have bemoaned the shortage of foie gras when under palace arrest in Phnom Penh during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, but his people were more concerned about getting anything at all to eat.

One country that has taken to French food with a vengeance in past years is Japan. "Tokyo Nouvelle" emerged in the 1980s as a popular type of food, with French-trained chefs using Japanese ingredients or vice versa. The food writer Elizabeth Andoh writes of a restaurant in Tokyo called Imari that is known for its French tea ceremony meal. The meal follows the strict rules of the tea ceremony but, for example, the course known as hassun, which pairs something from the sea with something from land, is a mix of garlic-laced sea snails and endive dressed in a miso sauce. She also noted the emergence of a popular form of sashimi flavored with olive oil, vinegar and herbs.

Now the French devote considerable energy to selling their food and wine across the region. They have been battered recently by a spate of food scares but will doubtless bounce back. In the meantime, they have been opening their doors to Asian influences -- the hottest restaurants in Paris at the moment are serving French takes on Asian food.

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