



Food from Afar

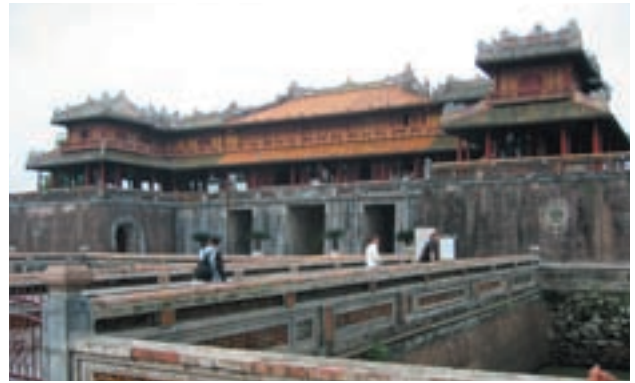
By Nateampai Sarakosass

Aromatic and fragrant, the perfumed cuisine of Vietnam is sharp, sweet, tangy and bitter - imprinting itself on the memory as it imprints itself on the palate.

Vietnam is one of the truly captivating 'East Meet West' destinations - at its core Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by China - at the peak of Chinese hegemony over Asia, Vietnamese scholars would take Imperial examinations in Mandarin in the hopes of working their way up through the Empire's vast bureaucracy. Then of course came the French and their attempts to recreate a portion of La Belle Epoque in this far flung corner of the world. Mix in some Khmer, Buddhist, Confucian and American influence and you can see how Vietnam's culture and cuisine have become so intriguing.

My friend Raweewan and I went to university together, but our lives have taken us on different paths. She now stalks the corridors of one of Thailand's most successful advertising agencies while I slave over a hot stove. After a recent trip to Vietnam she brought me back a cookbook. Nice gift, but be careful, the hidden agenda is slipping - I've noticed when friends give you cookbooks they expect to them to be used to cooked lavish meals. *Authentic Recipes from Vietnam* by Trieu Thi Choi was both a map and springboard for me, offering diversions for the adventurous reader to follow on their own, and a satisfyingly authentic selection of dishes to keep the strict Vietnam-ophile happy.

Vietnamese cuisine places a lot of emphasis on fresh herbs and raw vegetables - it's healthy, light and utterly delicious. All the ingredients are readily available throughout Asian markets and supermarkets. The **Betel leaf** is a green, heart-shaped leaf believed to be useful for various medical purposes; a stimulant, an antiseptic, a decongestant and a digestion aid among other things. In Ayurvedic medicine, the betel leaf is held to be an aphrodisiac; possibly due to its heart shape and mild stimulant properties, while in Vietnamese culture the betel leaf and betel nut are a symbol of marriage. These small palm-sized leaves are great for salad and wrapping meat for grilling.



A **banana blossom**, sometimes called the Asian artichoke, is the unopened male flower of the banana plant. Peeling off the gorgeous red petals reveals layer after layer of the whiter and more delicate texture of the petals and the tiny undeveloped banana clumps. The soft creamy white inner petals are traditionally thinly sliced and immediately soaked in cold water mixed with limejuice to prevent discoloration. They can be eaten raw, or else simmered in salted water until tender, whereupon the taste becomes very similar to the artichoke.

Five-spice powder is a blend of five balancing flavours; bitter, sweet, hot, sour and bitter, and made with a blend of cinnamon, star anise, cloves, fennel seeds and Szechwan or Sichuan peppercorns. It can be readily found in any Asian supermarket, but it's a nice idea to make your own for maximum freshness.

First, toast all your spices in a hot pan until the oil and aroma are released, then blend together in a spice grinder or mortar and pestle. Blend the spices to your liking; starting with a one-to-one ratio, and then adjusting to suit taste - like an Indian masala, every Chinese household has a different five-spice mix.

Continued overleaf



Grilled Pork Rolls Wrapped in Betel Leaves 🍴

Slice 500 g pork tenderloin or sirloin into strips, marinate in 2 tsp five spice powder, 2 tsp curry powder, 1/2 tsp turmeric powder, 2 tsp sugar, 1 tblsp soy sauce, 2 tblsp minced lemongrass, 2 cloves minced garlic, and 1 tsp ground white pepper for an hour, then wrap with soaked large betel leaves, skewer them, then grill and serve with fish sauce dip.

Fish Sauce Dip (Nuoc Mam Cham) 🍴

In a pot mix 1/8 cup water, 2 tblsp rice vinegar, 3 tblsp sugar, 1 finger-length red chilli - deseeded and minced, 2 cloves minced garlic, 1 tblsp freshly-squeezed lime juice and 3 tblsp fish sauce into a pot. Bring to the boil then simmer for 3 minutes. Before serving, add julienned daikon and carrots.



Banana Blossom Salad with Shrimp 🍴

Thinly slice one young banana blossom (you will get around 1 cup). Soak the banana shreds briefly in bowl of iced water mixed with lime, before blanching them into a large pot of boiling water. Blanch for two minutes and then return to the iced lime water to shock and then drain.

While the banana blossom drains, plunge 8 shelled and deveined prawns, tails intact, into boiling water until pink and just cooked through.

Toss the banana blossom and prawns together with 1/2 cup of the fish sauce dip above, 1 tblsp minced ginger, 1 tblsp crushed toasted peanuts, and thinly sliced saw leaves. Crisply fried shallots make another excellent garnish.

Serve alongside a variety of crunchy vegetables.

