



# Vietnam's Food Systems

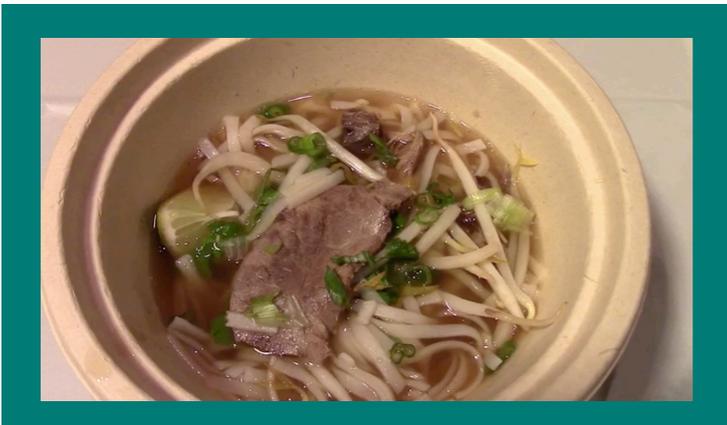
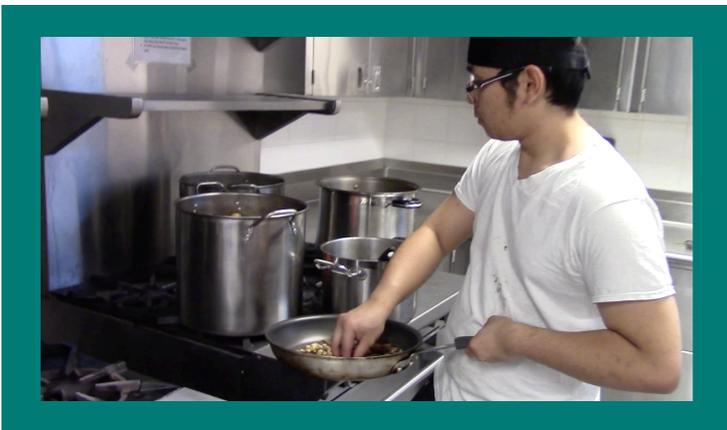
FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE

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# FÍLM SYNOPSIS

This film explores Vietnam's historical cuisine, agricultural landscape, and climate challenges.



Before traveling to Vietnam, I knew about Pho, the country's infamous noodle soup. Each savory dish consists of rice noodles, herbs like basil and star anise, and thin-cut slices of beef held in a delicate golden broth. I knew about banh mi baguettes, a cultural fusion from when the French occupied Vietnam. Before my trip, a Vietnamese friend had drawn up a list of foods for me to try while in country: various noodle soups and rice dishes, spicy fish dishes and those with beef. He also urged me to try all the fruits like papaya and durian and the famous egg coffee of Hanoi. To my friend, sampling the foods and traversing the markets at any time of day from dawn to midnight was an integral part of experiencing Vietnam. This did not surprise me given that most Vietnamese events I had attended at Cornell before my trip centered around food and that Vietnam's biggest exports are rice and coffee. The central role food plays in a culture cannot be underestimated. Food is not only necessary for survival, but also at the center of celebration and pleasure. It connects people and resources, regions and countries, farmers and restaurant owners. Food is a complex web. I spent much of my time in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) hunting, gathering, and eating. My daily itinerary was often bookended by food, by what market I would visit that morning and what kind of dish I wanted for dinner. I knew that in following the path from plantation to market to restaurant many stories worth capturing would unfold. Food wove through the lives of everyone I met: farmers close to the earth, knee-deep in wet rice paddies and those reaching up to the sky picking fruits; entrepreneurs at the market piling cinnamon sticks, dried shrimp, and mangos into perfect pyramids for a colorful and enticing display; delivery drivers carrying pounds of rice in boxes that teetered precariously on the backs of motorbikes; street vendors selling pineapple and papaya carved into spears; café owners enticing pedestrians with menus of dark espresso and light frothy lattes; and friends sharing drinks or steamy dishes in restaurants, laughing together.

# Background Information

Vietnam is the easternmost country on the Southeast Asian Indochinese Peninsula. With nearly 100 million inhabitants, it is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Geography plays an important role in relation to Vietnam's food and agricultural systems. The Red River Delta is located in the north, Mekong Delta in the south, both of which are major rice producing areas. Despite Vietnam's small geographical size, and turbulent history, the country is a major global food producer and exporter.

Traditional Vietnamese cooking is greatly admired for its fresh ingredients, minimal use of dairy and oil, complementary textures, and reliance on herbs and vegetables. It is also low in sugar and is almost always naturally gluten-free, as many of the dishes are made with rice noodles, rice papers and rice flour instead of wheat. With the balance between fresh herbs and meats and a selective use of spices to reach a fine taste, Vietnamese food is considered one of the healthiest cuisines worldwide.Â



# Background Information

Important characteristics:

**Freshness of food:** Most meats are only briefly cooked. Vegetables are eaten fresh; if they are cooked, they are boiled or only briefly stir-fried.

**Presence of herbs and vegetables:** Herbs and vegetables are essential to many Vietnamese dishes and are often abundantly used.

**Variety and harmony of textures:** Crisp with soft, watery with crunchy, delicate with rough. Broths or soup-based dishes are common in all three regions.

**Presentation:** The condiments accompanying Vietnamese meals are usually colorful and arranged in eye-pleasing manners.



# Background Facts

- The most common domesticated animals in Vietnam are water buffalo, cattle, dogs, cats, pigs, goats, ducks, and chickens.
- Vietnam is the largest exporter of cashew nuts and black pepper in the world with one-third of the global production.
- The country is also the second largest exporter of rice behind Thailand.
- The cuisine of Vietnam traditionally combines 5 fundamental taste elements including: spicy (metal), sour (wood), bitter (fire), salty (water) and sweet (earth).
- Vietnamese food is a blend of Chinese and Thai styles and is considered one of the healthiest cuisines in the world with its combination of fresh ingredients like fresh herbs, seafoods, fruits and vegetables along with fish sauce, shrimp paste, soy sauce and rice.
- Rice terraces are planted that way to enable the crop to grow along the steep mountainsides.
- The principle of yin and yang is also applied in composing a meal, to provide contrasts in spiciness and temperature of the food. Noodles or pho are the second most popular food in Vietnam, after boiled rice.
- Vietnam owns about 20% of the coffee market share and is the second largest producer in the world.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Q: WHAT IMAGES SPRING TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR THE COUNTRY VIETNAM?**

**Q: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT VIETNAM'S CUISINE?**

# Food Security

After the Vietnam war began, farmers were the only people who did not receive food from the government. People were only given 28 pounds of food for the whole month. This rationing continued well past the war ending. Many were left in poverty and malnourished, and with the food supply worse than during the war one in four people faced starvation. Many had to make ends meet with only \$100 a year. After the government replaced the planned economy with a socialist-oriented market economy many were able to gain land and gain proper nutrition. While Vietnam was able to make a lot of progress minority groups are being pushed into less fertile areas by the fast-growing majority of the population. Slowly Vietnam has been able to transform this by improving infrastructure and education systems.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Q: PUT YOURSELF IN THE SHOES OF A VIETNAMESE LANDOWNER WHO HAD LOST THEIR FAMILY HOMESTEAD BECAUSE OF THIS POLICY. HOW WOULD YOU FEEL ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT TAKING PROPERTY AWAY FROM YOU?**

**Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK FOOD INSECURITY MEANS?**

# Historical Cuisine

Vietnamese cuisine has become popular throughout the world. The country is home to several iconic dishes, including aromatic pho, a noodle soup served with various meats and vegetables and Banh Mi, Vietnamese baguette sandwiches. Banh Mi are a fusion dish and were created during the French colonial occupation of Vietnam that ended with Vietnam's liberation at the hands of the North Vietnamese after the expulsion of U.S. forces during the Vietnam War.

Pho is the most famous Vietnamese dish in the world but surprising was only created in Northern Vietnam in the early 20th century. Vietnam was an essential part of French Indochina, and the strong culinary influences of the French can still be seen today. The fusion of Vietnamese noodles and herbs with a French beef broth is the basis for the original pho. The word itself has French roots as the French word pot-au-feu translates to pot in the fire. A pot-au-feu is traditionally made by boiling beef bones and vegetables in water and then adding meat to make a soup. The Vietnamese loved this dish because of its flexibility in regards to ingredients, and the fact that boiling the broth for so long would also rid it of any bacteria.



# Historical Cuisine

Before Vietnam gained their independence, they were under the reign of the various Chinese dynasties. This proximity, though not always peaceful, had the by product of noodles. They were made with other grains native to China and slowly expanded to include wheat, rice and eggs. These noodles and techniques were exported to Vietnam which was then used in their own different and delicious ways. The Chinese influence is most pronounced in the north. French culinary influences, including baked bread, are stronger in the south.

Vietnam also produces a significant amount of the coffee consumed globally. Unlike coffee from other regions, such as South America, Vietnamese coffee is often sold unmarked and is used for generic brands. Vietnam's coastal geography and numerous rivers lend themselves to a robust fishery products industry, with catfish and prawn being top exports. Its tropical climate allows for the growth of a diverse array of fruits.

Coffee was first introduced to Vietnam by the French in the 19th century. Their large success was their ability to create a processing plant that manufactured instant coffee. A  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the coffee that is drunk in the United Kingdom is from Vietnam. Some companies, like Nestle, have processing plants in Vietnam, which roast the beans and pack it. Their only downside to their booming coffee production is much of the land used for coffee cultivation is steadily being exhausted.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

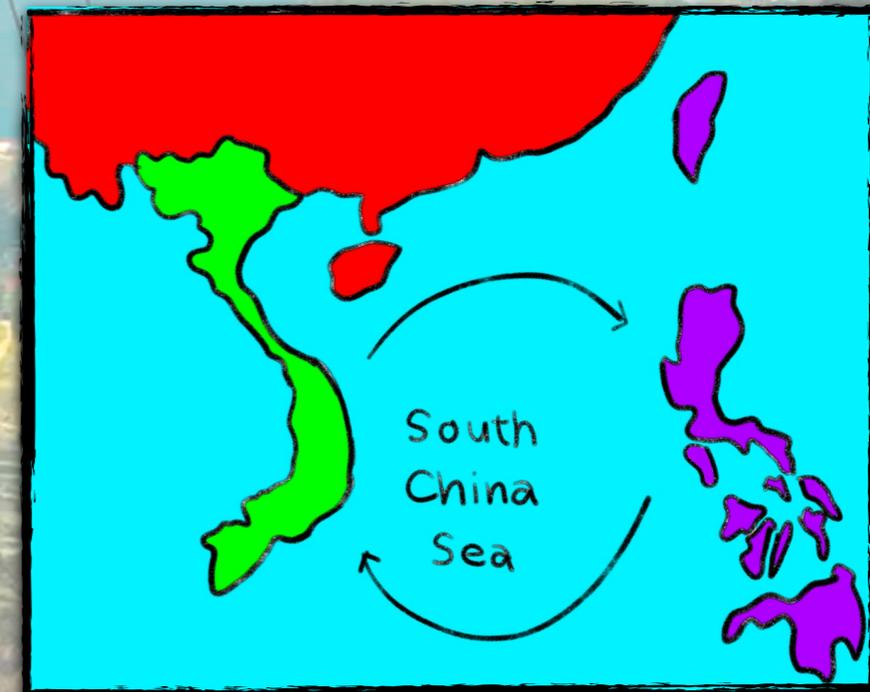
**Q: HOW DID TODAY'S FOOD SYSTEM DEVELOP?**

**Q: WHY DO YOU THINK THE FRENCH HAD SUCH A STRONG INFLUENCE IN VIETNAM COMPARED TO THE COUNTRIES NEARBY?**



# Geopolitics and International Relations

As early as the 1970s, countries began to claim islands and various zones in the South China Sea, such as the Spratly Islands, which possess rich natural resources and fishing areas. The South China Sea also accounts for 10 percent of the world's fisheries, making it a key source of food for hundreds of millions of people. The sea is also believed to contain major reserves of natural resources, such as natural gas and oil. One third of global shipping, or a total of US \$3.37 trillion of international trade, passes through the South China Sea, making it a vital trade route in the global supply chain, used by American companies who produce goods in the region. China currently claims more than 80 per cent, while Vietnam claims sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. In recent years, China has increased efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or creating new islands altogether. China has also constructed ports, military installations, and airstrips in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Vietnam, the most outspoken critic of China, has softened its stance. As a trading country, Vietnam needs free access to the oceans. It has struggled for centuries to remain independent, fighting a four-week war against China as recently as 1979.



# Geopolitics and International Relations

Vietnam will continue its close economic relationship with China, which supplies 30 percent of its imports, especially intermediate goods and components for industrial products. In April 2018, the government said it would be willing to hold talks with China to resolve disputes in the area in accordance with international laws.

U.S. and Vietnam relations have become increasingly cooperative and comprehensive, evolving into a flourishing partnership that spans political, economic, security, and people-to-people ties. The United States supports a strong, prosperous, and independent Vietnam that contributes to international security; engages in fair and reciprocal trade; and respects human rights and the rule of law.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

**Q: WHAT QUESTIONS DO THESE POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS RAISE FOR THE FUTURE OF VIETNAM'S TRADING AND CONTINUED INDEPENDENCE?**

**Q: WHAT SIMILARITIES OR DIFFERENCES DO YOU SEE BETWEEN VIETNAM'S GEOPOLITICS NOW COMPARED TO 1,000 YEARS AGO?**



# Sourcing and Agriculture

Although agriculture still employs more than half of the population and manufacturing accounts for a mere 8 percent of all employment, the output value of both manufacturing and services surpassed that of agriculture in the early 1990s. Yet, agriculture is the main source of raw materials for the processing industries and a major contributor to exports. The primary agricultural areas are the Red River delta, the Mekong River delta, and the southern terrace region. Agriculture is highly labour-intensive in Vietnam, and much plowing is still done by water buffalo. The export of such seafood as shrimp, squid, crab, and lobster has become a major source of foreign exchange. There also has been an increase in the number of commercial shrimp farms.

The United States quickly rose as Vietnam's primary export destination, following a trade agreement between the two countries in 2001. The majority of Vietnam's export revenues are generated by crude petroleum, garments, footwear, and seafood, and electronic products are of growing importance. Coffee, once among Vietnam's primary generators of export revenue, has begun to rebound after a damaging decline in prices at the end of the 20th century.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Q: WHY DO YOU THINK AGRICULTURE STILL PLAYS SUCH AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE VIETNAMESE POPULATION?**

**Q: WHY MIGHT OTHER COUNTRIES WANT TO USE EXPORTED GOODS FROM VIETNAM RATHER THAN OTHER COUNTRIES?**



# Green Revolution

In the 1970's, During the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was one of the focal points of the Green Revolution, which included the introduction of new varieties of miracle rice as well as fertilizer, tractors, pesticides and more.

The Green Revolution, or the Third Agricultural Revolution, is a set of research technology transfer initiatives occurring between 1950 and the late 1960s, that increased agricultural production worldwide, beginning most markedly in the late 1960s. The Green Revolution was a period when the productivity of global agriculture increased drastically as a result of new advances. During this time period, new chemical fertilizers and synthetic herbicides and pesticides were created. The usage of a high quantity of pesticides and insecticides incorporated toxicity in the plants. In order to protect crops from different types of disease caused by pests as well as the damages caused by insects, the farmers used pesticides and insecticides at a high amount. The areas with irrigation facilities were made to grow more crops; and by doing all these measures, it leads to high crop yield and in turn food scarcity problem was eradicated.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q: WHAT DOES THE TERM GREEN REVOLUTION REFER TO?

Q: IS THE TERM GREEN REVOLUTION APPROPRIATE?



# Rice Exports

Vietnam has played a large role in the global food system for centuries. The Mekong Delta exported rice to China even before French colonial rule, and the French in the 1800s and early 1900s turned the area into one of the world's largest exporters of rice. Vietnam's rice production was so important that the Japanese diverted rice from Vietnam during WWII to feed Japanese occupation forces in South East Asia, combined with other factors, this resulted in a famine in Vietnam. The French were also responsible for introducing coffee to Vietnam and fanned its success as a major export crop.

The Mekong Delta is the heart of the rice-producing region of the country where water, boats, houses and markets coexist to produce a generous harvest of rice. Vietnam's land area of 33 million ha has three ecosystems that dictate rice culture. The most prominent irrigated rice system is the Mekong Delta. Rice production in the Mekong delta has seen phenomenal increase in recent years, though in some years drought conditions have impeded this growth. This increase is attributed to planting of modern early maturing rice varieties and better management. Modern mechanized farming methods and new strains of rice are becoming popular. There are more than 1600 varieties grown in the Mekong Delta; one unique variety is the floating rice whose fairly long stems float in the flooded fields of the delta. As rice farming becomes more mechanized, traditional wooden farm tools as well as older strains of rice are also preserved. In 2019, Vietnam contributed to 6% of the total rice exported throughout the world totaling \$1.4 billion.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Q: WHY DO YOU THINK VIETNAM HAS HAD SUCH SUCCESS WITH THEIR RICE EXPORTS COMPARED TO OTHER COUNTRIES?**

**Q: WHY IS THERE MORE OF AN IMPORTANCE ON RICE PRODUCTION THEN OTHER CROPS?**



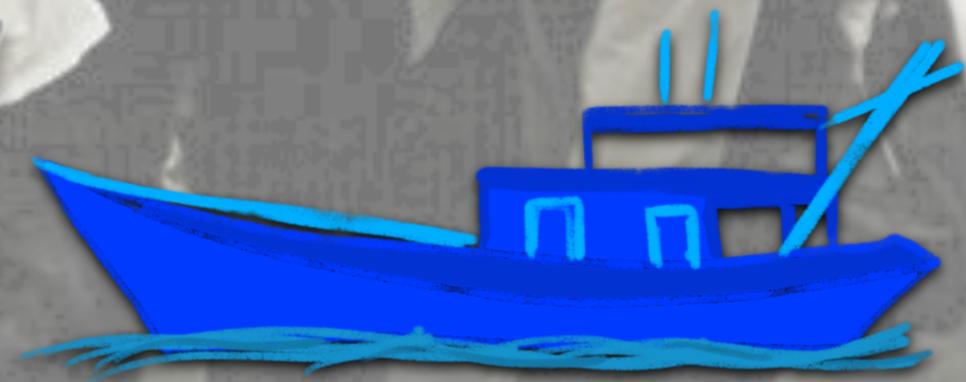
# Vietnamese Diaspora

Near the end of the Vietnam War, people in South Vietnam began to flee due to the rise of communism in Vietnam. Many of the people who left fled on boats, and they are referred to as the Vietnamese Boat People. A majority of them were rescued and resettled into developing countries, mostly into the United States. Following the end of the Vietnam War, the very first immigrants from Vietnam composed mainly of people who were associated with the military or South Vietnamese government who are now targets of the communist forces. Later in the 1970s, Vietnamese refugees escaped on boats, most commonly referred to as the Vietnamese Boat People Crisis. These people came mainly from "rural areas and were often less educated than earlier arrivals; many were ethnic Chinese immigrants fleeing persecution in Vietnam." The rise of the population of Vietnamese people in the United States ties back to the class because of the exchange of cultural influences between the two countries. Vietnamese immigrants introduced their foods and culture while Americans introduced theirs.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

**Q: WHAT INFLUENCES FROM VIETNAMESE CUISINE CAN YOU SEE IN THE UNITED STATES?**

**Q: WHY DID MANY VIETNAMESE PEOPLE FLEE TO THE UNITED STATES RATHER THAN OTHER NEARBY COUNTRIES?**



# Challenges with Climate Change

Going forward, Vietnam is facing several challenges including climate change that impact its agricultural production. The dry season from November to April has been drier than normal in recent years, putting the Mekong Delta's rice crop in jeopardy - that in turn threatens the food security not just of Vietnam but of countries in Asia and Africa including Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines that import large quantities of Vietnamese rice. During the 2008 global food crisis and again more recently, the Vietnamese government has cut off rice exports in order to prevent local shortages. This highlights the world's reliance on Vietnamese rice.

Vietnam's geography leaves it vulnerable to a number of calamities. Most of its 1,800 mile-long coastline faces the East Sea, which numerous tropical storms and typhoons traverse every year. The mountainous far north is prone to landslides and flash flooding, while the flat Mekong Delta in the deep south is among the most vulnerable regions in the world to rising sea levels. The Mekong Delta's vulnerability is an especially significant problem due to its economic vitality. The fertile region produces roughly 70 percent of Vietnam's agricultural products, including around 55 percent of rice and 70 percent of all aquaculture. Agricultural development in Vietnam not only helps Vietnam's food security, but also contributes to global food security as well. With climate change and sea level rise, the projection is that if sea levels increase by up to 3.3 feet, 40 percent of the Mekong Delta will be inundated, so we would lose 40 percent or even more of agriculture and aquaculture production.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

**Q: WHY MIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT VIETNAM MORE HEAVILY THAN OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES?**

**Q: WHAT POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS MIGHT AID IN PREVENTING CLIMATE CHANGE TO HAVE FURTHER EFFECTS?**

# Vietnamese Phrases

<u>English</u>	<u>Vietnamese</u>	<u>Pronunciation</u>
Pho	Pho	Fuh
Bread	Banh mi	Banh-mee
Iced coffee with sugar	ca phe sua da Duong	Ka-fey sooh-da Duong
Roll	Goi cuon	Ghoi Kwoon
Water	Suoi	Suoi
Dessert	Trang Mieng	Trang Mieang
Bill, please	Xin Tinh tien	Xin Tinh-tien
Hot/spicy	cay	cay
Delicious	Ngon qua	Ngon wa

# Recípes - Pho

## Ingredients

### Stock:

- 1 whole chicken (free-range chicken preferred)
- 1 tablespoon salt (for cleaning)
- 4 liters water
- Thumb-size piece ginger (roast whole in oven at 400°F for 15 minutes then slice into coins)
- 8 shallots (roast whole in oven at 400°F for 15 minutes, allow to cool then peel)
- 2 tablespoons dried coriander seeds (toast in dry pan for 1 minute then place in spice bag or cheesecloth)

### Stock Seasoning

- 2 tablespoons fine sea salt
- 2 tablespoons chicken bouillon powder
- 35 grams rock sugar
- 1 teaspoon MSG
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce

### Noodles & Garnishes

- 2 lbs rice noodles (cook per package instructions)
- 1/4 cup thinly sliced white/yellow onion
- 1/4 cup sliced green onions
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro
- Fried shallots
- Ground black pepper
- 2 limes (cut into wedges)
- Sliced red chili peppers or jalapenos (optional)

## Instructions

1. Clean the chicken: Lightly dust the chicken with salt. Give it a full exfoliating body scrub then rinse under cold running water. Drain dry.
2. Bring a large pot with 4 liters of water to a boil (make sure it will fit the chicken without overflowing). Add cleaned chicken, roasted ginger and shallots. Cook stock pot for 30 minutes on a low simmer.
3. Test chicken for doneness after 30 minutes. Any longer, chicken may be dry. Pierce chicken with a chopstick in between the joint of the breast and leg. If water runs clear, chicken is done. Transfer chicken to an ice bath. When cool enough to handle, slice chicken into thin strips. Return all bones back to the stockpot, along with coriander seeds. Continue to cook the stock pot for another 30 minutes on a low simmer.
4. After one hour of cooking, remove all solids from the stock pot and discard. Season stock with salt, chicken stock powder, rock sugar, MSG and fish sauce. It's best to season a little at a time to your liking. Like all noodle soups, you want the flavors to be strong and bold. Once noodles are added, flavor will mellow out quite a bit.
5. To serve, add a handful of cooked rice noodles to a bowl. Add chicken. Ladle in broth and top with a bit of white/yellow onions, green onions, cilantro, fried shallots and a sprinkle of black pepper. Serve with lime wedges and chili peppers/jalapenos on the side.

# Recípes - Banh Mí

## Ingredients

- 10 oz. pork tenderloin
- 6 tbsp. hoísín sauce, divided
- 6 tbsp. rice wine vinegar, divided
- 2 garlic cloves, grated
- 2 tbsp. fish sauce
- 1 medium carrot, thinly sliced
- 1 medium daikon radish, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil
- 12-inch baguette, sliced in half lengthwise
- 1/4 c. mayonnaise
- 1/2 c. cilantro leaves and tender stems

## Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 425°. Place pork tenderloin into the freezer for 15 minutes; this will make it easier to slice thinly.
2. Slice frozen tenderloin as thinly as possible. Transfer to a medium bowl, add 3 tablespoons hoísín sauce, 3 tablespoons rice vinegar, garlic, and fish sauce to bowl; mix until well combined. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes.
3. Toss carrot and daikon with remaining vinegar and salt; let sit at room temperature until ready to use. In a large cast-iron skillet on medium high, heat oil and add marinated pork. Cook without stirring for 4 minutes. Give it a toss and continue to cook 1 minute.
4. Toast baguette in oven for 10 minutes until golden brown. Spread mayonnaise on bottom half and remaining hoísín sauce on top half. Layer pork, then pickled veggies and cilantro on bottom half. Place on the top half and slice cross wise before serving.

# Summary

In conclusion Vietnam's fertile climate and abundant agricultural produce support not only its own population, but that of many other countries in the world, however, in the future Vietnam must overcome several challenges presented by global climate change in order to maintain this status.

# Further Thinking

## Resources to further discover Vietnam's food systems (vs. food culture)

<https://epicureandculture.com/vietnamese-cuisine-french-influence/>

<https://www.originalsaigon.com.au/french-influence-on-vietnamese-cuisine/>

<https://www.vietnam.com/en/news/article/vietnam-food-some-interesting-facts.html>

<https://www.bates.edu/art-visual-culture/short-term-to-vietnam-2008/reflective-journals/thao/>

[https://dune.une.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1114&context=an\\_studedres](https://dune.une.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1114&context=an_studedres)

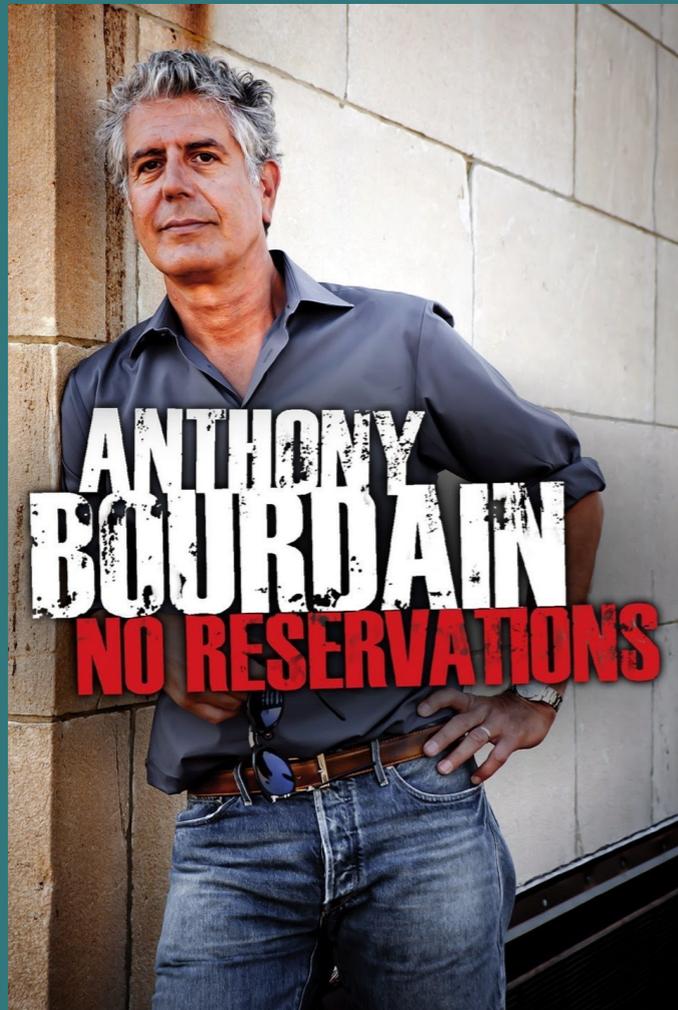
<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/new-climate-change-report-highlights-grave-dangers-for-vietnam/>

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=4abb0d406b784d8984784ed18691266a>

<https://www.vietnamonline.com/overview/food-culture.html>

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# Further Thinking



TV Series

Vietnam: The Island of Mr. Sang

Season 1 Episode 4

Travel Channel

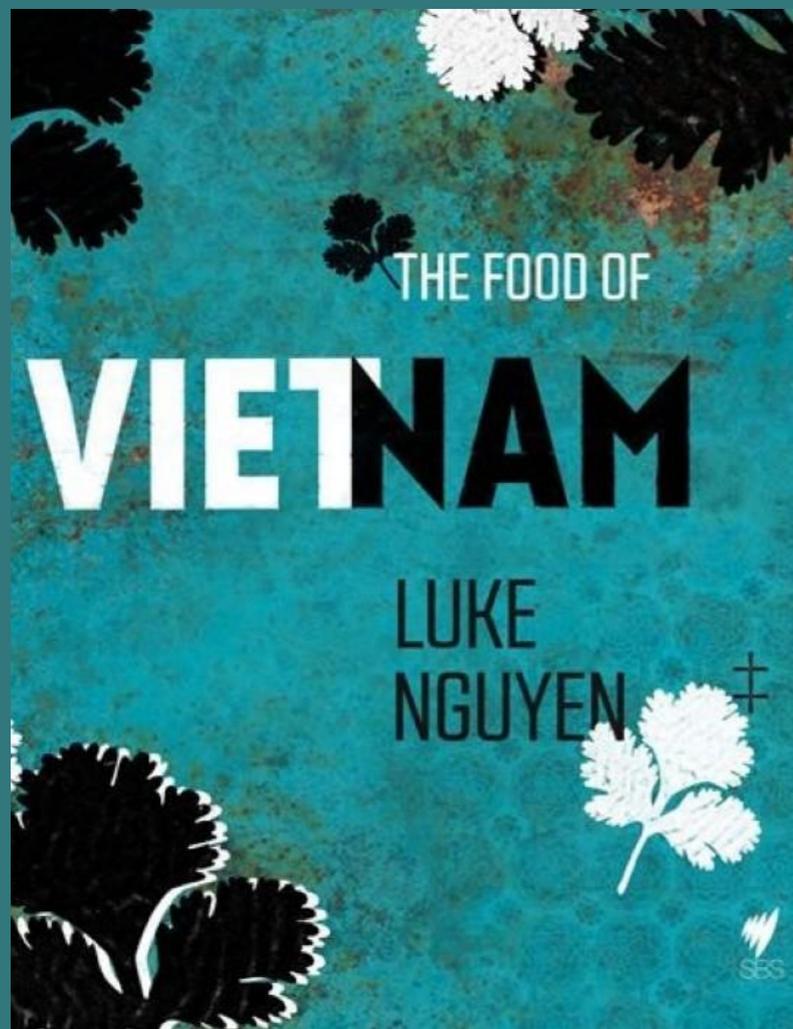


TV Series

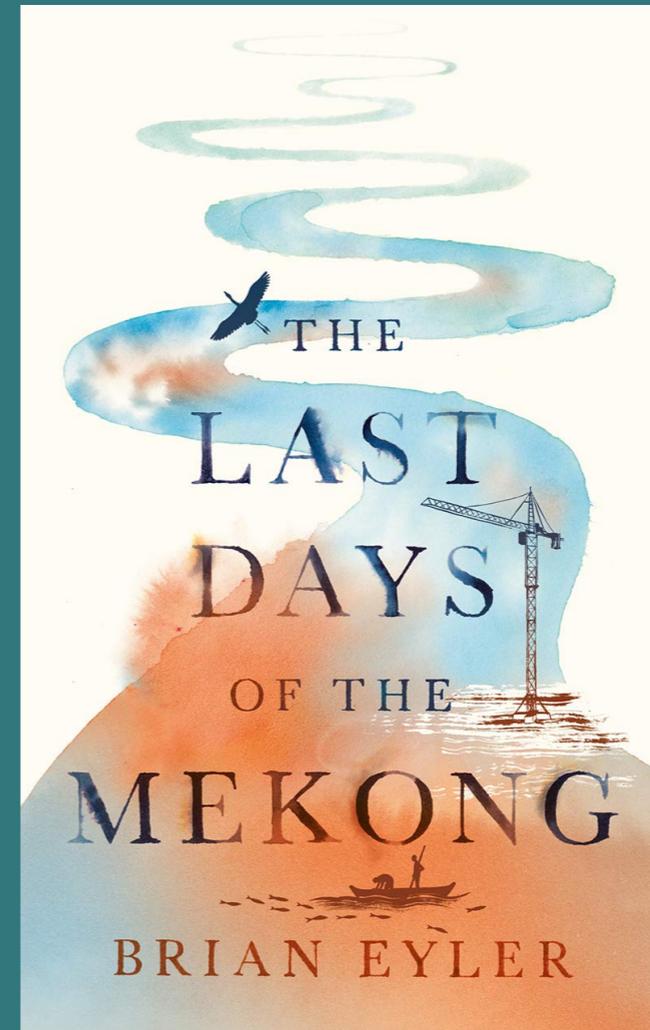
Season 1 & 2

SBS One/Good Food

# Further Thinking



Book  
Written by  
Luke Nguyen



Book  
Written by  
Brian Eyer  
[outreach.libib.com](http://outreach.libib.com)

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