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## VIETNAM: MEMORIES AND MEANING

# Cooking up the Culinary Nation or Savoring its Regions? Teaching Food Studies in Vietnam

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"In food, as in death, we feel the essential brotherhood of man."  
Vietnamese Proverb

This paper explores whether or not there is an identifiably Vietnamese national cuisine, one in which the ingredients, recipes, and/or dishes socially, culturally, and politically unite Vietnamese people. It contends that Vietnam, with its long history of foreign invaders, its own appropriation of the middle and southern regions, and its varied regional geographies, provides a critical example for Food Studies of the need to interrogate the idea of a national cuisine and to differentiate it from regional and local cuisines. The paper examines how cookbook authors and cooking schools have more generally sought to represent Vietnamese dishes as national, but that there is a strong argument against the claim of a Vietnamese national cuisine. We advocate a Food Studies methodology that creates an effective pedagogy that explores whether or not national populations are unified as single gastro-states or atomized by a plurality of regional cuisines. Through experiential assignments and student work we illustrate how Food Studies presents the pedagogical opportunity for students to study and learn at the intersection of national politics and the everyday lives of people, providing a framework for understanding connections of labor, gender, class, and, essentially, taste, among many other values. In the case of Vietnamese food, the critical details of ingredients, preparation, and consumption both reveal and conceal truths about the Vietnamese people.

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**Keywords:** Food Studies; Vietnam; pedagogy; cuisine; cookbooks

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## Introduction

Despite the emerging acceptance of food as a legitimate interdisciplinary lens for academic study over the past two decades, its capacity to reveal ways of knowing, sensing, and tasting the world continues to surprise (Belasco 2008; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Holtzman 2006; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Pilcher 2016a; Pilcher 2016b; Pottier 1999; Sutton 2010; Swift and Wilk 2015). In this article, we work through some of the tensions as regards a Vietnamese “national” cuisine. What are the elements in cuisine that may be considered specifically and identifiably Vietnamese? Are there ingredients, recipes, and/or dishes that are national? Is it Vietnamese cuisine that culturally unites Vietnam, despite the deep historical, regional, and political tensions that make unification challenging?

In what follows, we put forth the hypothesis that Vietnam, with its long history of foreign invaders, its own appropriation of the middle and southern regions, and its varied regional geographies, provides a critical example for Food Studies of the need to interrogate the idea of a national cuisine and to differentiate it from regional and local cuisines. We look at how cookbook authors and cooking schools seek to represent Vietnamese dishes, including their preparation and tastes. Ultimately, we advocate for a Food Studies methodology that creates an effective pedagogy precisely because it engages with as yet unsettled questions of the culinary politic: are national populations unified as single gastro-states or atomized by a plurality of regional cuisines?

Food Studies prompts us to try to understand how historical ideas, events, and contestations shape food systems. In the case of Vietnam, Erica J. Peters (2012) shows how attempts to unify disparate cooking knowledge, ingredients, and practices into a Vietnamese national cuisine may very well have provided proof for Vietnam’s recalcitrant localism. Beginning in the 1830s, Emperor Minh Mạng, son of Nguyễn Dynasty progenitor Gia Long, sought to fortify political imperialism with culinary dogma. Minh Mạng imposed gustatory requirements such as placing white, non-sticky rice at the center of the prototypical meal. This and other culinary elements of Minh Mạng’s prescribed cuisine presupposed wet-rice agriculture, and outlawed the “barbarian habits” of members of ethnic minorities (i.e., anyone other than Kinh). These “proper” foods were to be consumed socially around a tray of share food, but

with an individual bowl for each eater, filled with the correct rice, *nước mắm*<sup>1</sup> (fish sauce) condiment, and chopsticks (Peters, 29). A historically founded Food Studies, and its accompanying curriculum, challenges us to understand incursions like this and the consequences of this type of power present in systems of food. In this case, despite Minh Mạng's wealth and military might, he ultimately failed to enculturate cuisine on a national scale. Among other problems, the culinary and cultural ideals he espoused remained locked within a class stratum. Ironically, while some precepts of Mạng's Huế cuisine, such as the use of chopsticks, came to symbolize modernity and nationhood, his Imperial Cuisine today epitomizes culinary regionalism (Avieli 2012).

The "nationalization" of Vietnamese cuisine is fueled by several sources. There are of course recognizable food products that most Vietnamese eat, as we will note in our examination of cookbooks; but the fact that Vietnamese cuisine is rice-based does not a national cuisine make, especially in Southeast Asia. Moreover, Vietnam is not the only country that uses fish sauce. While there are certainly a number of common ingredients, the considerable sensitivity to weather and terrain makes the use of these ingredients more or less likely depending on the region, and their use may be quite varied. An array of Vietnamese official institutions communicate and promulgate a national cultural consensus, but that purported consensus is more often contested through regional interests, rural village and urban life, religious activity, regional economics, education, and tribal and ethnic relations. Vietnam is a nation with a distinctive and recognizable multiplex of social and cultural expressions based on Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Cham, French, and American influences. Vietnam has a long legacy of colonialism and conflict with China, France, and the United States, and of conflict in its relations with Cambodia in the south. Even as the Vietnamese have resisted these incursions by outsiders, and sought to destroy internal enemies, they have also absorbed elements from all of these cultures, often adopting language, social norms, and culinary products.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we italicize Vietnamese terms, but not proper names of places in Vietnam. Typically, we write place names in Vietnam in Vietnamese style, but defer to the forms as they are written when placed between quotation marks.

Vietnam has a remarkable regional history, some of which is suppressed in the historical and political narrative. The majority ethnic group, the Kinh, embrace the historic “March to the South” that celebrates the Vietnamese as conquerors of the Cham and later the Khmer societies and their cultures. While modern popular narratives declare a longstanding independence and nationhood, the fact is that Vietnam has a very short history of independence and unification. The first time Vietnam was unified in its current territorial form was in 1802 under emperor Gia Long, when he moved the capital from Hà Nội to Huế to re-center the home of the government. From 1851 to 1954 Vietnam was partitioned into three entities—the colony of Cochin China, and the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin—further straining the idea of a socially and culturally unified Vietnam. The division of the territory in 1954 into the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the southern Republic of Vietnam exacerbated new political, social, and cultural divisions, and the territory was finally reunified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Significant regional and urban variations in Vietnamese food preparation, cultural expression, and consumption are closely related to these historical developments. To understand these variations is to comprehend the actual cooking and consumption of Vietnamese foods.

Food in Vietnam is deeply rooted in its many regions. Until the 1400s, Vietnam (Nam Việt) was bounded by a geography, ecology, and political organization that constitutes what we know as northern Vietnam today, dominated by Hà Nội. Its climate and geography, especially its proximity to China, affected its cuisine. In the 1400s the Việt/Kinh ethnic group expanded southward into what is known as Central Vietnam. In this region, we find rather different ingredients and recipes represented by the foods of Hội An and Đà Nẵng, and also the “Imperial Cuisine” of Huế, developed in the 1800s. Completing the march south in the 1600s, this region developed the southern cuisines of Sài Gòn and the Mekong Delta, the latter’s food influenced by the Cambodian ethnic groups who lived there and by French colonialism. Despite these differences, however, the dominant political narrative, especially promulgated through Vietnam’s political elites, is of an imagined socially and culturally unified Vietnam, dominated politically and culturally by Hà Nội and

the northern region. Although Jamieson (1995), in *Understanding Vietnam*, presents several unifying aspects of Vietnamese identity and culture, mainly derived from Confucian values, beliefs, and customs, the Vietnamese themselves assiduously deny such Chinese cultural appropriations, especially when it comes to cuisine. Despite the great variety that constitutes a nation of rich cultural identities and variations (especially as a country home to 54 different ethnic groups), political institutions have worked to create a fictive social and cultural consensus, actively promoting “Vietnamization,” adopting the majority Kinh<sup>2</sup> cultural patterns, and asserting a Northern hegemony in language, the arts, music, national costumes, and behavioral norms and customs, thereby creating a supposedly national “Vietnameseness.” But in truth real conflict exists—both between ethnic groups and between regions.

Ironically, it may be the very plurality of cuisines in Vietnam that provides the bridge across these divides, and has served to underwrite historical and political frameworks. This may be a useful framework for a Food Studies pedagogy that seeks to understand the importance of cooking and consumption by Vietnamese. In a later section, we will present an anthropological/sociological pedagogy for examining the conceptualization of a Vietnamese national cuisine that is paradoxically based in significant regional and urban variations in food preparation, cultural expression, and consumption.

### **What Cookbooks and Cooking Schools Say About “Vietnamese” Cuisine**

How, then, to examine the cuisine found in Vietnam—its dishes, its preparation, its ingredients, its sources, and its taste? There are few texts that explore these aspects of cuisine in Vietnam better than cookbooks. Cookbooks are promotional, positioning themselves as representational, advocating for the flavors and tastes of the cuisine that they promulgate. They indulge us in ingredients, careful measurements, strict preparations, and suggest that consumption will result in delight. Moreover, cookbooks, Appadurai aptly notes, “tell unusual cultural tales” (2008, 289). They are the compositions and products of reflections at certain moments in social time. As

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<sup>2</sup> The Kinh are 86% of the population and consider themselves the core Vietnamese ethnic group.

among Appadurai's Indian texts, the proliferation of Vietnam modern cookbooks in the 1990s and 2000s coincided with widespread literacy, especially in the diaspora, and a desire in and outside the country to highlight cuisine, while also standardizing culinary practice (Appadurai; Goody 1996). Additionally, the rise in such cookbooks coincided with the prodigious population of Việt kiều expatriates living in the diaspora, while the country was undergoing dramatic economic transformations following the imposition of Đổi Mới reforms in 1986.

Most cookbooks on the food of Vietnam were written and published in Vietnam after the year 1989, although there are a few from the early post-American War period. One authoritative site lists twenty-eight Vietnamese cookbooks.<sup>3</sup> The earliest, and quite rare, is *Vietnamese Cookery* (1968) by Jill Nhu Huong Miller. Nguyen (2013) says of this book that it has "a certain Hawaiian touch." The next book is *Vietnamese Dishes* (1973) by Duong Thi Thanh Lien. Her writing, says Nguyen, "offers insights into how people cooked and ate in the pre-1975 era of Vietnam." The cookbooks produced from 1975 to 1989 reflect the waves of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States and Australia. In what follows, we review a sample of the more popular cookbooks that have been written since 1989.

The Vietnamese more generally have had a lack of food throughout much of their modern history. Hunger was a fact of life through the French colonial period, as well as the period of Japanese (Vichy French) occupation, during which over two million Vietnamese died of starvation. The Communist period, in the north from 1945–1975, and in the south 1975 to around the year 2000, was very bleak, and culinary practice was no different. Especially during this period, most Vietnamese had too little food and little food of any quality. State restaurant menus reflected this.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, if there was a "cuisine" in Vietnam before 1945 it was likely practiced by the French, along with the Vietnamese "Imperial" cuisine. It may have taken time for Vietnamese chefs, especially in the north, to relearn culinary skills and launch

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Nguyen (2013), <http://vietworldkitchen.com/blog/>.

<sup>4</sup> In 2012 Food Shop No. 37 opened in Hà Nội, replicating state run restaurants of the post-1975 period of rationing. They serve meals that consist, for example, of fatty pork, greens stir-fried in lard, and cassava.

restaurants. However, it is more likely that the preponderance of Vietnamese food preparation was a family-centered activity and that there really was not a national Vietnamese cuisine to remember.<sup>5</sup>

Early cookbooks on Vietnamese cuisine from the 1990s on are mainly in English, and while some acknowledge the great historical influences on foods in Vietnam, they typically neither identify nor distinguish recipes and dishes by region or locale. One of the earliest cookbooks available in English, published in 1989, is Nicole Routhier's *Foods of Vietnam*. Routhier, born to a Vietnamese mother and a French father, is from Sài Gòn. She learned to cook from her Hải Phòng mother and a nanny from Huế. In her introduction, she reflects on the historical antecedents and sources of Vietnamese cuisine, and reminds the reader that "the Vietnamese are proud of their long-lived civilization and traditions. This is especially true of their culinary heritage" (Routhier 1989, 8). Routhier situates Vietnamese cuisine amongst its neighbors, placing Vietnam "at one of the crossroads of the Asian world," strongly influenced by China (chopsticks, noodles, woks, stir frying), vegetarian Buddhist traditions, Mongolian beef in northern specialties, and food traditions from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and India. Moreover, there have also been strong European influences, especially the French. But, says Routhier, "As much as Vietnamese cuisine has borrowed from or been influenced by various cultures, it has succeeded in retaining its unique character" (9). While it is clear that tastes and textures have their sources elsewhere, "it is apparent from the first bite that the Vietnamese have developed a novel cuisine with a unique delicacy and subtlety of taste" (Routhier, 9). In addition, Routhier says, "The one most characteristic element in virtually every Vietnamese dish is *nước mắm*" and its transformation into the table sauce, *nước chấm* (9). Finally, Routhier asserts that "The Vietnamese are quick to point out that their cuisine, like their country, is divided into three regions, each with a distinct culinary tradition. However, regional differences are less pronounced than in Chinese cooking..." (11).

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<sup>5</sup> This last point is the keen observation of Professor Nguyen Khanh Linh, Coordinator of the Vietnamese Studies Program at California State University – Fullerton.



As a result, Routhier rarely identifies the region in the recipes themselves, so it is difficult to actually recognize specific regional variations.

The cookbook *Vietnamese Cuisine*, available in Vietnam but published by Wei-Chuan Publishing in Monterey Park, California, in 1999, with a Việt kiều author, is oriented to a Taiwanese audience. The author's introduction states:

Vietnamese cuisine embodies the culinary influences of China, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. In addition, the influence from many years of French colonization has added a unique blend of flavors to an already aromatic and exotic cuisine (Loangkote, (pg 5)).

As this cookbook points out, the many varieties of Vietnamese cuisine are reflected in the ways in which meals are served. The common Chinese meal comprises three or four dishes, accompanied by soup, whereas the Vietnamese one-dish meal of fried rice or stir-fried noodles can incorporate various types of noodles and of noodle soups. The author observes that Vietnamese Western-style meals include one-dish meals served with bread, and the Vietnamese sandwich *bánh mì* is derived from the French version. Traditional dipping sauces and meats to mix and match flavors are wrapped with rice paper or lettuce or mixed with rice noodles.

Mai Pham's cookbook *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (2001) is filled with recipes from home cooks, street food cafés, and market kitchens, along with reminiscences of life in Vietnam before the first great emigration of the mid 1970s. Pham, a "Việt kiều," agrees that Vietnam is at a major Asian crossroads, and has borrowed generously from many other cultures. However, she insists that Vietnam:

Has always managed to retain its unique character.... What really sets it apart boils down to three main factors: the extensive use of *nước mắm* to season almost every dish, the high consumption of *rau thơm* (aromatic herbs) and the distinctive style of eating small pieces of meat or seafood wrapped in lettuce or rice paper and dipped in sauce. These characteristics apply to all three culinary regions of Vietnam, although each has a slightly different approach to cooking (9).

Pham identifies the key ingredients of Vietnamese food as *nước mắm*, *tương hạt* (bean sauce), *sốt tương* (hoisin sauce), *tương ớt* (ground chili paste), *dầu hào* (oyster sauce), *nước tương* (soy sauce), *gạo* (rice), *gạo nếp* (glutinous or sweet rice), *bột gạo* (rice flour), *bánh tráng* (rice paper), *bún* (rice vermicelli), *bánh phở* (rice noodles), *nước cốt dừa* (coconut milk), *rau thơm* (fragrant herbs), *dậu phộng* (peanuts), and *me* (tamarind pulp) (11–14). More often than not, she too does not locate the recipe or dish in a specific locale or region.

The cookbook *Authentic Recipes from Vietnam*, published in Singapore in 2005 and available in Vietnam, provides recognition in the introduction of regional differences. The authors share their understanding that, “in the cooler northern region...where undulating limestone hills recall Southwest China and where many of Vietnam’s ethnic groups have their homes, the cuisine shares distinct similarities with Chinese food” (Choi and Issak 2005, 6). The authors claim that northern-originated *phở* and *bún chả* are uniquely Vietnamese and eaten throughout Vietnam. They write that the central region is less agriculturally rich and focuses on the highly developed royal cuisine of Huế. The authors ignore the extraordinary richness of the non-royal foods of Hội An and the surrounding Quảng Trị province. Of the southern region they write that “the cuisine more closely resembles that of neighboring Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. The food is more varied and rich than that of Huế or Hà Nội ...” (Choi and Issak, 7).

Choi and Issak seek to define “Vietnamese Cuisine,” and write that “at the heart of Vietnamese cuisine, with its hearty kick and unique aroma, is the salty, pale brown fermented fish sauce known as *nước mắm*...” and that *nước mắm* is “mandatory in Vietnamese cooking” (8). In addition, “what also sets the cuisine apart from that of other Southeast Asian countries,” according to Choi and Issak, “is the pervasive use of fresh leaves and herbs...” (9). They identify the cuisine of Vietnam as “based on rice, fish and fresh vegetables” (13). They list “authentic Vietnamese ingredients” as annatto seeds, Asian chives, basil, banana blossoms, banana leaves, chayote squash, chilies, coconut cream and milk, coriander, daikon radish, lotus seeds, rice paper, dried shrimp, shrimp paste, fish sauce, five spice powder, galangal root, jackfruit, lemongrass, loofah, lotus stems, mint, mustard greens, varieties of rice noodles,

palm sugar, polygonum Vietnamese mint, pomelo, varieties of rice, rice vinegar, rice wine, sago pearls, saw-leaf herb, sesame rice crackers, shrimp crackers, star anise, starfruit, sugar cane, tamarind, tapioca starch, taro, tofu, turmeric, water spinach, morning glory, betel leaves, and wood ear fungus (18–23). However, Choi and Issak rarely identify recipes by region or locale, and they often declare a recipe as classic or ubiquitous without recognizing regional or local variations. An example is *chả giò*, a Vietnamese Spring Roll, the recipe treated as if it is universal across Vietnam. Another is *giò xào xanh tôm hấp*, which they characterize as a “variation on the traditional Vietnamese shrimp salad” (46). *Coi cà bắp cải*, cabbage salad with chicken, is declared a classic that can be “found in most restaurants throughout Vietnam” (49). To read these recipes is to conclude that they are the same throughout Vietnam.

Pauline Nguyễn’s *Secrets of the Red Lantern* (2008) is a charming cookbook and family biography featuring recipes by her brother, Luke Nguyễn. Reflecting on the question of what defines Vietnamese food, Nguyễn tells us directly that:

The first thing I always say is that Vietnamese food is easy—there is no mystery to it. It is simple to prepare; the execution is most quick; and the cooking methods are straightforward. Another distinction is that ovens don’t exist in Vietnam: we prefer to watch our food being cooked—deep fried, steamed, slow braised, grilled, barbecued, or tossed in a flaming wok.... What most distinguishes Vietnamese food, however, is its emphasis on freshness. We do not use fresh herbs sparingly to flavor or garnish a dish—instead, they play a major role in the food.... Wrapping savory dishes at the table in lettuce or rice paper with an abundance of the freshest uncooked herbs is very much the signature of Vietnamese cuisine.... This combines the raw with the cooked, the cold with the hot, and the soft with the crisp. The Vietnamese have a distinct preoccupation with crunch and contrast. Flavors and textures are juxtaposed for dramatic effect. In Vietnamese cuisine balance is always at play (14).

Nguyễn also lists a “handful of ingredients that are typically Vietnamese.” Echoing the lists provided by other cookbook authors, such as Pham and Hoyer, *nước mắm* remains central.

The 2009 hardcover book by Daniel Hoyer, *Culinary Vietnam*, intends to show “how broad the scope of Vietnamese cooking is...and aims to inform the Western cook...” (Hoyer 2009, 15). Hoyer understands that Vietnamese cuisine “has a history of thousands of years in development and countless influences from other cultures, as well as regional and personal variations too numerous to catalogue.” His list of ingredients is almost identical to Mai Pham’s (2001), but he adds several items such as *mắm tôm* (shrimp sauce), *gừng* (ginger), *bột quế* (cinnamon), *rau quế* (basil), *đinh hương* (cloves), *bột ca-ri* (curry powder), *mì* (egg or Chinese noodles) and *miến* (glass noodles). The book is organized straightforwardly by course, without much identification of recipes by region. Hoyer does, however, recognize strong regional differences, pausing to consider “The People and Flavors of Hue and Hoi An” (36), “The People and Flavors of Hanoi” (80), “The People and Flavors of Ho Chi Minh” (122) and “The People and Flavors of the Mekong Delta” (158).

Miss Trinh Diem Vy, a noted restaurateur in Hội An, (See **Figure 1**) unabashedly identifies her cookbook as local and regional in its focus; it is also wonderfully autobiographical. *Taste Vietnam: The Morning Glory Cookbook* (2011) was the first



**Figure 1:** Miss Vy at her Cooking School. (Photo credit: Jack Harris).

commercial cookbook from this region, and it celebrates the uniqueness of Quảng Trị generally, and Hội An specifically. This cookbook reflects the menu at one of Vy's Hội An restaurants and includes unique local and regional ingredients, recipes, food preparation instructions, information on how each ingredient contributes to health and well-being, musings on the environment, and lots of autobiographical details about growing up poor as a young girl in Hội An and starting what is now a modest restaurant empire in this small, tourist town.

Despite these nods to local and regional specificity, Miss Vy also makes a claim about the national character of Vietnamese cuisine:

Vietnamese cuisine can be described as three countries in one bowl: the North, Centre and South, each of which has its own distinctive style. What binds our food culture together is the country's stable carbohydrate—rice—and the fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, which are an essential part of every Vietnamese dish....

The other vital component of a Vietnamese meal is the *mắm*—a by-product of fermented river fish and seafood.... When it comes to Vietnamese food, the main ethnic influences are Champa, Chinese, French, Indian, Khmer (ancient Cambodian) and Siamese (ancient Thai). The typical dishes from each region are determined by the produce available. Vietnamese people know which dishes are special according to the area where they come from and as such we will seek out the specialties when visiting a place outside our home. Alternatively, when friends or relatives visit, they will always bring special hometown foods as gifts. Just as each meal must have certain harmonizing elements to make it complete, each region in Vietnam complements the other, like a member of the family (7).

An illustration of Miss Vy's point about regionalization is the following evidence about one of Vietnam's most ubiquitous noodle dishes that turns out to have all sorts of distinctive regional variations. As recently as 2013, the prominent chef Bùi Thị Sương wrote a small book devoted to *phở*. Sương is one of the founders of the Saigon Professional Chef's Association. She has thoughtfully divided the book's

recipes and dishes into the three recognizably distinct regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. Moreover, she identifies local variations, and seeks to identify cultural sources. In her introduction Sương notes that:

Nevertheless, not everyone is aware of the diversity and uniqueness featured in the Vietnamese cuisine. Take for instance the salad; regions vary greatly in their preparation styles. Or with regards to Bun (fresh noodle soup) [and] Pho, each region shows distinctive creativity in just cooking the broth (3).

Sương claims that “Phở originated in Nam Dinh” province in Vietnam, “but Hanoi was where the recipe for phở was cultivated and refined” (14). She identifies *phở* as “a typical dish that proudly represents Vietnamese cuisine in the world” (14). Under this rubric Sương includes a wide variety of noodle soups. From the central region she includes *bún bò Huế*, the fish-based *bún cá Đa Nãi*, Hoi An-based *cao lầu*, and Quảng Nam’s *mì Quảng* noodles. Quoting Nguyễn Tuan, Sương says “Cao Lau is an original dish which is unique to Hoi An,” (48) a claim that may belie the significant relationship of this region with the Fukien Chinese and the Japanese of long ago. Presenting noodle dishes from the south, Sương indicates that the southern style includes additional herbs, vegetables, and spices, especially star anise, that give a more intense flavor (61). Additional soups, mainly from the Mekong Delta region, include another version of *bún cá* from the Province of Kien Giang; *bún nước lèo*, originating from the Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups living in Tra Vinh; *bún Campuchia*, credited to the Cambodians living on the border; and *hủ tiếu* (from Mỹ Tho, and Nam Vang), credited to the Chinese living in Cambodia (69–77).

Also in 2013, Luke Nguyễn published his enormous and stunning picture book/cookbook *The Foods of Vietnam*. Nguyen, who grew up in Australia, journeyed to Vietnam to discover his heritage and also the country’s regional specialties. Perhaps unencumbered by the need to defend a unitary Vietnamese cuisine, Nguyễn organizes his book to emphasize regional diversity, taking us from Sài Gòn and the South (Hồ Chí Minh City, Mekong Delta, Phú Quốc), from coast to countryside (Mũi Né and Phan Thiết, and Đà Lạt), and from Salt Water People (Nha Trang, Quy

Nhon, Hội An), Princes and Paupers (Huế, Vinh, Ninh Bình) to The Dragon and the Turtle (Hà Nội and Hạ Long Bay) and Mountain People (Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, Mai Châu). Interestingly, Nguyễn devotes four pages at the end of this 367-page book to “basic recipes” that include such items as annatto oil, cooked pork belly, coconut tamarind ice cream, fried red Asian shallots, Huế *hoisin* dipping sauce, *nước chấm* dipping sauce, pickled vegetables, spring onion oil, and toasted rice powder. Perhaps Nguyễn does feel some need to reinforce the commonality that all Vietnamese have with their cuisine after all.

In all of these examples, we can see the absorptive power of Vietnamese cooks to adapt recipes from elsewhere as their own. With a wonderful complexity, cookbook authors claim a distinctive Vietnamese cuisine while acknowledging the multiple cultural sources and great regional and local variations and unique products. The most recent books emphasize regionalization and the local. The twenty-six cooking schools that have sprouted throughout Vietnam reflect this tension—several schools identify the dishes they teach as regional and local, especially in Hội An, but most are more generic. This is not surprising, as they catered initially and still mostly to non-Vietnamese tourists and, more often than not, make the claim of providing an authentic Vietnamese cooking experience with authoritative recipes and cuisine (cf. Heldke 2005). However, Vietnamese cooking classes are increasingly attended by middle-class Vietnamese housewives, and television shows, such as Master Chef and Iron Chef, reinforce the notion of an expert Vietnamese cuisine that requires specific ingredients, measurements, and procedures, over and above the eyeball cooking and tasting of conventional family practice. Such shows have also created Vietnamese chef celebrities. In this way, Vietnamese “cuisine” is being promulgated, marketed, learned, and professionalized.

### Cooking Schools

The cooking school experience (See **Figure 2**) revolves around learning about home cooking, home-based recipes, local fresh food, regional staples, and specialty food. In almost every case, despite the regional and local variations, customers are told that they are preparing and consuming “authentic” Vietnamese food. The Vietnam cooking class attractants include:



**Figure 2:** Cooking Class in Hội An. (Photo Credit: Jack Harris).

- Immersion in food culture—“Eat like a local”
- Real Vietnamese culinary experience
- Celebrity Chefs
- Cookbook Authors
- Farm to Table
- Health and Wellness

To increase its connection to a broader food system, it is not unusual for a cooking class to start with a visit to the market to purchase ingredients. Some cooking classes begin with a visit to a farm. In both cases, this task is usually accompanied by an explanation of Vietnamese food philosophy, revolving around balance and harmony. This will involve talking about specific ingredients, and the interplay of ingredients to provide balanced nutrition, or balanced tastes.

A self-conscious example of the claim and celebration of Vietnamese national cuisine, represented by the emperors, is Huế’s Imperial Cuisine. There is, ironically, only one cooking school in Huế, a proclaimed foodie town. But there may be good reason for this. Imperial Cuisine was originally a political-cum-gustatory construction by Emperor Minh Mạng in the 1830s. Mạng envisioned cuisine to be a culinary and moral unifier of the nation his father had consolidated just decades earlier (Peters 2012). Today, Imperial (also, Royal) Cuisine is a novelty, not generally embraced by Vietnamese. It is considered an anomalous specialty, not derived from the folk or home table. As such, few Vietnamese have ever even tried Imperial Cuisine. The



primary consumers of Imperial Cuisine are tourists, often dining to an accompanying stage show. Imperial Cuisine's role as an elite, touristic culinary enterprise may not fulfill Mạng's erstwhile ambitions, but it is good to "think" and teach with (cf. Lévi-Strauss 2013). We will discuss how teaching and studying such regional cuisines informs understanding of the nation in the next section.

Hồ Chí Minh City, the most populous city in Vietnam, has seven cooking schools. It is quite cosmopolitan, more so than Hà Nội, and has only been part of Vietnam for 300 years. For the majority of those years it was part of the French Colony of Cochin China, so it is not surprising that there should be a French culinary presence. In addition, the thirty years of American presence brought additional western influences. Nevertheless, southern cooking schools rarely identify region or locale, as seen in the example that follows. In the absence of such identification, the participant may be led to think that these dishes are national dishes of note, and universally Vietnamese.

The Hội An cooking schools are the most intensive regarding their representation of local specialties. Moreover, they frame them as that: representations of Vietnamese national cuisine that reflect intense local and regional culinary achievement. Emphasizing both the common threads between the regional food and local and regional culture, these cooking schools provide the fusion of sameness and difference that appears to embrace the paradox. This recalls Miss Vy's comment that "Vietnamese cuisine can be described as three countries in one bowl: the North, Centre and South, each of which has its own distinctive style" (Vy 2011, 7).

Since the forced unification of Vietnam in 1975, national identity has remained contentious, both within the boundaries of the country itself and for its overseas (now called "heritage") Vietnamese, the *Việt kiều*. However, the rising tourist industry and the internationalization of "Vietnamese cuisine" have resulted in framing several Vietnamese dishes, most notably *phở*, as originally and distinctly (if perhaps falsely) Vietnamese (Peters 2010). Such identification is, no doubt, useful to government rhetoric about a unified and distinctive Vietnamese culture, at least where the Kinh ethnic group is concerned. This is reminiscent of Emperor Ming Mạng's efforts to define a singular Vietnamese cuisine.

Several of the cookbooks conceal this tension of national and regional identities and subcultures. The few that recognize it use strategies not unlike those employed by Hồ Chí Minh to emphasize a fictive intertwining of the different ethnic groups, regions, and localities into a harmony of differences. In many ways, the idea of a Vietnamese national cuisine fails the culinary authenticity test (Johnston and Baumann 2009): While lots of dishes are made in Vietnam, the geographic specificity is really regional. Many of the dishes and their variations are not simple, not even a good *phở*. What personal connections and relationships to food there are tend to be familial, local, and regional. The history and traditions of Vietnamese cuisine are situated in these localities and regions, and are not ubiquitous. Finally, there is great ethnic variation amongst the cuisines of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. If you want to have authentic food, it needs to be local and regional, and it may be at its best when eaten in a Vietnamese family's home. It may be that there is enough security in the Vietnamese national identity, through useful identification of common ingredients and methods that are bound to a larger geography, to begin to emphasize regional differences without threatening this unifying aspect of the culture. The national political rhetoric notwithstanding, Vietnam, like many other countries (such as Italy), has fierce local and regional cultural expressions that find their way, quite forcefully, into their ingredients, preparations, dishes, and tastes.

### **Teaching Food**

After three months of exploring various aspects of Vietnamese culture, I have realized that the location in which the food is made, the process of personalizing the dish before the spoon reaches one's mouth and even the utensils used to devour the food, are all fundamental parts of making the Vietnamese cuisine unique to the culture that creates it (Sarah Kloos, "What is Vietnamese Cuisine?", student Research Essay #3, Fall 2016).

These next two sections draw from the Hobart and William Smith and Union colleges combined Vietnam Study Abroad program in Fall 2016. We went to Vietnam to learn about sociocultural and political life—so we ate. Food Studies was the curricular focus for this semester-long study abroad program. I (Annear) required my students

to understand Vietnamese culture, society, politics, and history by developing knowledge about Vietnam through gustatory engagement. To do so, as suggested in the student research essay excerpted above, we explored three culinary geographies—North, South, and Central—via our probing chopsticks and the tips of our tongues.

This study abroad program drew theoretical focus and methodological inspiration from David Sutton's (2010) concept of "gustemology." This term and ethnographic approach emphasizes sensory data, especially taste and smell, and place-making. Sutton notes:

In pursuing our interest in the sensual aspects of food, we should keep our multisensory apparatuses trained on what anthropology has in one way or another always been concerned with: everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value (220).

Flavor and flavor borders thus can be recognized as carrying sociocultural and political meaning commensurate to other social institutions. Tastes and foods should be recognized as primary meaning-makers in human cultural worlds, no longer just analogs or conduits for learning about something seemingly more important, such as class or masculinity (Holtzman 2009). In the case of Vietnamese cuisine, this invites the study of *nước mắm*, which is cited by many cookbook authors to be a gastro-border and national unifier. Yet by taking its flavor profile seriously, *nước mắm* may be contrasted against technique, ingredient, and taste variations among Vietnam's regions, thus engaging tensions between locality and nationhood. As we will show in the next section, which features student learning, students frequently recognized and wrote about such national-local tension evident in Vietnamese culinary practice and meanings.

Food Studies presents the pedagogical opportunity for students to study and learn at the intersection of national politics and the everyday lives of people. As with *bánh Tết*—a New Year specialty comprised of rice, pork, and banana leaves—a single dish can even symbolize the nation itself. Yet, as Nir Avieli well notes, the production

of the dish—including the anxiety over the rice harvest, gendered labor investment, and regional modifications—ground it in lived daily life. *Bánh Tết* thus is both the imagined taste of the nation and its gustative constituent parts (Avieli 2005).

Despite its political ambivalence, tension regarding national and local portrayals of cuisine is productive to student learning. This is particularly the case within a Food Studies framework. Swift and Wilk note that the teaching of Food Studies typically eschews academic disciplinary boundaries, even when its courses are housed within them (2015, 9). In my teaching, this topical, multidisciplinary frame allows me to challenge students to explore foodscapes regionally and nationally, and through the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, international relations, and economics. They must apply theories that impose categories based on cooking processes (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 2013) and anticipate social positioning (e.g., Bourdieu 2013), and then determine whether these frameworks fit their culinary data (e.g., Avieli 2012; Goody 1996). Once students feel they have a handle on the elements of cookery and class that produce Vietnamese dishes, they are ready to address questions of regional and national culinary scale through rural and urban culinary knowledge and economy.

Distinguishing rural and urban cuisines adds further texture and tastes to questions of regional and national culinary systems. As *bánh Tết* symbolically represents the nation, it is also an economic product of peri-urban villages such as Tranh Khúc outside of Hà Nội. Students toured this village in order to better understand this purported taste of Vietnam—notably, how sticky rice melts together with fatty pork in this savory concoction. They also learned that this dense rectangular delight is a commodity that marks identity and produces economic capital for the residents of Tranh Khúc. In similar ways, home-cooked meals, such as Hoianese *cánh chua* (sour soup), are both symbolically the universe in a bowl (Avieli 2012) and a light lunch sold to visiting tourists.

Students came to understand street foods as products of urban industrialized economies. Sometimes heralded as “authentic” or “real” Vietnamese cuisine (cf. Vandenberghe and Thys 2010), street foods are accessible and enlivening for students. They also provide a window into an emergent urban cuisine that contrasts in notable

ways with foods of nostalgia, which are typically associated with rural spaces (M. Pham 2001; A. Pham 2009). Urban street food as a category consists of atomized dish construction (i.e., each quán (bistro) sells just one dish) and the economic structures that keep it cheap. Students interviewed the street vendors known as “basket women” for the food-laden woven platters they balance on both ends of a flat bamboo pole over a shoulder. Although illegal, this usually female labor, and along with the industrial, mass production of noodles and other constituent products, keeps street food cheap—thus making it available and popular as “domestic” Vietnamese food (cf. Yasmeen 2007; Jensen et al. 2013).

### **Studying Food**

This section describes the applied pedagogy and practice of teaching Food Studies in Vietnam. We discuss and draw from student work produced in a semester-long study abroad program led by one of the authors in Fall 2016. The program’s academic focus operated chiefly through its director’s seminar, entitled “Eating Cultures in Vietnam.” A variety of activities supported this course, including 21 food-focused field trips, six of which included student cooking in each of three Vietnamese regional culinary styles. In addition to readings and discussion, the seminar required students to research and write three “research essays” over the course of the semester.<sup>6</sup> These essays facilitated a deliberate mix of primary fieldwork and secondary text-based research. These were planned so that they built progressively from a theoretical examination of student-generated lists of Vietnamese dishes to an empathetic documentation of productive labor, and then to a determination of the nature of Vietnam’s cuisine(s). Similar to our findings from cookbooks on Vietnamese cuisine above, student work revealed success in process and surprise in their results—and benefitted from a Food Studies pedagogy. While all submitted student essays were at least satisfactory, most ranged toward superb. Below, we discuss the best essays written for each assignment.

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<sup>6</sup> These essays required a complementary mix of primary fieldwork exploration and secondary texts focusing variously on theory, ethnography, and history. Students composed 7–10-page double-spaced papers to fulfill each assignment.

## Research Essay #1: Food by Region and Class

For this research essay, you will study how Vietnamese cuisine is characterized by geographic region and class distinctions. Cuisines classify food; and foods act as symbolic indicators, linking producers and consumers to social categories—thereby classifying people. You should catalog the ingredients and dishes you have thus far encountered, drawing upon Bourdieu (2013) and Lévi-Strauss (2013). Applying ethnographic evidence, you will then discuss what these foods represent and how Vietnamese eaters experience these culinary categories (Research Essay #1 Assignment Prompt).

The purpose of this essay was twofold: to establish and apply a theoretical basis to Food Studies research, and to begin the process of understanding everyday Vietnamese life through primary gastronomic data generated by student fieldwork (cf. Sutton 2010). This essay required each of the 19 American students participating in the program to compile a list of all of the Vietnamese dishes they had encountered in their first month in the country. They were also asked to construct a food classification chart and a culinary triangle, respectively, by applying Bourdieu (2013) and Lévi-Strauss's (2013) models. Students must then properly position and describe five of the dishes appearing in their culinary list on both of the theoretical charts using class, region, gender, and socioeconomic criteria.

The four best essays students produced for this assignment exhibited an impressive breadth of structural and sociological possibilities available within Food Studies. Two students discussed the intersection of women's labor and class, while two others argued that the physical spaces where food is prepared presupposes its class positioning. All these essays underscored the role of the relative visibility of food labor in defining social taste for those who consume its culinary products. The first of these essays portrayed this dynamic well:

Throughout my experiences thus far, it seems that women street vendors are essential to the Vietnamese lifestyle, but are perceived with little admiration. Therefore, since women are generally the owners of street food,

they are perceived with less praise than men in society. My five dishes gave me the personal experiences needed to be able to understand the labor that goes into the food and the type of people who make it. (Natalie K. A. Bishop)

This student argued that street food production is largely women's work, and that, together, such food and labor combine to create low-class cookery. In terms of social perception, she therefore hypothesized that the public nature of street food and the gendered work that creates it are mutually demeaning.

The second student's writing paralleled the first essay. This student similarly argued that women's food labor is marginalized, and suggested that this was an active process that contrasted with the privileged status of male work:

It seems as though the role of women is unescapable [sic] in the creation of all Vietnamese meals. They are the farmers, traders, sellers, cooks, and in general, the ones in charge of the food... The more the food conceals the role of women in its presentation, the more prestige and monetary value it holds in society, and vice versa. Thus, like many others, that smiling woman wearing bright pink and purple pajamas that works from 4 AM to 10 PM on the street will never get the recognition or prestige she deserves, especially compared to her male counterpart. (Danielle C. Moyer)

Both of these essays emphasized the role of labor and public food production. They highlight how the social status of food is sculpted by the hands that create it.

Following Sutton's (2010) concept of *gustemology*, the third student explores class through her senses. She notes that the social positioning of food is intimately engaged with its taste on the tongue and the space where it is consumed:

Eating a meal is an experience, not the separation of one of the five senses. Street food is named for its environment and therefore, environment is a strong factor in that food. From this exploration, I am noticing that the higher up you go in class, the farther away from the earth that experience

takes you. Bun Cha [grilled pork and noodles in broth; typical street food] in a five star hotel would taste cold and out of place, while a piece of toast with caviar on the street would just look comical. Food on the street is the pride of local people. Food eaten in a suit and tie places culture in a memory bank. The AC [air conditioning] acts as a chemical spray that masks the true nature entirely. (Sarah Kloos)

Returning to the idiom of food and labor visibility, the fourth student explores the creation of the meaning of globally popular dishes such as *phở bò*, noodles in beef broth, as they are consumed in personal spaces:

Frontstage and backstage kitchens often imply a visibility or hiddenness in relation to cooks as well as diners. However, the idea of visible versus hidden is mediated not only by space, but also by time and diner behaviors. Therefore, there is some fluidity between frontstage and backstage and an ability to morph from one into the other. Yet, the actualized, current state of a kitchen is what affects the perception of the food being served, its presentation, and thus those who choose to eat it. While Bourdieu's chart is convenient in plotting generalities, the specific kitchen type from which a food hails powerfully influences its placement. (Brenda Lin)

This student shows that Food Studies provides the space to study sociocultural life as well as theoretical space. She is able to use Bourdieu's food classification theory, while at the same time critiquing and extending it. Once students situated and recognized the gendered labor of the dishes they were consuming, they were prepared to imagine what that work felt like. I asked them in their second research essay to interview food laborers and write from their perspective.

## **Research Essay #2: Biographies of Food Labor**

For this research essay you will research and write descriptive accounts of food labor in Vietnam. You may focus exclusively on one type of food labor, or present a series of different modes of food labor (e.g., *bánh mì* vendors,



herb growers, street vendors, etc). You must draw upon Jensen, et al. 2013, and I strongly recommend conducting your own interviews and other modes of ethnographic research. You should focus on personal stories of food production and write them up as first-person narratives (Research Essay #2 Assignment Prompt).

This essay challenged students to write creatively from the first-person perspective of food laborers. Although voluntary, all the students interviewed street vendors (with the help of a translator). The melding of primary and secondary data sources allowed students to both personify the analysis they read in a companion book (Jensen et al. 2013), while also grounding the stories of street food vendors in economic and cultural scholarship. One student remarked that her interviews corroborated the veracity of what she was reading in class.

All these students chose women rather than men to interview and sympathized with the difficult choices that brought them to streets in Hà Nội, as well as the hard work required of them to stay there. In particular, students highlighted the loneliness that came with leaving children and sometimes spouses in villages in order to earn urban money that allowed them to maintain these rural lives. The opening to the first essay shows this well:

I wake up longing for my son more than ever before. It has been a rough couple of days for me financially. These are the days that make it especially hard to be far away from home (Interview 1 about Ms. Luyen. 10/20/16, Hà Nội). Ugh, I wish I were with him. He is so young. A seven-year-old should be raised by me, his mother, not by his grandparents (ibid)... For a minute I question whether or not I should return home and care for him. However, I am quickly snapped back into reality. I know that going home 60 kilometers to my home town of Hà Tây is not realistic (ibid). (Natalie K. A. Bishop)

Such discussion also shows how vending petty food items in a city contrasts with disappointed hopes for some that Vietnam's rapid economic development since Đổi

Mới reforms in the late 1980s would improve formal employment opportunities for all Vietnamese.

Student narratives also told of culinary creation and the lived experiences of its producers. Street vendors are awake in the predawn hours of the morning in order to purchase fruit at a wholesale market for resale, or to mold and fry donuts:

To make my donuts, I am a part of a group of female donut sellers in Hà Nội who make them daily on the balcony of our rented home (Jensen et al. 2013, 134). We rotate who buys the ingredients, who makes the donuts, who cooks the donuts, and who sells the donuts on the daily basis, so we are able to fairly split the labor between us. We get to keep the money we make for selling, but some of us are better at selling than others. I am a shy person, so selling is sometimes hard for me. I do what I can do (Interview, Sen, 10/14/16). Beginning sharply at 4 AM, we make the donuts by preparing the filling by soaking the mung beans in water for two hours. While those soak, we peel the potatoes and boil them till they are soft so we can puree them. Next, we mix glutinous rice flour, rice flour, and baking powder in a mixing bowl. Separately, we put water and sugar in a pan and boil it till it turns into a “thick syrup”.... We know the donuts are done when they float to the top of the pan (Thys and Vandenberghe 2012, 92–93). (Danielle C. Moyer)

This student essay tells of the social life of food production in a literal sense—the women depicted in it rise from tight communal living quarters, collaborate to make the donuts, and then pool together their meager resources to bail out a vendor unlucky enough to be snared in a police raid:

Women all around are ducking into alleyways. Police are coming. “Illegal occupants of the sidewalks, leave immediately.” The crowd fails to move and the street is jammed. “You!” echoes behind me as a hand juts full force behind my back. I stumble on the broken tiles beneath my feet that mock me as my basket full of pomegranates is loaded into the back of the truck,

followed by my bike. "Please have mercy, lower the fine." This is what the other women told me to say. The harsh scowl from the larger man tells me they are in a bad mood (Jensen et al. 2013, 113). (Sarah Kloos)

These stories show that such women are integral to the food system, but nevertheless devalued by those around them. Theirs is difficult, marginal, and anxious work.

Students seemed to most enjoy this essay among the three assigned. Appropriately, they felt they had the license to imagine the lives of others, and productively did so:

We listened to the stories of both Sen and Huong for an hour and I hung onto every word. I was eager to show them I cared and listened intently to what they chose to say. From all of their hardships, they still had smiles to share with us. They are such strong, hard working women. We learned about the length of their days, family life, aspirations for the future and obstacles in their paths. (Sarah Kloos)

As in the first essay, students worked to give voice to low-class women who work in occupational silence on the streets of Hà Nội. This topic was not mandated in either of the two essay guidelines. We argue that such gendered discussion of typically overlooked public laborers shows the breadth of the pedagogical space presented by Food Studies curricula.

### **Research Essay #3: What Is Vietnamese Cuisine?**

For this research essay, you will research and argue for the scale and nature of Vietnamese cuisine. What constitutes Vietnamese cooking? Is there a single, recognized national Vietnamese cuisine or instead an assemblage of regionally bounded dishes? Are there specific ingredients, culinary techniques, modes of presentation, or anything else that makes Vietnamese cuisine distinctive? (Research Essay #3 Assignment Prompt).

This essay challenged students to apply their empirical and theoretical knowledge to the question with which this paper contends: what is Vietnamese cuisine? The

intention is for students to engage Vietnam politically, historically, anthropologically, and sociologically by determining elements of its culinary boundedness. As Avieli (2012) underscores, Food Studies allows for the examination of potentially provocative social issues with little scrutiny, because they are cooked into the everyday practice of sustenance (cf. Sutton 2010).

One of the four notable students papers produced for this assignment considered how French and Chinese culinary practices and gastronomic politics sculpted, but did not construct, Vietnamese cooking:

Vietnamese cuisine was developed through a period of wide French and Chinese influence. The way these two nations impacted Vietnamese culture varied drastically. The French tended to initially have a negative impact on the culinary traditions in Vietnam, while the Chinese helped push it forward with trade (Peters 2012, 86, 126). However, a common misconception arose regarding the distinction between a singular national cuisine and a complex culinary system. Due to their significant imperial presence in Vietnam, the French and Chinese shaped, but did not create the regionally diverse Vietnamese cuisine we know today. (Matt Gracer)

This student argued that French citizens impacted Vietnam's foodscape mainly through avoidance. They typically chose canned French imports over fresh Vietnamese dishes, while creating an invented tradition (cf. Ranger 1983) of simplified, rurally-founded Vietnamese cuisine that belied its dynamism and urban creativity. However, the French colonial government unintentionally altered the recipe for the fundamental *nước mắm* by restricting access to salt when it endeavored to monopolize the commodity (Peters 2012). By contrast, Chinese food knowledge simmered through the more intimate channels of migration, intermarriage, and shared ingredients. If France commandeered salt, it was Chinese businessmen who traded it.

This student author, on the other hand, saw economic restriction in French aloofness and Chinese culinary kinship; another recognized disparate yet related gastronomic framework in Vietnam's regions:

Food could just simply be a result of family and social environments that a person learns and adapts to throughout their life. This would conclude that the Vietnamese food doesn't fall under a specific cuisine, but instead it is just the food options that the people of Vietnam have grown up eating and learning to love through time and history. There is no doubt that "Vietnamese cuisine" is a concept that exists, but it is key to acknowledge that any possible definition will hinder, restrain, or exclude what exactly "Vietnamese food" is. Thus, Vietnamese food does not have to be labeled. It does not have to fall under a certain nationality. It does not have to be confined. Vietnamese food can tell us a lot about the Vietnamese culture, however, only if we let it. (Danielle C. Moyer)

This student argues that such frameworks foster family and defy categorization. Regional differences are born of historical contingency and fed by Vietnam's remarkable diversity of ingredients. Each region thus constructs ways of producing and consuming food that unite through common knowledge, but remain distinguishing by class.

As certain as one student can be about Vietnamese culinary atomization, the next argues that it is, rather, common ingredients, historical experience, and colonial influences that mold *national* cuisine (cf. Anderson 2006). She highlights Minh Mạng's attempt to standardize the table setting and to make central non-sticky rice, and observes the broad-based use of fish sauce as ties that bind and unite Vietnamese cooking. Furthermore, she writes, Vietnam's is a generative cuisine that can integrate novelty:

Even a dish that seems to be in a category of its own like *bánh mì* is based on many flavors and uses many of the same common ingredients. Historically, *bánh mì* or bread represented a separation between French cuisine and Vietnamese cuisine but as Peters (2012) describes "Wandering the streets of Hanoi, one can find bakeries selling *bánh mì*" and these bakeries or street stalls are on a corner every couple blocks (ibid). *Bánh mì*, made from rice

flour, makes a Vietnamese variation of a French baguette. When made with egg, pickled vegetables, cilantro and chili sauces, it combines many common Vietnamese ingredients and represents historical influences making it a uniquely Vietnamese sandwich. It incorporates a rice product, protein, vegetables, herbs, and chili sauce as a typical Vietnamese dish would. (Jacqueline Sharry)

These students show that there is not a single correct answer to this and many of the questions Food Studies inspires, but benefits lie in the process of learning gustomologically. They operated within the tension that exists between a possible culinary nationhood and the everyday local sensory practices that produce meals. The final paper highlights the active and individual decision-making that generates meaningful food:

Glancing around at the other customers, there was a similar sense of concentration in preparing their meals, but each took a slightly different route to come to their finished masterpiece. As Peters suggests, “what people eat reflects not just who they are, but who they want to be” (2012, xxv). This statement shows that the process of not only eating but also creating the food is an act of exercising free will. No individual creates food in the same way, although the inspiration may come from a common place, making cuisine a highly personal activity capable of transforming ingredients into new realms of discovery. This is achieved simply by the input from various working hands and conscious decisions by both the chef and the consumer. (Sarah Kloos)

## **Conclusion**

To stretch Claude Lévi-Strauss’s famous aphorism, Food Studies are good to think—and to teach with. In this article we have explored questions of culinary nature and scale in Vietnam. What is Vietnamese cuisine and how much does it encompass? Do national borders overlay culinary boundaries to construct a politically effective state

of cuisine or do local taste systems partition the landscape like an interlocking web of gastronomic dialects? These queries are at once political, sensory, ethnographic, and structural. Academically, they are Food Studies questions.

Food Studies provides a framework for understanding connections of labor, gender, class, and, essentially, taste, among many other values. Sutton (2010), Holtzman (2009), and others argue that food should be imbibed intellectually, but also gustatorially, and must be understood in its own right. We have sought to show how this may be performed in the field and in the classroom. Students in one study abroad program successfully engaged Food Studies questions from a variety of perspectives, often digging in and unearthing surprise. They systematically identified gendered status, in particular, when asked to consider productive food labor. Taste permeated culinary classification—leading them to better understand cultural knowledge, identity, and politics. Food Studies requires exploring, and paying attention. Clearly the cultural, social, and political formulations surrounding food often serve purposes that are more than culinary, yet, in Food Studies, the food itself still nourishes.

In the case of Vietnamese food, the critical details of ingredients, preparation, and consumption both reveal and conceal truths about the country from which it originates. On the one hand, it is easy to settle on a few ingredients, such as rice, *nước mắm*, and fresh greens in order to imagine a unified Vietnamese cuisine. On the other, direct experience of the foods of Vietnam reveals the deep, often contentious influences of its invaders and colonizers. It also exhibits the influences of an internationalized Vietnam, where tourism makes the claim of a national Vietnamese cuisine good business, and good national politics, and keeps matters of unification simple and, more likely, simplistic. The economy of Vietnamese food is driven by the forces of globalization, capitalism, and Vietnam's recent prosperity. This has tended to overshadow the extraordinary and wonderful regional and local variations that make a claim to a national cuisine difficult. Of course, we are witnessing a growing tourist "foodie" culture that is seeking out regional and local artisanal foods. Perhaps this development will compete with the claim of a national Vietnamese cuisine. After all, it is true that, depending on where you are in Vietnam, you may be eating a very

different rice noodle. It is fair to say that, to the practiced eater of foods in Vietnam, it is actually the diversity and variations of that cuisine that make it so “Vietnamese.” This is more true given Vietnam’s segmented history, and its rich cultural and distinct ethnic groups. Indeed, as Ms. Vy suggested, Vietnamese cuisine is at least “three countries in one bowl” (Vy 2011, 7), and it is also so much more than that.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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