

Hanoi Snack Time

The refined cuisine of Trang an, as Hanoi was once known, has made its mark throughout Vietnam. Using ingredients from the rice paddies, generations of Hanoi women have created a unique culinary legacy. Made of rice and water, Bun (rice vermicelli) is symbolic of the paddy fields. In Hanoi, these simple noodles are enjoyed year-round. Vermicelli, like steamed sticky rice and other cakes, is generally considered a snack, to be eaten morning, noon or night. Rather than encouraging you to: help yourself to the vermicelli", Hanoians say: "You are invited to try a morsel".

Dishes of vermicelli are sold by itinerant vendors, at sidewalk stalls and in restaurants. Street vendors peddle the most popular type, Bun Rieu (sour crab vermicelli soup). This tasty dish mixes the cool taste of tomatoes, delicious freshwater crab, sour vinegar, fresh vegetables and rich crab roe fried with onions.

Bun Oc (snail vermicelli soup) is a popular morning snack. Originally from Khuong Thuong village, this dish is getting harder to find in Hanoi's Old Quarter, as cooks and vendors are abandoning their traditional jobs. The snails hail from Hoa Binh province, where they live on moss-covered rocks. Steamed in wine vinegar, the white snails have a crunchy texture. Their delicate fragrance is highlighted by the flavors of ginger and chili. The vermicelli is as soft as rose petals.

Another delicate dish is Bun Moc (minced meat vermicelli soup). Bobbing in the broth are pieces of white chicken, brown mushrooms, pink pork pie and spicy green vegetables. The sweet smell of mushrooms accompanies the whole meal, lingering even after the bowl is finished.

Hanoians are also fond of Bun Ca ro Rau cai (anabas fish and colza vermicelli soup), especially in early autumn. Fish broth is poured over vermicelli, white fish, green colza and fennel to dispel the heat of a sunny morning.

A favorite lunchtime dish is Bun Cha (vermicelli with grilled meat). This dish is hard to forget. In the past, minced meat patties were skewered on bamboo sticks, grilled over charcoal, and served with coiled vermicelli. Today, the minced meat is clamped between two grills, cooked and served with long vermicelli. Thankfully, the distinctive taste of the amber dipping sauce remains unchanged. Each shop has its own recipe. Surrounded by the fragrance of grilling meat, the diner dips his noodles into a bowl of sour, hot, salty and sweet sauce that contains garlic and chili, and then adds fresh mint leaves. One bite and you'll understand why the writer Thach Lam, in his book *Delicious Hanoi Foods* claimed that aroma of grilling Bun Cha could inspire sick people to rise.

While it isn't difficult to make Bun Cha, it is hard to make good Bun Cha. As attractive as the Bun Cha served in restaurants may be, purists are still tempted by the flat baskets of minced meat and Tu Ki lotus vermicelli (noodles wrapped in lotus leaves), which remind them of the old days. Those in the know head to the corner of Thi Sach and Tran Xuan Soan streets, where some women sell Bun Cha Tu Ky from about 7 AM to 11 AM.

Once eaten only by poor people, Bun Dau (vermicelli with tofu), is a tasty and healthy dish. The ingredients are simple. Phu Do coiled vermicelli and golden fried Mo tofu from Co Mai village are dipped in reddish shrimp paste mixed with the grease used to fry the tofu. Fresh perilla, basil and marjoram make the dish complete.

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About the Author

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