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FOOD



ROOFTOP DINING + PIZZA WITH A PURPOSE + ICE CREAM SOCIAL + VIET-CAJUN CUISINE

ISSUE



Ragin' Viet-Cajun

Southeast Asia and Louisiana
meld in New Orleans

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Magicians perform all sorts of illusions: chopping a woman in half, making an assistant disappear, or pulling a rabbit out of a hat. But the magic trick on my plate astonished me. Hieu Doan, owner of Nameuse in New Orleans' Mid-City district, had just turned a bowl of *pho* into a po'boy.

As I was about to bite into this soup-sandwich synthesis, the man sitting next to me at the bar leaned over and said, "Now that's not very authentic."

On the surface, this "pho boy" might not seem authentic. Yet it's congruent with America's evolving food landscape, where the hipster proclivity for mashing up dishes from different cultures—think Korean tacos and ramen burgers—simmer at record levels.

Since 2005's Hurricane Katrina, Vietnamese cuisine has caught the attention (and taste buds) of nearly everyone in New Orleans who has a mouth. Restaurants such as MoPho, Ba Chi Canteen, Mint Modern Vietnamese Bistro and Bar, and Nameuse—helmed by either first-generation Vietnamese-American or non-Vietnamese chefs—are rocketing Vietnamese cuisine into the 21st century and rooting it in Louisiana's native soil.

This trend is the latest iteration of a movement that started in the 1990s or earlier, when Vietnamese immigrants began opening Cajun restaurants in Louisiana. Most had generic-sounding names such as Cajun Seafood or the Cajun Boil. One of my Vietnamese friends in New Orleans referred to it as Asian-Cajun cuisine; others have called it Viet-Cajun. Before long, Viet-Cajun restaurants popped up in Vietnamese communities from Orlando, Florida, to Little Saigon in Westminster and Garden Grove.

I wanted to dig into the evolution of the Big Easy's Vietnamese cuisine and find out what the plethora of Viet-Cajun restaurants here says about the city, its residents, and the nature of culinary authenticity.



Clockwise from top: Fisherman Phuoc (Michael) Nguyen prepares his boat, *Lady Hana*, for shrimping season. Fresh crawfish is served up at NOLA's Tet Fest, which celebrates the Vietnamese New Year. The "pho boy" at Nameuse, being prepared by owner Hieu Doan, combines elements of Vietnamese *pho* and a New Orleans po'boy.

Shrimp Boats

To begin my exploration, I rang Sandy Nguyen, executive director of Coastal Communities Consulting in New Orleans. She acts as an advocate for Vietnamese shrimpers, who make up a majority of the state's shrimpers. In the wake of both Katrina and the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill, she walked the fishermen through getting financial restitution from the government.

"Come down anytime," she said. "I guarantee you'll have an amazing time with us."

A few weeks later, I walked into Café Trinh Quyen in New Orleans East, about a 15-mile drive from the French Quarter, to find about a dozen Vietnamese Americans sitting at a large communal table, beers in front of them, chain-smoking. Most were male shrimpers who'd just returned to port after being at sea for nearly two weeks.

Someone put a bottle of Tiger beer in my hand. "Yooooooo!" everyone shouted in unison, a common Vietnamese drinking chant, raising their beer bottles and then swigging.

Cajun food "is similar to Vietnamese in that you can sit around and pick at it like we're doing right now with this food," said Sandy's husband, Phuoc, who goes by Michael and is a shrimper. He waved his hand over the table covered with communal plates of *be thui muoi* (rare, partially cured, or roasted beef) and *goi ca ngua* (raw croaker fish with a tamarind dip).

"The longer we were in Louisiana, the more we slowly started adding local ingredients to our own food at home," said Hanh, a shrimper across the table from me.

"When I'd make shrimp spring rolls for my children's lunches, I eventually started using Cajun spices in the boil," added Tay, the only other woman there besides Sandy.

Cue everyone at the table: "Yooooooo!"

After a few more toasts, I posed the question about how and why the local Vietnamese began opening Cajun boil restaurants.

"It really comes down to a business decision," someone bellowed. At this point, people were talking so fast I could hardly keep up, and Sandy was translating whatever she picked out of the bibulous cacophony: "There were only so many Vietnamese to eat at Vietnamese restaurants in New Orleans—the white Americans were not eating Vietnamese much yet—so some of us opened restaurants serving the local cuisine."

A bottle of cognac materialized. Shots were

poured, glasses were raised. We slammed our empty glasses down and laughed. In two days, all the men here would be back at sea.

Katrina

Was it just a business decision, I wondered. Southern California has large Vietnamese communities, but I have yet to see Vietnamese tacos take off. And despite Houston's large Vietnamese community, Viet-Texas barbecue isn't exploding there.

To understand the Viet-Cajun phenomenon, we must go back to 1975, when tens of thousands of Vietnamese immigrated to the United States after the Fall of Saigon. Many of the southern Vietnamese were Catholic, and Catholic charities sponsored refugees, finding them homes and work in and around New Orleans. The hot, soggy climate was similar to southern Vietnam, and many recent arrivals had been fishermen back home.

The immigrants settled in run-down neighborhoods and eventually revitalized them. One such spot was New Orleans East, officially known as Village de L'Est. The refugees bonded and relied on each other for support, keeping largely to themselves.

Everything changed when Katrina hit in 2005.

After the storm, the Vietnamese were among the first to begin the rebuilding process. They patched up New Orleans East and the West Bank, helping create a momentum for the rest of the city.

"We Vietnamese shrimpers were looked at as uneducated and dumb by the locals," said Michael. "But then Katrina happened, and we were suddenly necessary."

"People are drawn to New Orleans to eat," added Sandy. "After Katrina, the shrimpers and fishermen were seen as important. Without us, restaurants could not produce some of the most famous Cajun and Creole dishes."

Culinary Heritage

At a Lower Ninth Ward branch of Cajun Seafood, a small Vietnamese-owned chain in New Orleans, I met with Anthony Tran, former owner of a Viet-Cajun restaurant in Lafayette. He'd been one of the "boat people"—Vietnamese who escaped the country via a harrowing sea journey.

"The key here is to realize that Louisiana has such a strong food heritage," he said. "Other cities have culinary traditions, too—Italian-American in New York, for example—but nowhere is it so strong



Clockwise from top: Shrimp boats stand at the ready at Venice Marina near New Orleans. Cajun Seafood's raw menu includes crawfish and shrimp, as well as crabs, oysters, and fresh whole fish.



Viet-Cajun in Nola

Cajun Seafood is a minichain in the Big Easy with addictive boiled shrimp and crawfish at four locations. cajunseafoodnola.com.

Namese serves up high-quality takes on Southeast Asian cuisine. The "pho boy" goes on and off the menu. (504) 483-8899; namese.net.

At **MoPho**, chef Michael Gulotta cooks up Vietnamese-inspired dishes with Louisiana and Gulf Coast ingredients, such as fried Gulf shrimp roll and glazed pork belly bowl with spiced peanuts and cracklins. (504) 482-6845; mophonola.com.



crawfish, and I was about to discover the difference between a Cajun and a Vietnamese boil.

"In a traditional Cajun boil," Anthony said, "you'd be almost assaulted by Cajun spices." Cajun boils contain seasonings such as mustard seeds, cayenne, black peppercorns, pickling spices, celery seeds, ginger, bay leaves, and oregano.

Taking a crawfish from this dish, I sucked the brains out of its head and could detect a subtle fruity sweetness. As is the southern Vietnamese proclivity with just about everything they cook, chefs sprinkle sugar into the boil. For good measure, they douse it with lemon juice. According to Anthony, Cajun Seafood owners Viet Nguyen and his wife, Nga Le, created this particular concoction.

"My mom, who had been working at a Cajun restaurant previously, came up with the idea to add sugar and lemon to the mix," said the Nguyens' son, Chi, when he gravitated to our table. "We wanted to balance out the flavors, adding sweet and sour to a recipe that was already salty and spicy." Which is the heart of the Vietnamese food philosophy: a balance among sweet, sour, spicy, and salty in one dish.

It seems to be working. "There are 185 Viet-Cajun restaurants in New Orleans alone," said Anthony, who is on the Crescent City's board of economic development.

Authenticity

The Viet-Cajun combo is so popular that non-Vietnamese chefs are embracing it. Michael Gulotta, who worked his way through the empire of an acclaimed local chef, is now chef-partner of MoPho. While eating some of his specialties—crispy pig tail terrine paired with a red curried squash, chicken *paillard* with Vietnamese fish sauce, and a po'boy *bánh mỳ* mash-up—I asked him why his first restaurant combined Vietnamese and Cajun flavors.

"When I thought about where I like eating on my day off, it was always Vietnamese," said the chef. "This restaurant is my vision of what it would be like if the historic New Orleans identity blended with Vietnamese culture, if the Mekong and the Mississippi rivers collided."

Michael Gulotta noted the recent frenzy over all things Vietnamese on the local restaurant scene and echoed the shrimpers I'd spoken with a few nights earlier: "After Katrina, we all opened up a bit more. It brought us together."

I recalled my discussion of the pho boy at Nameuse, and questions of authenticity arose. But what makes a dish "authentic?" Take the *bánh mỳ* sandwich, something most people would agree is a legitimate Vietnamese product. Yet the sandwich was born out of French colonialism, the baguette and *pâté* introduced in the 1870s by Gallic conquerors. It's a fusion of French and Vietnamese ingredients, culinary cultures, and histories. The same is true for what I'd been eating in New Orleans, an organic marriage between two cuisines caused by the movement of people and the larger forces of history. If that's not "authentic," then I don't know what is.

Family Style

On my penultimate morning in New Orleans, I joined Sandy at the shrimp boat docks, not far from where the Mississippi River meets the Gulf of Mexico. We walked over to a large steaming pot on a bench. It was a shrimp boil.

I picked up a shrimp, twisting off the head and sucking the brains out before peeling the outer shell and legs off and eating the rest. The just-pulled-from-the-sea morsels exuded a buttery goodness. Beneath that, subtle hints of spiciness and sweetness hit all those Vietnamese notes. Toward the bottom of the pot lay soft-shell crab. I picked one up and bit into it. Juice ran down my arm, my rolled-up shirtsleeve acting as an impromptu sponge. I didn't care. Utter deliciousness enraptured me.

"Oh my God, do they eat this way all the time?" I asked no one in particular. Sandy nodded.

Then it hit me: Long before any Vietnamese restaurateur opened a Cajun restaurant there was this: Vietnamese shrimpers who came in after a trip at sea and brought home shrimp and other fish to share with family members and friends.

They would make it in a way that would make sense to their palate (i.e., sweeten it a bit, go slightly easier on the Cajun spices). That's how they created one of the most unlikely yet delectable hybrid cuisines the world has seen.

David Farley writes for the New York Times, AFAR, and Condé Nast Traveler.

Where to get your Viet-Cajun Fix in SoCal

If you can't make it to Louisiana, point your taste buds to one of these Asian-Cajun eateries that serve up crawfish and shrimp boils.

Garden Grove
Rockin' Crawfish
(657) 233-5944;
therockincrawfish.com

Come with friends and take advantage of the daily deal at the Garden Grove outlet of this small chain: For every 3 pounds of seafood ordered, an additional pound is on the house. The garlic noodles are a fan favorite.

Westminster
Cajun Islands
(714) 775-7435;
cajunislandsrestaurant.com

Cajun cuisine dominates the menu at this spot at the edge of Orange County's Little Saigon, but if fusion is more your style, don't miss the grilled shrimp *bánh mỳ* sandwich or the Cajun tacos (pictured) loaded with oysters, shrimp, and crawfish.

Multiple locations
The Boiling Crab
theboilingcrab.com

Started by a Vietnamese-American shrimper from southeastern Texas and his family, the Boiling Crab has locations in L.A., Orange, and San Diego counties. The menu is loaded with enough Cajun seafood that a hungry diner can sample practically the entire sea at one sitting.

Northridge
Kickin' KAsian
(818) 280-5563;
kickinkasian.com

Pick your fruit of the sea—from shrimp to crab legs to lobster—then your preferred seasoning, such as buttery garlic or the signature (and spicy) KAsian, *et voilà*. Your feast is ready.



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Clockwise from right: MoPho's Michael Gulotta prepares such delicacies as glazed pork belly with hot smoked shoulder and fried Gulf shrimp spring rolls.



as Louisiana. It's going to end up in your own food, like it or not."

Anthony pointed out the similarities between the *bánh mỳ* and the po'boy sandwich, Vietnamese blood sausage and boudin sausage, gumbo and various Vietnamese soups and stews like *bo kho* and *bun bo Hue*.

"When you think about it, the similarities between southern Vietnam and Louisiana make a blending of our cuisines and cultures inevitable," he said. "There's the humid weather, the Mekong Delta and the Mississippi Delta, the fact that we both have rice-growing cultures, and the fact that we're both former French colonies."

Just then, our order arrived: a pound of crawfish, delivered to our table in a transparent plastic bag. Anthony showed me how to peel a