



What can you tell us about this pho stand and/or this street scene?



FOR THE LOVE OF PHO

A quest to uncover the origins of Vietnam's beloved national dish

BY DAVID FARLEY + PHOTOGRAPHS BY IVANA LARROSA

My glasses steamed up as the aroma of cardamom, cinnamon, and ginger rose from the hot soup in front of me. As I was about to plunge my chopsticks into the bowl of rice noodles and thinly sliced beef, a voice cut through Hanoi's scooter traffic: "Excuse me." I looked up to find a fortysomething bespectacled Vietnamese man seated several feet away. "How did you hear about this place?" Before I could even answer, he added, "No foreigners come here. No one knows about it except locals and hardcore pho lovers."

Without saying it in so many words, he was telling me I just may have found the best pho in town, if not all of Vietnam.

It wasn't by accident. My journey to this diminutive spot in Hanoi's Old Quarter was weeks in the making: a detour-laden, calorie-loaded expedition that was as curvy as a freshly boiled rice noodle.

Despite traveling to Vietnam a half dozen times to write about the cuisine, until now I had overlooked pho as a subject, perhaps because of its ubiquity on every Vietnamese restaurant menu. But one day while eating it in New York City, I thought: *Pho is the national dish of Vietnam, devoured from Ha Long Bay to the Mekong Delta. But where did it actually originate?*

I knew its roots were in northern Vietnam. I also knew that pho bac—northern pho—is different from the pho I'd been eating most of my life in the U.S. In southern Vietnam, the broth is sweeter, spicier and more herbaceous, and the dish comes with a side of sprouts, Thai basil, cilantro, hoisin sauce, sriracha, and jalapeño. In the north, the broth lacks the same sweetness, and the side accompaniments are usually pickled garlic and sliced red hot peppers. I'd fallen hard for northern-style pho. When I asked

Pho served at Hanoi's Madame Hein. Owner Didier Corlou insists "the best pho on the planet is from Hanoi."





Clockwise from top: Đông Xuân Market in central Hanoi; a vendor trims noodles; spices, including star anise, fill bins.

friends in Vietnam about its origins, their responses varied. Some said pho—most easily pronounced *fu* for English speakers—was first created in Hanoi. Others pointed to an outlying province. To complicate matters, theories differed about the influence of French colonialism and Chinese occupation. To trace the soup’s origins, not to mention find the best bowl of pho in Hanoi, I decided to make a pilgrimage there.

I have a habit of doing such things. I’ve searched for the origins of pasta carbonara in Rome; the roots of pad thai in Bangkok; and the causality of Viet-Cajun cuisine in New Orleans. Why? I chalk it up to curiosity and my love of food and culture. There

are few better ways I can imagine spending my one wild and precious life.

Upon arriving in Hanoi, a metropolis of 8 million people, I dove right in, eating pho for breakfast—the most common time it’s eaten in Vietnam—and often for lunch or a late-night dinner. On my third morning, I ventured into the late-19th-century Đông Xuân Market in central Hanoi. Joining me were two local friends, Nguyen Hoang Yen and Phan Le, who work at a famed Hanoi restaurant. Stalls selling everything from pigs feet to tropical fruit crammed the market’s three floors. My friends pointed out pho ingredients for sale: cuts of beef and freshly made rice noodles, dried black cardamom, star

anise, cinnamon sticks, and *sá sùng*, or dried peanut worm, which gives northern pho a dose of umami. Nguyen fanned her arms at the buzzing food stalls and said, “You could say this is where pho begins.”

“Wait,” I said. “Is this where pho originated?”

Yen laughed. “No, no,” she said, “but you could get all the ingredients here. If you want to find the origins, you must go to Nam Dinh province and a village called Van Cu.”

It Takes a Village

Two days later, I steered my rental car to the sleepy village about 70 miles southeast of Hanoi. In an effort to promote the town as the birthplace of pho and to attract visitors, locals had recently launched the annual Van Cu Pho Festival. Van Cu’s pho is similar to Hanoi’s but has more pronounced seasoning and a liberal dose of fish sauce. Local entrepreneur Cổ Như Đồi spearheaded the effort, so when I arrived in the village on a drizzly morning, I went straight to his house. He greeted me wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and cardigan, and wasted no time in preparing tea.

A fourth-generation pho maker, Cổ said he helped found the festival to bring attention to his village’s place in food history, but he admitted there’s no written evidence that pho began in Van Cu.

“For us, cows and bulls were prized work animals and not slaughtered for meat unless the beast was close to dying or there was cause for a major celebration,” he said. Enter the French, who occupied Vietnam and other parts of what was known as French Indochina from 1887 to 1954. “The French, though, have a love of beef,” he said, “and so we started slaughtering cows for them.” Eventually, he explained, people in Van Cu—specifically, someone also with the last name of Cổ, the most common name in the village—began foraging for discarded bovine bones outside of French butcher shops. Soon, those bones found their way into a broth—along with thinly sliced beef, rice noodles, and spices. Thus, pho was born. The recipe spread throughout Nam Dinh, particularly the eponymous capital, where French colonialists had established large textile and garment factories that forced people from villages to relocate for work. “At this point in the late 19th and early 20th century,” Cổ said, sipping his tea, “pho was still unknown outside of Nam Dinh.”

But he hadn’t finished his story. The 1899 construction of the Long Biên Bridge across the Red River in Hanoi brought hundreds of workers from Nam Dinh who carried their love of pho. As a result, some cooks in Nam Dinh, specifically in Van Cu, followed them to Hanoi, catering to this new demand

for beef noodle soup. Some sold pho by wandering the capital’s streets with a long pole on their shoulders balanced by a container of rice noodles, beef and herbs on one side, and on the other, a pot of broth with a wood fire underneath. A few others opened pho restaurants in the Old Quarter. “The very first pho restaurant from Nam Dinh was run by Cổ Như Chiểu, a chef from Van Cu,” he said, chuckling. “In this village, we almost all have the same name because we’re basically all related.”

After I said farewell to Cổ, I strolled through the village, wondering if I might find a good place to sample the soup in its supposed birthplace. In the town center, I encountered an ornate, gold-colored gate erected in 2020 inscribed with the words CRADLE OF PHO. There, I randomly met Cổ Huu Nghi, a lifelong resident. I asked him about the monument. “We wanted to show our gratitude that pho became the national dish of Vietnam and is eaten and enjoyed all over the world.” He gestured at the earth. “And it started right here.”

Children ride through the streets of Van Cu; Cổ Như Đồi, who led the effort to promote the town as the birthplace of pho, pours tea.



I asked him where I should try pho in town. Then came an unexpected twist. “Everyone in Van Cu makes their own pho at home,” he said. “That’s why we don’t eat it at restaurants in the village very much. Many generations of people from Van Cu have left to open pho restaurants elsewhere in Vietnam, especially in Hanoi. If you want to eat pho from its birthplace, look for a pho place in Hanoi with ‘Cổ’ in the name. That last name is now synonymous with great pho.”

Pho Goes Global

Back in Hanoi the next day, my investigation continued when I met up with French-born chef Didier Corlou in his famed restaurant, Madame Hien. Corlou has been cooking in the city since 1991, and I’d first met him in Hanoi a decade earlier. He loves talking about the history of Vietnamese cuisine. He agreed that pho originated in Nam Dinh province, and in Van Cu, in particular. “Whatever the case,” he said, “the best pho on the planet is from Hanoi.”

As he mixed spices near the restaurant’s kitchen, he mentioned the influence of the Chinese. “The main five spices in pho [cardamom, star anise, cinnamon, coriander seeds, and cloves] are essentially Chinese five spice, brought here when the Chinese occupied Vietnam hundreds of years ago.”

And what of any French influence? While many Vietnamese deny any Gallic involvement in the beginning of the dish, Corlou pointed out that the charring of ginger and shallots for the broth is a very French technique, similar to the way the French prepare pot-au-feu.

In fact, he said the name *pho* could have come from pot-au-feu, the latter word meaning *fire* in French. As Corlou explained, roving pho vendors in the 1920s and ’30s carried a fire-heated earthenware pot called a “*coffre-feu*” in French. Hungry locals would say “*feu*” to ask if the soup was available. That, he said, is how the name pho caught on.

Pho remained a northern dish until the end of the French Colonial period in 1954, when Vietnam split in two. Northerners who didn’t want to live under a communist regime fled to the south and brought pho with them—and so began its ascent to the national dish. When the Vietnam War—or the “American War,” as it’s called here—ended in 1975, tens of thousands of southern Vietnamese fled a reunited and Communist Vietnam, introducing pho to the rest of the world. That’s why, if you’re having pho outside of Vietnam, you’re likely eating the southern version.

Putting the “Cổ” in Vietnamese Cooking

I still wanted to find a vendor from Van Cu in Hanoi. My friend Nguyễn Hùng Quân told me about a place in the Old Quarter run by a family from Van Cu. At Phở Bò Việt Hòa Cự Chiêu, I plopped down on a tiny stool and ordered a bowl with *chin* and *tái*, cooked and raw meat, respectively. About 30 seconds later, the cook slid a bowl of pho in front of me. That’s when the enthusiastic local interrupted me, amazed that I—a foreigner—had found this place.

“Look at the broth,” he said. “It’s clear. That’s very unusual, especially when you cook with the



A scooter speeds past Hanoi’s famed Madame Hien, where, at right, French-born chef Didier Corlou mixes spices.



flavorful spine bones of a cow. I’ve asked how they keep the broth so clear and yet so flavorful, but they told me it’s a family secret.”

With my first sip, I detected cinnamon, star anise at the back of my palate, and the pop of cardamom on my tongue. Then came the meat, which was fresh and tender. I glanced at the mobile food cart that acts as a kitchen and saw one of the owners chopping beef as he prepared each order, which helped explain why the meat was so good. This was, by far, the best bowl of pho I’d had all week, perhaps all my life.

After the meal, as I was paying—a mere 60,000 Vietnamese dong, or about \$2.30—I asked two of the owners, Cổ Việt Hải and his mother, Nguyễn Thị Xuân Hòa, if they were really from Van Cu. He seemed surprised that a foreigner knew of his hometown. “Yes, my grandfather moved here from Van Cu and opened the first Van Cu pho restaurant in Hanoi,” the son said. Now it all made sense: Cổ Như Chiêu, his grandfather, was the near-mythical Van Cu local who moved to Hanoi 100 or so years ago to open a pho place. This very place.

I asked if they believed pho really originated in the village of Van Cu.

“No, it’s a bit more complicated than that,” Nguyễn said, surprising me. I braced myself for yet another plot twist. “A form of pho started in Van Cu, but it really took shape in Hanoi, thanks to people from Van Cu.” Pho evolved in Hanoi to have a much lighter broth with less fish sauce, she said. Many people from Van Cu moved to Hanoi early in the 20th century, she added, and they saw an opportunity to make beef noodle soup that only the rich and the French could afford. “Pho might be for everyone today, but 100 years ago,” Nguyễn said, “it was a dish for the wealthy.”

That made sense. While everyone agrees that pho began in northern Vietnam, there may never be a consensus on exactly where. But one thing is certain: Pho reflects Vietnam’s complicated history, born out of some French and Chinese influence and a lot of Vietnamese ingenuity and self-determination. It started somewhere in Nam Dinh, was perfected in Hanoi, and now—for very good reason—is beloved all over the world.

DAVID FARLEY last wrote for AAA Explorer about the controversial origin of pasta carbonara.

Clockwise from top: Cổ Việt Hải serves a bowl at Phở Bò Việt Hòa Cự Chiêu; diners slurp; the author’s favorite bowl of pho.

If You Go

Phở Bò Việt Hòa Cự Chiêu restaurant is located in Hanoi on Hàng Đồng street near the cross street of Phố Hàng Vải.