Introduction

I once asked my grandmother where she thought Vietnamese cuisine came from. After thinking about it for a few seconds she started laughing, her hands waving in the air, ‘where else but from our “ong ba” (our ancestors)!?’ (Mai Pham, Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table, 2001)

Vietnamese in America have created their own ethnic imprint. Many scholars have written about Vietnamese refugees in America often focusing on family and community (Haines et al 1981; Fry 1985; Rutledge 1992; Wood 1997; Shelley 2001). Others have focused on Vietnamese gender roles (Jeffords 1987; Kibria 1990; Goodkind 1997; Marino 1998). Many studies however, whether focusing on family, community, or gender roles, discuss the importance of the transition of Vietnamese culture outside of Vietnam (Roberts and Starr 1982).

This paper will discuss how persisting Vietnamese foodways are critical to sustaining cultural identity for Vietnamese refugees. For any immigrant group, traditional foods represent a connection to the past, function to maintain ethnic identity, and assist in reducing the effects of acculturation (Kilcik 1984). Vietnamese food is not only important for the maintenance of identity for refugees who fled Vietnam in search of asylum, but also for their descendents. Vietnamese food acts as a shared symbol that helps hold Vietnamese communities together. Persisting Vietnamese foodways is an important way for descendents of displaced Vietnamese to form their ethnic cultural identity, since they were not acculturated in Vietnam. Andrea Nguyen, born in Vietnam, was six years old when she left, she states, “[Food] was a way my parents made sure we held on to our ethnic heritage” (Haughton 2006).

Because many refugees left in haste, they were only able to gather a few possessions with them (Marino 1998). One important piece of property often saved was recipe books. Nguyen notes, “My mother is an excellent cook,” who escaped with few possessions, ”except a small orange notebook of recipes that she brought to this country in case she opened a restaurant” (Haughton 2006).
Even after losing everything following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, displaced Vietnamese who were living at shelters and stranger’s homes stressed the need for Vietnamese food to be served to Vietnamese evacuees. Vietnamese restaurants in Texas helped raise spirits after Hurricane Katrina by serving evacuees Vietnamese food (Tang 2005:2).

History

To understand the cultural significance of food for Vietnamese identity, origins of Vietnamese food must first be examined. The rich and extensive history of the Vietnamese people began many millennia ago, when people first started migrating to Southeast Asia. Then about four centuries ago mass migration occurred from present-day Southern China. This migration consisted of a mix of indigenous tribes that shared many characteristics (Salemink 2003:23-26, Jamieson 1993:6-8). These people were the first Vietnamese, and because of the close geographical proximity and historical connections to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and India, Vietnamese food share similar qualities.

Chinese Influence

In 111 B.C.E., Vietnam fell under China’s control, which strengthened Chinese influence on Vietnamese culture. Under China’s one thousand year rule, Vietnamese Confucian and Buddhist values took shape among other elements of Chinese culture. Vietnamese cooking, as a result, is strongly influenced by the Chinese. Similarities include the wok and the use of chopsticks. In addition, cooking methods such as quick stir-frying and the daily use of ingredients such as rice and noodles are influenced by the Chinese (Hsiung 1997).

Another contribution of the Chinese towards Vietnamese culture is the belief in yin and yang. All things in Vietnamese culture are believed to be encompassed by yin and yang. Harmony was maintained if yin and yang are balanced including the individual human body. According to traditional folk thought, all foods are believed to have an “essential nature,” where “hot” and “warm” foods are considered yang, and all “cool” and “cold” foods are considered yin (Jamieson 1993:11). It must be made clear; however, the concept of “hot” and “cold” foods in this context is not in reference to temperature but instead, in reference to the innate spiritual essence of all foods. The balance between yin and yang foods influences Vietnamese foodways in several ways. One is the need for variety of diet. Because illness is believed to be influenced by the imbalance of yin and yang, the balanced diet of yin and yang can be achieved through the variety of “hot” and “cold” foods.
French Colonial History in Southeast Asia

French colonists provided another significant cultural presence in Vietnam. The French began colonizing Vietnam in 1859 with most of their influence in the South. French contribution to Vietnamese culture includes, French language, Catholicism and the introduction of Western values. The influence of the French also can be seen in Vietnamese foodways. Examples include the baguette, a symbol of French national pride. The differences, however, are that the French baguette is made from wheat, while the Vietnamese baguette is made from rice and wheat (Trang 1999:17). This is a clear example of how Vietnamese food unmistakably has its own identity despite foreign influences. The most popular usage of the baguette is seen in “banh mi” sandwiches stuffed with different variations of meats, jalapeños, pickled vegetables, and cilantro. Other influences of French foods are seen in Vietnamese pastries, Vietnamese pâté, and coffee. The introduction of coffee to Vietnam is particularly significant in two ways. First is that coffee is now a major export of Vietnam, which was the second largest global exporter in 2000 (Salemink 2003:45; The Economist 2002). Secondly is the importance of coffee shops in Vietnam and, as I will later discuss, Vietnamese communities outside of Vietnam.

Historical Food Shortage

An important aspect of Vietnamese current foodways involves the food shortages and starvation that due to war and famine have scarred its history (Jamieson 1993:197; Nguyen 2003:95). For example, the year 1945 was one of the most disastrous years for North Vietnam. Two million people died of famine caused by the disruption of agriculture as a consequence of Japanese wartime policies among other things in Vietnam (Nguyen 2003:95). Another factor was the consequences of an inexperienced administration after the Vietminh gained control in North Vietnam (Hammer 1966:130, 137; Lancaster 1961:127-128). Combined with the second consecutive poor harvest in the fall of 1945, the inexperience of the Vietminh led to horrible starvation. Additionally, the presence of 150,000 Chinese troops who had entered Vietnam with no provisions of their own and 50,000 of whom remained there for over six months exacerbated the food shortage (Jamison 1993:197).

This dreary fact of Vietnam’s history has long passed but is still remembered in the minds of many Vietnamese and is culturally transmitted to their children. My mother, a Vietnamese Catholic refugee, like many others, believes that wasting food is a sin. Quynh Hoang remembers her mother’s words, “If you waste food, when you die, you will have nothing to eat [in the after-life]” (interview with author, February 25, 2007). This conservative practice of
food encompasses the spiritual, emotional, and psychological. Here, food impacts more than the physical, but can also involves spiritual redemption as well. And although generations of American-born Vietnamese have never experienced starvation, the conservative practice is shared through stories and behavior.

**Migrations**

The 1975 reunification of Vietnam provoked a mass migration of Vietnamese people to other countries. From fear of physical harm, economic instability, and Communists reprisals, many fled the country. Migration encompassed two waves of movement. The “first wave” occurred between 1975 and 1977. The “first wave” was much more organized than the second. Consisting mainly of educated refugees who had connections to Western military, the “first wave” migration was less dangerous than the second. The “second wave” migration occurred after 1977 comprising mainly of “boat people.” “Boat people” were refugees with little education, who escaped Vietnam on make-shift boats in the hope of being rescued (Rutledge 1992; Wood 1997; Marino 1998; The Economist 2002). Although many drowned in the South China Sea, many were saved and brought to refugee camps awaiting sponsorship for immigration.

Many refugees resettled in America. One Vietnamese enclave, Versailles, was created in New Orleans, Louisiana. Versailles has been said by many visiting native Vietnamese as being reminiscent of the landscape of Vietnam. Even more interesting is the kinship and community ties that the people of Versailles have with others in the community. Approximately sixty percent of Versailles residents in the early 1990s originated from the North Vietnamese bishopric of Bui Chu with a many other residents coming from the adjoining bishopric of Phat Diem (Airriess 2002:232). Many were rural farmers and fisher folks.

**Food Traditions**

Vietnamese identity for those who migrated after the war was being threatened by the diaspora. Being displaced from their homeland and way of life, most had to redefine their lives in very different ways. One way in which Vietnamese held on to their identity was through food traditions. Vietnamese food traditions can be separated into two categories: the sacred and the profane. Sacred traditions are observed during festive holidays and religious offerings. One festival where food is significantly important is Tet. Tet, Vietnamese New Year, has food which is specialized for the holiday such as “banh chung” and “banh Tet,” which are called New Year cakes. Another symbol of the Tet holiday, which began in Hanoi peach blossom trees and mandarin orange bushes.
One way in which diasporic Vietnamese held on to their cultural identity was by continuing sacred food traditions by recreating ethnic landscapes (Airriess and Clawson 1994; Airriess 2002). By recreating a familiar geographical and cultural environment of Vietnam through food, they allow cultural identity to persist. This is achieved in several ways in Versailles during the Tet season. First is the continuing production of special traditional New Year foods such as “banh chung” and “banh Tet.” Production of New Year cakes is a very long and arduous task (Nguyen 2003:76). The continuity to make New Year cakes despite the hardship of time and labor is evident of the importance to the cultural identity maintained through food for residents of Versailles.

Second, persistence of cultural identity through traditional holiday food is seen in the sale of traditional items of Tet including peach blossom trees and mandarin orange bushes during the early Saturday market (Airriess 2002). The Saturday outdoor market is a recreation of the village markets in Vietnam (Jamieson 1993). This recreation of an ethnic economic landscape provides a way in which residents can feel a sense of familiarity both for the vendor and consumers. The market contributes to the celebration of Tet since it provides a space for people to sell and purchase traditional items common to Tet. Tet and Tet food becomes a shared symbol with shared meaning for the displaced Vietnamese community.

The other category for Vietnamese food tradition is the profane. This is representative of Confucian values in Vietnamese society. Another common foodway in Vietnam that has origins in China is the way food is served, which is highly reflective of the social structure. After the food is prepared, it is often served in large serving vessels and placed in the center of the table. Everyone has a small individual bowl with rice. The meal then is shared and eaten communally and not portioned. Among many things this particular foodway shows that the communal is more highly valued in Vietnamese society than individualism.

In addition, hierarchy can be represented in everyday Vietnamese foodways. Before a family is allowed to begin eating, it is customary for each member of the family to simultaneously welcome everyone at the table to begin eating beginning from the highest person in the kinship hierarchy to the member right above themselves, but never anyone lower than them in the hierarchy. After that, no one is allowed to begin eating until the highest person in the social hierarchy (usually the oldest) begins. Food rituals and social roles are much more intricately intertwined in Vietnam than in America.
Nevertheless, important food customs that surround holidays or daily foodways continue to exist in Versailles. These customs mark a cultural continuity that is shared among Vietnamese-Americans. The existence of food customs help preserve Vietnamese identity for the Vietnamese refugees and their descendants.

**Therapeutic Gardens in Versailles**

The early outdoor markets in Versailles are re-creations of the village markets in Vietnam. The market in Versailles are full women wearing the traditional cone-shape Vietnamese hats squatting down near the ground selling everything from baked goods, live ducks and rabbits, to homegrown vegetables. The sounds of women haggling often fill the early Saturday air.

Most of the vegetables sold are grown in the Versailles gardens, a community garden, which can be found near the edge of Versailles. Thirty-four different leafy green vegetables, tubers, cucurbits, condiments and herbs, legumes, and medicinal plants not common to the Western diet can be found (Airriess and Clawson 1994). Because New Orleans shares a similar climate with Vietnam, hot, humid, and (sub) tropical, the inhabitants reproduce the vegetables they once produced in rural Vietnam.

More than environmental similarity and economic incentives, the residents of Versailles may have other reasons to recreate rural landscapes of Vietnam (Airriess 2002: 241). In many instances of diaspora, the elderly are more often the ones who experience psychological adjustment problems in a new environment because of a lack of English-language skills, employment opportunities, and a dependence upon their children for the basic daily interactions outside the community including financial relations (Roberts 1982; Marino 1998;
Airriess 2002). Also, the traditional social structure is being challenged because of the elderly’s high dependence on their children. As a result, the elderly experience a profound sense of helplessness that leads to psychological health problems.

Because mental health is not commonly recognized in the Vietnamese community, many of these problems are not addressed in a formal way. Gardening then is seen as a “hortitherapeutic” activity (Kaplan 1973; Wood 1997; Airriess 2002). Gardening allows the elderly to reminisce and recreate rural Vietnam, and their sense of home. This form of psychological healing serves two major purposes: it eases the psychological trauma of being part of a forced ethnic displacement, and it provides the continuation of Vietnamese culture for future generations not born in Vietnam.

Gardening in Versailles, then, provides more than an availability of Vietnamese food. Culture is passed on from older generations to younger generations through food. This makes gardening and food customs crucial in the continuity of Vietnamese culture outside of Vietnam. Food and food customs act as a medium to share cultural meanings from the Vietnamese acculturated in Vietnam and later generations born in America. Food customs share more than sustenance from one generation to the next. It allows other values to be implemented through foodways. For the Vietnamese, the importance of the communal and kinship hierarchy can be emphasized. Because the re-creation of Vietnamese food and food customs outside of Vietnam are made available, American-born Vietnamese can still create a strong Vietnamese identity.
Hidden Functions of Ethnic Grocery Stores, Restaurants, and Cafés

After migrating, many Vietnamese became self-employed by developing and maintaining food establishments. The Vietnamese food establishments have many cultural functions beyond simply providing familiar ethnic food to the community. In Versailles, the most numerous and oldest business establishments are food and grocery stores. Of ninety-three businesses, fourteen are varied-sized grocery markets that sell a wide range of merchandise. In addition there are two fresh meat markets, one seafood market, and one bakery. Numbering eleven, the second most numerous business establishment in Versailles are restaurants and cafes that range from large formal restaurants to small coffee shops (Airriess 2006:22). The prevalence of food establishments represents its importance in maintaining cultural identity.

Food establishments are a way for Vietnamese refugee residents to belong to a community, which is essential for emotional adjustment in a new environment (Tran 1975; Haines et al. 1981:313). This is created in several ways. First, food establishments connect numerous Vietnamese communities nationwide by bringing Vietnamese performers as far away as California mainly at nightclubs and restaurants (Haines et al 1981:315). By doing this food establishments create an environment that helps to adjust to a new environment. This helps the creation and maintenance of cultural identity through live entertainment.

Second, the use of coffee shops and food restaurants provide a space where Vietnamese people can gather through the commonality of shared foodways. Small shops such as cafés and restaurants provide a “Vietnam-like haven” in the United States; it is a place where Vietnamese can take pleasure in being Vietnamese (Wood 1997:68). This “Vietnam-like haven,” are places where people hang out in their free time creating a space for socializing and networking with other Vietnamese that ultimately creates and maintains community identity.

The importance of kinship also has its place in food establishments, since many are family-owned and operated (Haines et al 1981:316-318; Airriess 2006:25). In Versailles, 44 percent of businesses are co-managed by spouses (Airriess 2006:25). Food establishments like other family-owned businesses are able to provide economic support for the family. Food establishments and other family-owned businesses also keep family together. This is evident in that even if the individual refugee could be better off financially, they choose to stay with the family business due to family obligations (Haines et al 1981:316). Other evidence that family-owned businesses such as food establishments enforce cultural values of family is the children working in the businesses after school or in their
spare time (Haines et al 1981:318). In addition to the economic incentives of free labor, children working for the family businesses help develop strong ties within the family. Haines et al (1981: 318) notes, “one woman stressed the importance to her of the children helping each other, making decisions together, spending their allowance (which she controls) together. She emphasized that she did not want them to become ‘too individualistic; we want them to stay together’.” Although Vietnamese food establishments provide the services to make Vietnamese food readily available to the community, it also provides a way to enforce cultural identity.

**Negotiating Gender Roles and Identity**

Traditional Vietnamese gender roles are threatened by displacement. The changes in gender roles subsequently threatened the traditional diet. One initial problem of adjustment that many scholars have noticed among Vietnamese refugees is lack of employment especially for men (Marino 1998). Many men lacked the English-speaking skills and the education for adequate employment. Women, on the other had, had less difficulty finding employment since more low-paying occupations were available such as waitressing, sales, domestic service, and food service (Marino 1998:93). Because of the lack of male employment opportunities due to various factors, women often redefined gender roles by becoming the sole economic provider of the family. This significantly challenged the traditional Vietnamese Confucian gender roles of male dominance and offset the balance of *yin* and *yang*.

Because women are now unable to dedicate the customary amount of time to their traditional role in the home, less effort is spent on traditional food preparation. Because of this, the traditional Vietnamese diet changed. The Vietnamese in America now consume less of the healthy traditional diet with little fat, and with much variety and have turned to American food. Much of the American food consumed, however, are unhealthy fast food and frozen meals often consisting of an unhealthy amount of chemicals, fat, sodium and carbohydrates. The production and demand of pre-made Vietnamese products are also threatening gender roles. Examples of popular products are instant noodles (Americans have a popular version called Ramen noodles), instant “pho,” a traditional Vietnamese soup, and, more recently seen on the market, instant “chao,” Vietnamese congee made with rice and meat. The heavy reliance on foreign foods also disrupts the balance of “hot” and “cold” foods.

The transition to more Americanized food also helps the acculturation of the younger Vietnamese generation, who prefer American food (Crane and Green 1980; Story and Harris 1989; Airriess and Clawson 1994) as opposed to the older
generation who may consume it more out of convenience. Food, then, becomes a marker of cultural transition and acculturation for the new generation of Vietnamese Americans. In addition, since food symbolizes the change in traditional gender roles, this will have an effect how the new generation perceives their identity within traditional gender roles. Another example of negotiated cultural identity is the renaming of the Vietnamese baguette sandwiches to “Vietnamese po’boys” in New Orleans. Po’boy sandwiches are one of culinary trademarks of New Orleans. The renaming of the traditional Vietnamese sandwich to include a culinary symbol of their current surroundings is further evidence of a negotiated cultural identity in New Orleans through food.

![Fig 5 “Banh Mi” sandwiches renamed Vietnamese po’boy in New Orleans](image)

**Conclusion**

Vietnamese cuisine has evolved and changed over time with many influences from other cultures. Despite foreign influences, Vietnamese food still manages to maintain its unique style. Vietnamese food in America still maintains its links to Southeast Asia. Corinne Trang notes that “food is the center of life.” This is meant literally and centers around the family, home, culture, relations, health, seat of ideas, an expression of emotion, a form of display, and so forth: it is life (1999).

When many Vietnamese migrated outside of Vietnam, their cultural identity was negotiated through food. This negotiation shows that, not only the ways in which this new style of foodways defines new forms of belonging, but also the diaspora now engages an intercultural space where tastes are redefined and reimagined in the relation to the wider society (Thomas 2004). Vietnamese food connects Vietnamese people together. This helps maintain their identity because Vietnamese people cannot be culturally Vietnamese without the presence of other Vietnamese whether it is family or community. This communal emphasis is important for refugees because of the Vietnamese diaspora. When they lived in Vietnam, they were an ethnic majority, but after they dispersed, many became ethnic minorities in the countries in which they resettled. Because of this, maintaining ethnic identity became more important than ever in the past. Food, then,
connects Vietnamese people together through shared cultural symbols. Rice, jasmine tea, and coffee are all staples of Vietnam and are all shared cultural symbols among Vietnamese. It fulfills more than just physical need, but impacts the emotional and psychological as well through memories and multi-faceted understandings of belonging. As a Vietnamese, when I think of jasmine tea, I think of my mom sipping jasmine tea with me when I was a small child. I can hear the sounds of her laugh and the sight of her comforting smile. Vietnamese coffee always brings memories of my father in the morning, and rice reminds me of family because it is always present and shared in family meals. Rice is to the Vietnamese and other Asians as apple pie is to Americans. It is a symbol of nationality and shared meanings impacting the physical, psychological, and emotional. Loung Ung speaks for Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians when she describes, “When I have rice, I am at home” (2006). Understanding how foodways are negotiated is important to understanding the ethnogenesis of Vietnamese people in American. Foodways play an essential part of maintaining and creating Vietnamese cultural identity.

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FOOTNOTES


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