

# FOOD & WINE

## 7 Must-Try Culinary Experiences in Vietnam

Get hands-on with Vietnamese coffee and cuisine.

By [Veronica Stoddart](#) | Published on May 31, 2026



Credit: CravenA / Getty Images

“The food, culture, landscape, and smell; they’re all inseparable. It just seemed like another planet; a delicious one that sort of sucked me in and never let me go.”

These memorable words of the globetrotting Anthony Bourdain perfectly capture the appeal of Vietnam’s distinctive culinary culture. Famously tasty – from a garden-fresh spring roll to a rich, earthy pho to a crusty, savory banh mi – nothing compares to experiencing the cuisine and exploring its roots in the Southeast Asian country where it was born.

I did just that on a two-week, close-to-the-ground culinary tour with the British company, [Explore Worldwide](#). As our small group moved overland from Hanoi in the north to Ho Chi Minh City (aka Saigon) in the south, I drank in the sights, smells, and tastes of this intoxicating food. In addition to savoring authentic meals in backstreet eateries and family homes, we enjoyed these standout experiences – from street food and barista school to farm visits and cooking classes.



Credit: Photo by Veronica Stoddart

“Smell the liquid in each vial and try to match it with its food picture on the board,” said our instructor Truong Tam Tai (aka “Tafi”) during my half-day barista class. Amid much laughter and head-scratching, my fellow classmates and I played the Coffee Aromarble Game to test our sense of smell. But matching the liquid scents to their correct photos was a very tall order. In fact, I failed miserably (I got only one right out of nine). Still, this class at Ho Chi Minh City’s [Barista School](#) gave me a new appreciation for the art and science behind every Vietnamese cup.

Until taking this class, for example, I had no idea that coffee beans have a whopping 144 – count ‘em – different aromas according to the [Scentone Aroma Standard](#). Or that sensory skills are considered key to success for a barista. “Aroma connects to your emotion and memory,” Tafi said. “You use all your senses with coffee and can discern the personality of people by what they drink.”

At the city’s only barista training academy to offer classes to non-professionals, I also learned how important coffee is in this java-adoring country, the second-largest exporter in the world (after Brazil). Indeed, coffee is all the buzz here with more than 500,000 coffee shops nationwide, one of the highest concentrations worldwide. More than just a beverage, it’s a social ritual where the beloved – and scrumptious – iced milk coffee is the reigning star.

Tafi also taught us the 10 steps that take the seed to cup and how to use the Vietnamese phin filter method to make the country's slow-brewed, highly concentrated coffee.

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## Sip a classic egg coffee (Hanoi)



Of Vietnam's many distinctive coffee drinks, one of the most unique was born in the capital's Old Quarter. Since 1946, [Café Giảng](#) has been serving the iconic egg coffee to customers perched on traditional low wooden stools around low tables. Simple and spare, the café oozes old-timey charm with vintage prints and family photos lining the pale-yellow walls. There, I spoon-drunk this thick, slightly sweet beverage made by whisking egg yolks and condensed milk into a custardy cream and heaping it onto a cup of coffee.

Nguyen Van Giang, the father of the current café owner, created the first egg coffee while he was a barman at the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hotel in Hanoi. One day, he ran out of fresh milk for coffee, so he replaced it with a mixture of egg yolks and condensed milk. Voilà – a new drink was born. When it took off, he quit his job and opened Café Giang to serve it fulltime.

“We don’t have a source of fresh milk in Vietnam and many families don’t have refrigeration,” our tour leader, Thin Ton, explained. “So we use condensed milk instead.”

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## Make Green Bean Cakes (Hue)



Credit: Photo by Veronica Stoddart

In Vietnam's ancient imperial capital of Hue, a local family showed us how to fashion green bean cakes that are popular during Lunar New Year celebrations and weddings. In the family's simple front parlor, where they run a small bean cake-making business, we rolled small mung bean doughballs into fruit shapes, coated them with agar, and painted them with jewel-toned food coloring using Q-tips. Made from finely ground mung beans, sugar, oil, and grapefruit essential oil, the slightly nutty, melt-in-your-mouth confections resemble the inside of a peanut butter cup.

Originating in the northern Hai Duong province more than a century ago, green bean cakes are more than a mere dessert. After being praised by Bao Dai, Vietnam's last emperor (from 1926 to 1945), they assumed a special place in Vietnam's culinary heritage, offered to ancestors during special times like the Lunar New Year.

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## Go fishing and rice planting in the paddies (Ninh Binh)



Credit: Smartshots International / Getty Images

In Vietnam, fish and rice are *the* culinary essentials, thanks to a thriving aquaculture, long coastline, and neon-green paddies that lace the countryside. It's a rare meal that doesn't feature the signature fermented fish sauce, nuoc mam, and rice ("the base for sticky rice, rice noodles, rice pancakes, and rice paper," said Thin).

For a hands-on experience, we visited a family farm near the northern town of Ninh Binh, where we donned work shirts, waterproof waders, and traditional conical straw hats. Then we waddled through the muddy, flooded fields to painstakingly plant rice seedlings and scoop up tiny fish with straw baskets.

Afterwards, on an open-air terrace overlooking the fields, we sat down to a groaning board of farm-fresh dishes: beef in mint leaves; fried spring rolls; goat meat with sesame, lemongrass, and chilis; crab soup with morning glory; sweet and sour prawns; sauteed greens with garlic; and sticky rice. Ubiquitous bowls of soy and chili sauces lined the table.

Despite the meal's abundant variety, "Vietnamese food is not heavy," observed Thin. "It's all about the balance of sweet and sour."

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## Eat a famous banh mi (Hoi An)



Credit: Photo by Veronica Stoddart

To sample one of Vietnam’s signature culinary creations, the banh mi sandwich, we belled up to the celebrated hole-in-the-wall [Banh Mi Phuong](#), which Bourdain famously considered the best banh mi in the world. There, in the central Vietnamese river town of Hoi An, we joined the line at the street-front glass counter to place our to-go order of this French-style mini-baguette typically filled with slices of pork belly (or chicken), pickled carrot and daikon, cucumber, tomato, cilantro, chili, and smeared with pâté and mayo.

Then we tucked into this “symphony in a sandwich,” as Bourdain called it, nestled in a classic paper wrapper emblazoned with – what else? – his photo. The crusty, airy bread (a legacy of French colonial days) flanking the flavorful meats and veggies stands up to the best Philly hoagie or Cubano sandwich.

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## Cook at a culinary school (Hoi An)



Credit: Photo by Veronica Stoddart

“Teamwork!” yelled our instructor Nguyen Anh Hong, aka “Pinky,” as she doled out tasks to our class at the [Green Mango Cooking School](#). This exuberant culinary cheerleader helped us prepare five traditional Vietnamese dishes, while peppering us with takeaway tips. “Sticky rice uses 1:1 rice to water to make it very sticky,” she explained. “To make tender chicken, bring it to a boil, turn off the heat, and let it sit in the hot water for 20 minutes.” (It worked.)

Starting with a visit to a nearby market, Pinky introduced us to a cornucopia of unfamiliar ingredients: red dragon fruit, jicama, morning glory, rambutan, and longan, as well as various rice noodles, including Hoi An’s signature brown cao lau, which are soaked in ash.

Next, we prepared and feasted on coconut chicken soup with coconut cream, lemongrass, lime, chili flakes, coriander, and scallions; deep-fried duck spring rolls wrapped in rice paper with garlic chili fish sauce; green mango shrimp salad with tamarind dressing; smoked pork in banana leaf seasoned with turmeric and fish sauce; and quenelle-shaped red sticky rice made of mango puree, dragon fruit puree, coconut milk, sesame seed, and raspberry vodka and drizzled with purple dragon fruit raspberry sauce.

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## Sample street food at the Ho Thi Ky Flower Market (Ho Chi Minh City)



Credit: Courtesy of Vidotour

For a head-swiveling array of Vietnam's tantalizing street food, we prowled the Ho Thi Ky Flower Market tucked into a narrow alley in Vietnam's largest city. Arriving in time for dinner, we grazed our way through the mix of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and pan-Asian foods peddled by some 125 vendors. As we elbowed through the jostling throng of pedestrians and motorbikers, heady aromas and eye-popping dishes beckoned at every turn: crispy grilled rice paper and spring rolls; skewered seafood and meats; noodle dishes, curries, and soups (organ-meat stew, anyone?); fish balls, prawn balls, and meatballs; green papaya salads and grilled chicken feet; ice creams and Crayola-colored candies, all densely packed into a buzzing night-food hub.

We ducked into a tiny stall where we perched shoulder-to-shoulder on low plastic stools to sample boiled fertilized quail eggs with embryos floating in a tangy tamarind sauce with peanuts and greens, a prized Southern Vietnamese specialty, and fried mint leaf-wrapped beef.

Then we moved to a noodle shop to slurp hu tieu, a clear soup of sliced and minced pork, shrimp, hard-boiled egg, scallions, and tapioca-rice noodles, served with pickled garlic, limes, chopped chilis, bean sprouts, and soy sauce. This soul-warming Southern Vietnamese favorite of Chinese-Cambodian origin is considered the counterpart to Northern pho. And for dessert? It was delectable avocado ice cream topped with crushed coconut cookies and peanuts. Yum!