



Just Pho Fun

It's healthy, hearty, and good for the soul: Giselle Whiteaker dines on Vietnamese street food at Pho.

Speak to anyone who has travelled through Vietnam and the conversation will soon turn to food. Vietnamese food is simple, with subtle regional variations and fresh ingredients that keep punters pulling up a their plastic stools at tiny pavement tables for more.

Pho is perhaps the best-known dish – it's almost impossible to walk a block in Vietnam's major destinations without spotting a horde of hungry patrons ingesting noodles at a makeshift pho stand. This simple noodle soup is a mainstay in the Vietnamese diet, yet it's also the subject of fierce debate.

Pho originated in Hanoi, in the north of the country, and northerners are fiercely proprietary about how it should be prepared, but like many Vietnamese people, in the 1950's, when Vietnam was partitioned into two nations,

pho migrated from north to south, where it adapted to southern flavour preferences. Northern pho is delicate and elegant, the savoury broth the focus of the dish. Southern pho is sweeter, paired with piles of bean sprouts, herbs, a squeeze of lime, and perhaps a splash of hoisin or Sriracha sauce. Whatever way it comes, it's downright delicious, as discovered by British husband and wife team, Stephen and Juliette Wall.

Inspired by pho and other delicious Vietnamese street food, this duo opened their first little 30-cover Pho restaurant in Clerkenwell, London in 2005, after supping on the noodle dish at a street stand in Ho Chi Minh City. They must have done something right, as there are now 27 Pho restaurants across the UK, from Brighton to Birmingham and on to Leeds.

Walking into the Pho restaurant near Spitalfields Market in London on a Wednesday night, my boyfriend Elio and I are struck by how few tables are left empty. Rows of lantern-like lights illuminate the diners, who sit at simple wooden tables, many slurping on steaming bowls of broth – broth that takes some 12 hours to prepare. Tantalising aromas swirl in the air as we take our seats and quickly order cocktails – a refreshing Phojito for me, with Nep Phu Loc (a clear white spirit), mint, lime and soda, and a cool Ha Noi Mule for Elio, with Ha Noi vodka, fresh apple, ginger, mint and lime.

Browsing the dishes on offer, we're torn – we should sample the Pho that gave the restaurant its name, but the variety on the menu makes me nostalgic for the two years I spent living in Ho Chi Minh City, frequently dining on all manner of street food. We opt for diversity, selecting five dishes from the medley of mouth-watering temptations before we move to a larger table.

The first dish to arrive is the Cha Gio, crispy spring rolls, served with lettuce and herbs for wrapping and dipping in the accompanying sauce. Unable to decide between nuoc cham, a piquant fish sauce with chili, and the creamy peanut sauce, we have gone with both, alternating between the two as we crunch our way through these delicious morsels.

One after the other, plates appear on the table, quickly taking up every inch of available space. We tear strips of Banh Xeo – a savoury crispy crepe packed with chicken, prawn and bean sprouts – and wrap them in delicate rice paper squares, popping them into our eager mouths, where they melt on the tongue. We baste our breath with garlic, as we scoop up bundles of fried morning glory (water spinach) with our chopsticks, and transfer them precariously across the table.



"I love a challenge," says Elio, as he attempts to shred a portion of sticky rice vermicelli to accompany the Bo La Lot, dense chargrilled beef, wrapped in betel leaves. He packages a sticky bundle of meat, pickled carrot and noodles into a lettuce leaf and dips it into the fish sauce, revelling in the intense flavour. There's a simple pleasure in eating manually – while we use our chopsticks to prepare the components, it's our fingers that gently fold the lettuce and rice paper around each foodie present.



Our final dish is Com Tam Dac Biet, a bowl of broken rice, topped with chunks of charfrilled pork, with wok-fried Chinese leaf, relish, cucumber and pickles, finished with peanuts, herbs and fresh chillies. Broken rice is fragments of rice grains, damaged in the field during drying, transport, or milling. It's simply fragmented, not defective, but the grains are separated from the "whole" rice as they cook faster and have a different texture, soaking up sauces somewhat like cous cous, but with more substance. This is a southern dish, hailing from old Saigon and it's packed with flavour, the deep, smoky meat lightened with the crisp vegetables, given warmth from fresh sliced chillies. I can't resist pouring the last of the peanut sauce onto my last spoonful of rice, and it's with a sigh of satisfaction that I lean back from the table, surveying the landscape of empty plates.

It feels like we've spent the last few hours on the bustling streets of Saigon, inhaling the authentic flavours of Vietnam. It's only when we make our way out onto a quiet London street that I remember where I am. Food that can transport you to another destination is the key to Pho's success.



DIY Pho Nam Rom: vegan pho with mixed mushrooms

Serves 4

Ingredients

Stock:

1.5 litres good quality vegetable stock

½ white onion

1-2 star anise

1 clove

3cm cinnamon stick

3 cm piece of ginger

Garnish:

4-6 spring onions, sliced

1-2 red chillies, sliced

200g mixed exotic mushrooms (shitake, oyster), cut as preferred

150g chestnut button mushrooms, halved

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

200g flat rice noodles, fresh or dried

1-2 limes, cut in quarters

150g raw bean sprouts

Fresh mint leaves, 1 small bunch

Fresh coriander, 1 bunch, roughly chopped

Thai basil leaves, 1 small bunch

Other options: hoi sin sauce, Sriracha chilli sauce

Seasoning:

Depending on personal taste and dietary preferences, the stock can be adjusted in flavour and balance using a little salt and sugar, or Maggie seasoning (contains gluten), Bragg Liquid Aminos (gluten free) or vegetarian fish sauce.

Method:

Heat the vegetable stock in a large pan. Meanwhile, in a dry wok, toast the stock ingredients to release the aroma, then add to the stock. Cover and simmer gently for 30 minutes or until you reach your desired strength of flavour. Strain, season to taste, and keep on a low heat until just before serving, when you can bring it quickly back to the boil.

Prepare your garnish plates with chillies, lime and herbs. Heat the vegetable oil and lightly fry the mixed mushrooms for a few minutes, seasoning if desired, until they become soft. Cook the noodles following the pack instructions. Drain and divide between the bowls. Top the noodles with mushrooms and spring onions and pour over the hot stock.

Garnish at the table with a squeeze of fresh lime, fresh herbs, sliced chilli and crunchy bean sprouts.