



Pho the

Love

FORGED IN STRIFE, OKLAHOMA'S VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY NOW IS A THRIVING CENTER OF CULTURE AND COMMERCE, AND ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO LEARN ABOUT IT IS BY DIVING INTO ITS RICH CULINARY TRADITIONS.

BY ROBERT REID | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS

LUNCH LOOKS LIKE Christmas. Green cilantro and lemongrass float in a bright red, chili-spiced broth filled with chunky slices of fatty beef and palm-sized bits of congealed pig's blood that's been brewed in a home-made stock for ten hours.

Really, it is yummy.

An *Oklahoma Today* colleague has joined me for this meal, and I ask him if he'd like to try some. He gamely takes it with his

green plastic chopsticks and bites off a piece. His eyes light up.

"This is my new favorite place," he says.

You may have tried pho—beef noodle soup—which is served in most Vietnamese restaurants around the country and certainly around northwest Oklahoma City's Asian District. But the central Vietnamese dish, *Bún bò Huế*, before us today is a lesser-known concoction. It packs much more heat than pho. Be prepared to sweat.

Bún bò Huế, available at Vietnamese restaurants like Pho Cuong in Oklahoma City, is a spicier alternative to typical Vietnamese pho.



Above from left, Pho Cuong owners Thanhvan Vu-Tran and Duy Tran. Duy came to Oklahoma City in the late 1970s, and he says the restaurant is one of the longest-running Vietnamese eateries in the city.

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We're eating at Pho Cuong, a simple place that decades ago opened in a long-closed Long John Silver's. Sitting with us is owner Duy Tran, an easygoing middle-aged guy with a hint of Elvis in the swoop of his salt-and-pepper hair. As we slurp the soup, Duy tells us of his rocky arrival in Oklahoma, a common thread for most of the state's 16,000 Vietnamese-Americans.

Duy left Vietnam alone in 1979 at seventeen as part of the second big wave of refugees after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. He reached a Singapore refugee camp then went on to stay with family in Connecticut.

Not long after, he relocated to Oklahoma City, arriving by bus with \$2.85 in his pocket. He had the name of a friend of his parents but no address. Not knowing about phone books, he sat around the downtown bus station for two days unsure what to do. Finally, a friendly taxi driver helped him look up the address and offered a ride. Before long, Duy had a job washing dishes at a 24/7 diner he walked to, and he eventually scraped together enough to open Pho Cuong with an uncle. He says it's the oldest pho restaurant in town that's still run by the original owners.

"Now," he says, "you see them popping up like mushrooms."

ABOUT ONE IN sixty locals in Oklahoma City are Vietnamese-American, which is amazing considering the community was essentially non-existent before 1975. The Vietnam War famously divided the nation, as did the question of the influx of Vietnamese to the United States after it ended. According to James M. Freeman, author of *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995*, 54 percent of the

Right, Duy and his kitchen staff at Pho Cuong prepare orders during a busy lunch rush. Duy makes the broth for his pho and other noodle dishes fresh daily.



“

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country opposed Vietnamese immigration. But over the next twenty-five years, more than one million arrived, two-thirds of whom came as war refugees and not immigrants. Within a generation, most were flourishing. In education, for instance, Vietnamese-Americans soon were outperforming the GPAs of other groups of students.

Communities got a makeover too. A look around Oklahoma City's Asian District—bounded by old Route 66 at Northwest Classen Boulevard and Northwest Twenty-third Street—

shows the positive mark the Vietnamese community has made on a once-sketchy part of the capital city. Today, Vietnamese signs tout *pho*, *banh mi* sandwiches, *banh cuon* rice noodle rolls, Asian groceries, and bubble tea. Exploring here is best done on an empty stomach.

A good starting point is Super Cao Nguyen. This 25,000-square-foot grocery

store, fronted by neon-colored palm trees and a Chinese-style sculpture garden, opened in its current location in 2003. Its owners since 1979, Tri Luong and Kim Quach, came to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1978, first landing in Washington, DC, before leaving for Arkansas then Oklahoma. Their son, Ba Luong, helps his family run the store.

“We went west like all the American settlers,” Ba tells me as we walk through the aisles. “Living the American dream.”

The first thing to notice is how Super Cao Nguyen's not limited to Vietnamese goods. Its shelves cover the globe. We breeze by Hawaiian fruit juice, Burmese sour pickle tea, Jamaican spices, tamale corn shucks, New Zealand Ora King salmon, green tea-flavored Kit Kat bars from Japan, Tunisian harissa, fifty soy sauces, and Filipino purple yam bread.

“I find stuff I didn't know about every time I look around here,” Ba says. “Look: Pakistan barbecue sauce. That's new to me.”

All these offerings have helped turn Oklahoma City into a foodie destination. In 2007, the *New York Times* profiled the city's Vietnamese food scene. Ba mentions many young chefs who come for ingredients they see on TV. And last year, Andrew Zimmern visited while shooting an episode of the Travel Channel's *Bizarre Foods*.

“Oklahoma always gets that cowboy persona from outsiders,” Ba notes. “But people are learning we're not just steak and potatoes.”

SPEAKING OF MISPERCEPTIONS, people often associate Vietnam with a war rather than with a place or a people. I've felt this blurry distinction for decades. My ex's family escaped Saigon one day before the war ended, and our nine-year-old daughter Ruby exists because of the opportunity Oklahoma City gave them. But when we moved to Vietnam in the mid 1990s, I quickly learned a couple of things: First, the war—when it's discussed—is called the “American War,” and second, it hardly weighs on the daily routine. In eighteen months, no one ever uttered a disgruntled word to me, even in the north. Life has gone on.

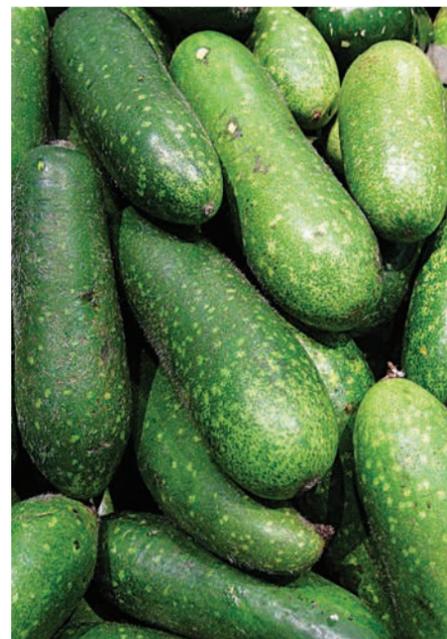
Thankfully, a superb new exhibit at the Oklahoma History Center is offering a look beyond the war.

Welcome Home: Oklahomans and the War in Vietnam, which runs until November 2019, begins with interlocked South Vietnam and Oklahoma flags and a sign that casually notes, “The

Right, the 25,000-square-foot Super Cao Nguyen in Oklahoma City's Asian District offers not only hard-to-find Vietnamese ingredients but fresh vegetables and seafood, serving dishes, and even home décor.



Ba Luong and his family have owned and operated Super Cao Nguyen for nearly forty years. The store moved into a larger nearby location in 2003.



NATHAN GUNTER, DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS, AND MEGAN ROSSMAN

story starts with immigration.” Almost all Oklahomans—Native Americans, Land Run settlers, Vietnamese refugees—came from somewhere else, it says. Instead of dwelling on typical war subjects like guerrilla warfare tactics or Agent Orange, the exhibit focuses on the people involved, notably the new Oklahomans the war brought: the Vietnamese–Oklahomans.

Midway through the exhibit’s stacks of moving crates, video monitors offer recorded oral histories by local Vietnamese–Americans sharing their harrowing tales of escape and arrival

in U.S. In one video, Hugh Do tells of leaving Vietnam by boat in 1980 and drifting six days in dangerous waters without food or water.

“I was glad we were attacked by pirates,” he says. “They left a bucket of dirty water.”

In another video, Mai Ly Do breaks down as she recalls leaving Saigon when she was a child.

“I thought we’d leave for a few weeks and then come back,” she says.

Bob Blackburn, the Oklahoma Historical Society’s executive director and exhibit curator, has been involved

with the community almost since the beginning. In 1978, he and his wife moved to Heritage Hills—just south-east of today’s Asian District—because they wanted their son to be raised with easy access to a diverse part of the city. When his wife Debbie won a seat in the state legislature in 1994, she held her election-night watch party at a Vietnamese restaurant.

Bob believes the story of Vietnamese people in America is an Oklahoma story—and one that is important for Oklahomans of all ethnicities to learn about and understand.

“That’s the heart of the exhibit,” he says. “The more you can preserve your culture, the stronger we all are.”

I’VE OFTEN BEEN asked by visiting out-of-staters what they should do while in Oklahoma, and I always send them for a bowl of pho. Many who are familiar with Vietnamese cuisine are surprised by how faithful the food is to original recipes.

Today, I’m taking my fifteen-year-old nephew, Ethan, to try his first. We go to a long-time favorite, Pho Lien Hoa, on a Sunday morning. Lacquer-

ware art lines the wall as Vietnamese pop softly plays. He admits he only dabbles in the occasional broth, and when two steaming bowls are set before us, Ethan quickly pulls out his phone. I’m worried I’ve lost him.

“Hey, did you know there’s a pho emoji?” he asks.

Turns out, he’s bragging about his breakfast by texting a Vietnamese–American friend.

“I don’t have anything to compare this to,” he says approvingly.

I take that as a success.

Afterwards we drive along Twenty-third Street east of I-35, passing ranch homes and big churches on hilly plots as the country seeps into the city limits. After heading north, we reach a flurry of Buddhas.

The Vien–Giac Buddhist Temple, which was founded in 1981, hosts free vegetarian meals on Sundays. Nearly a third of *Viet Kieu*—“overseas Vietnamese”—in the U.S. are Catholic, and 43 percent are Buddhist, but in Vietnam, more than three-quarters of the population is Buddhist.

Meeting people is no problem. In a prayer garden, we chat with a Californian Vietnamese–American who’s trying to clear his mind before taking an air traffic control test the next day. In the banquet hall, tables are lined up next to each other, and a buffet of veggie dishes is being laid out in the back. A few dozen worshippers mill about until a robed monk comes in, rings a bell, and offers a short prayer in Vietnamese. The meal begins.

A man named Quang Pham soon adopts us. He first came to Oklahoma to study at OU in 1971 and returned to the state permanently not long after the war ended.

At the Vien–Giac Buddhist Temple in northeast Oklahoma City, fruits, water, flowers, and incense are set before the Buddha in the main sanctuary.



Photographs of deceased relatives adorn altars in a section of the Vien–Giac Buddhist temple where members pray for their ancestors.

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CHEAT SHEET

Vietnamese
FOOD

If you've not tried Vietnamese food, you're entering a world of hundreds of dishes. To help you start, here are five things to order first.

Pho Bo

This beef noodle soup—pronounced “fuh” with a dip/rising intonation, like a question—is the most common starting point. It only appeared outside Hanoi a little more than a century ago, merging Chinese-style flat rice noodles and the French fondness for beef. Most stateside versions follow the sweeter southern style with add-on condiments like bean sprouts, basil, and lime wedges. Oklahoma City's Pho Lien Hoa has a photo menu showing different meats. If unsure, save the tendon and start with *nam* (flank) or *tai*, a rare cut that cooks in broth.

Banh Mi

The popular Vietnamese banh mi sandwich often is made of cold cuts or, better yet, grilled chicken or pork and with pickled vegetables that give extra crunch. Key is the French baguette. Vuong Nguyen, a local Vietnamese-American chef who's created fusion dishes at Oklahoma City's Guernsey Park and Chae, says, “The bread's gotta be airy, fluffy inside—with all the ingredients kind of melting together.” Even the Chesapeake Energy Arena's Budweiser Brew House now serves a “southern-style” pork belly banh mi at Thunder games. Super Cao Nguyen serves fresh ones too.

Bun Thit Nuong

This bowl of cold rice noodles topped with grilled pork is a classic street staple in Vietnam, where it's usually served as a quick lunch from sidewalk stools. Do use the saucer of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) to dress the dish. The shrimp version, *bun tom thit nuong*, is an excellent substitute for those who don't eat pork.

Cha Giò

Unlike egg rolls at Chinese restaurants, Vietnamese *chà giò* come plumper, with glass egg noodles, fish sauce, enough garlic to linger for days, and a choice of vegetarian or pork varieties. Nearly all Vietnamese restaurants serve them.

Ca Phe Sua Da

Serious caffeination is part of the appeal of Vietnamese iced coffee. The coffee drips over sweetened condensed milk (*sua*) from a Vietnamese filter then is mixed and poured over ice. It's strong.



Lido Restaurant is one of several establishments serving pho in Oklahoma City's Asian District.

MEGAN ROSSMAN

“There was one other Vietnamese guy in Oklahoma at the time,” he says of his time at OU. “I was the second.”

We try to decline our second meal in an hour, but he insists we try some noodles, rice, soup, bean paste dessert, and tea. (*An di*, which literally means “go eat,” is a common command in Vietnamese households.) As we nibble, we talk.

“People think we're just in the middle of the Bible Belt,” Pham says. “They don't realize how multicultural Oklahoma is.”

Ethan texts about this too. Turns out, his friend is a regular at the temple.

THE NEXT DAY, I begin at the beloved Jimmy's Egg, the chain famous for eggs, bacon, and burgers. There's a queso blanco burrito on the menu, but no *banh mi* or *bun thit nuong*. This is surprising, as its owner is one of Oklahoma City's most well-known Vietnamese-American citizens.

I'm meeting Loc Le at the original Jimmy's Egg at Northwest Sixteenth Street and May Avenue—the one he bought in 1980, when he didn't even know how to make coffee. We slide into the red vinyl booth and order. I go with the “garbage breakfast,” two eggs over hash browns with onions, bell peppers, and sausage crumbles. Loc gets a burger.

“I like the burger,” he says. “I ate them in Vietnam before I came.”

Over a long breakfast, I learn a lot. He grew up in Danang in central Vietnam and ran a transport business during the war before escaping by boat the day Saigon fell. He's not interested in adding Vietnamese food to his menu, but he is proud of the impact the community has had in places like Houston, Seattle, and Orange County, California, where he has a second home.

“Think about Classen,” he says, referring to the nearby Asian District, gradu-

ally restored since the '70s. “If we didn't come here, it would be zero. We need to adjust here—to become Vietnamese-American, not create our own Vietnam.”

What “Vietnamese-American” means is up for debate. Follow any story of immigration—of any nationality—and you'll find the question of identity soon follows. First generations tend to look backward, while their kids and grandkids become more Americanized.

In 1995, Vietnamese-American student Minh Huynh wrote an essay on the topic that was quoted in Freeman's *Changing Identities*. In it, Huynh claims it would be incomplete to consider himself only Asian or Asian-American.

“I acknowledge Asian, Anglo, Hispanic, and African influence to all be a part of my heritage,” he writes.

In other words, the result is for all of us in the Okie universe to share. The Asian District welcomes all Oklahomans. And while the food may be a common starting point, it's only the beginning.

Pho Cuong is open daily, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. 3016 North Classen Boulevard in Oklahoma City, (405) 524-5045. Super Cao Nguyen is open daily, 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. 2668 North Military Avenue in Oklahoma City, (405) 525-7650 or caonguyen.com. Pho Lien Hoa is open daily, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. 901 Northwest Twenty-third Street, (405) 521-8087. Oklahoma City's Asian District is located along Northwest Classen Boulevard between Northwest Twenty-third Street and Northwest Thirtieth Street. okcasiandistrict.com. Vien-Giac Buddhist Temple, 5101 Northeast Thirty-sixth Street, viengiacoklahoma.tripod.com. The Oklahoma History Center's exhibit *Welcome Home: Oklahomans and the War in Vietnam* runs through November 2019. Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. 800 Nazih Zuhdi Drive in Oklahoma City, (405) 522-0765 or okhistory.org.

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In addition to Vietnamese food, central Oklahoma City is home to the Asian District as well as many Asian-owned businesses, including restaurants serving Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai cuisine.