

Photos by MARY ANN STERNBERG

Chef Think of the Red Bridge Cooking School in Hoi An, Vietnam, shows students how to fill a spring roll.

Vietnam cooking class keeps students on a roll

BY MARY ANN STERNBERG
Special to food

HOI AN, Vietnam — My little frying pan was on fire. Orange flames leaped high in the air with spectacular ferocity, inducing a vision of my burning down the Red Bridge Restaurant's lovely, open-air, bamboo classroom. Happiness was the immediate appearance of an aide who grabbed the pan and whisked it and my singed rice pancake away. It was the morning's only disaster.

Vietnamese food is one of my favorites so I was delighted to sample my share during a two-week tour of Vietnam. A highlight of the trip was a cooking class in Hoi An, a city on the South China Sea.

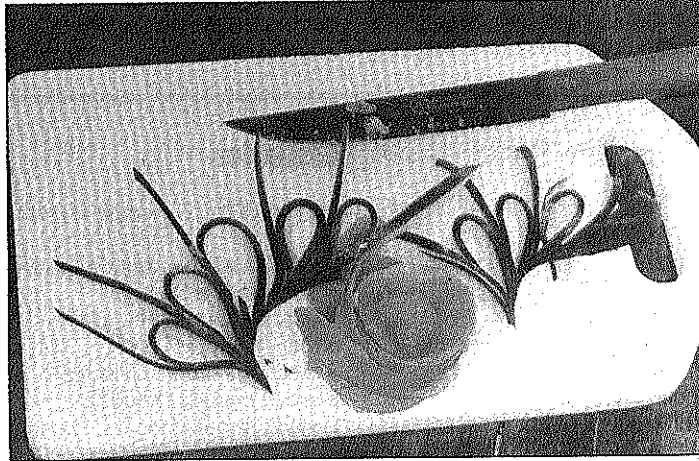
Our class of 18, mostly Australians, met for the half-day culinary adventure and followed our wisecracking young guide, Mr. Ysi, to Hoi An's daily market. We wandered through the exuberant, colorful expanse of booths and stalls, gazing at the profusion of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and seafood. We peppered Ysi with questions about the unfamiliar foodstuffs and learned to recognize dragon fruit, longan, rambutan, sweet-sop, green tea leaf bunches, lotus roots and bamboo shoots.

There were sticky rice flakes, barrels of spices, quantities of unfamiliar meat cuts, live animals and much more. He offered tastes of fried silk worms; no one accepted.

We traveled from the market to the restaurant by boat along the Thu Bon River, past stands of palm trees and fishermen throwing huge, circular nets. Ysi led us through the restaurant's kitchen garden, green with lemon grass, water spinach, betel nut palms and other plants grown for the chef's use before filing into the handsome bamboo room to meet Chef Think, our teacher.

The chef, dressed in a black shirt and a white baseball cap turned backward, stood behind the demonstration table spewing a steady patter like an Asian Emeril Lagasse as we sat in chairs, sipping ginger tea.

Think's first dish was warm Squid Salad served in a pineap-



As in most Asian food, the garnishes carved and sliced from fresh vegetables and fruits are important to the presentation of each dish.

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ple half, which he created and assembled into a dazzling presentation. He pushed it aside for his next dish — Asian Eggplant in a Clay Pot. His deft movements put the class at ease as we began our first round of cookery at the individual burners that ringed the room, each outfitted with pots, utensils and ingredients.

Then we settled back into the chairs to watch what looked like sleight of hand: making fresh rice paper wraps for spring rolls. It seemed pure magic to spread homemade rice paste on fabric stretched over a large pot of steaming water, let it heat, then lift off a fragile white disc with a sliver of bamboo. Think filled several circles of rice paper with shredded vegetables, wrapped each one tightly and evenly, and dipped them ceremoniously in peanut sauce before it was our turn to try.

It was an intimidating assignment but, remarkably, the rice paste steamed dutifully, and our bamboo slivers worked expertly. We shredded vegetables and fumbled with wrapping them neatly into the rice paper, learning that messy spring rolls taste as good as neat ones.

The last preparation was *Bánh Xèo* — rice pancakes, which are made with homemade rice paste batter. Think poured the batter into a frying pan, and when it was partially cooked, topped it with shredded meat and vegetables, then folded and flipped it with brio. After conquering the rice paper, the pancake looked so easy that we returned to our burners in high spirits. It was at that point that the handle on my frying pan, already loose and jiggly, wobbled toward the burner and created the conflagration.

Think and his battery of helpers, however, were unfazed by the drama, and as I calmed down, we watched him make a charming tomato-peel rose and a carved cucumber fan, both used as plate decorations. Then we attempted to duplicate his creations.

The final segment of the Red Bridge Cooking Class experience was partaking in a lunch of traditional specialties from the restaurant kitchen served in the school's stylish, white-cloth dining room. It was a feast of Squid Salad in Pineapple, fresh shrimp and vegetable spring rolls, *Bánh Xèo*, and fish

steamed in banana leaf, followed by a dessert of fresh fruit that included longan and dragonfruit.

The half-day cooking classes started four years ago. Up to four classes are held daily except in summer. The experience, including guided market walk, round-trip boat ride, cooking lesson, and lunch—costs \$19 per person.

The Red Bridge Cooking School is located at Thon 4, Cam Thanh, Hoi An, Vietnam. Telephone from the United States is 011-84-510-933222. The Web site is <http://www.visithoian.com/redbridge.html> and the e-mail address is info@visithoian.com.

Vietnamese cooking classes have become popular attractions for visitors. Another well-known venue is the Vietnam Cookery Center, M1 Cu Xa Tan Cang (362/8 Ung Van Khiem), Binh thanh Distinct, in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The e-mail address is vietnamcookery@expat-services.com.

Here are some of the recipes from the Vietnamese cooking class:

Asian Eggplant in Clay Pot

Serves 4. Recipe is from Red Bridge Cooking School. A Dutch oven is a good substitute for a clay pot.

Root to 2 lemon grass, crushed (may substitute fresh ginger)
2 cups water
2 Asian (long, thin) eggplants cut into rounds
½ to ½ cup vegetable oil
1½ tbs. tomato purée
1 tsp. sugar (or honey or pineapple juice)
Salt, to taste

1. Boil lemon grass in water for 2 minutes.
2. In a wok or a large frying pan, deep-fry eggplant in vegetable oil until softened.
3. Add tomato purée, sugar and salt to the lemon grass water. Stir and mix. Add this mixture to the eggplant, bring to a boil. Cook 3 minutes, or until eggplant is very soft and sauce thickens a little. Serve with steamed rice.

Rice Paper Spring Rolls With Shrimp

Serves 4. Recipe is from Red Bridge Cooking School. (Instead of making rice paper, buy it premade and soften a fresh cabbage or lettuce leaf between each sheet, then tightly in a plastic bag for about 3 hours.)

1 tsp. vegetable oil
1 tbl. finely chopped white onions
½ lb. peeled, deveined shrimp — sliced down the middle
2 pinches sugar
2 pinches salt
10 medium lettuce leaves, chopped

1. Put oil in a wok or skillet; add onions and sauté briefly. Add shrimp and half of the salt and sugar. Cook 1 minute.

2. In a separate bowl, mix lettuce, carrots, papaya (or substitutes), coriander, mint, basil, etc., vinegar, and rest of salt and sugar. Mix together.

3. Put some vegetable mixture toward one arc-edge of the rice paper. Put some wok mixture on top. To roll, wrap the filled edge toward the cen-

½ cup grated carrot
½ cup grated green green mango, beat cucumber)
Chopped fresh coriander, basil, to taste
2 tsps. white vinegar
Rice paper

ter; take care to tuck. Dip in Peanut Sauce.

Peanut Sauce:

1 tsp. crushed garlic
2 tbs. crunchy peanut butter
2 tbs. soy sauce
1 tsp. brown sugar or
1 pinch chili powder
¼ cup water or coc-

Mix ingredients in over moderate heat warm.

Cuisine defined by region and fresh vegetables, herbs

Traditional Vietnamese food differs by region — south, central and north — but primary requirements everywhere are fresh vegetables and/or fresh herbs and dipping sauces.

Mainstays of the kitchen include lemon grass, ginger, fish sauce and rice which is eaten, but also used to make rice noodles, rice paste, etc. Noodle soups are common, all with a rich, tasty broth but reflecting regional influences.

Seafood was plentiful, including boiled crabs and shrimp; the latter are usually dipped in a lime juice and sea salt mixture.

Ingredients for reproducing

Vietnamese dishes. Rouge can be found at Phat Oriental Market, Saigon Hong Kong, Vinh Phat is at 12 Blvd.; phone (225) 2... its Web site is vinhphatmarket.com. Saigon Hong Kong, N. Sherwood Forest, J; phone is (225) 2...

► ON THE INTERNET:

For more about Vietnamese food and more recipes, visit <http://www.vietworld.com> or <http://www.vietnamrecipies.com>