

# The Cuisine of Southeast Asia Culinary Focus: Vietnam

Curriculum Developed By:

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## **Curriculum Learning Objectives**

Individuals successfully completing this module will be able to:

1. Explain how the cuisines of Vietnam and Southeast Asia are distinctive from other Asian cuisines
2. Identify the key nations, religions and cultural practices that have influenced contemporary Vietnamese and Asian cookery
3. Understand how the geography and topography influenced the cuisine of these countries
4. Identify key ingredients, cooking methods, and equipment key to Vietnamese and Asian cuisine
5. Describe the key tastes and flavor sensations detected by the palate, and establish a flavor matrix, citing examples of each of these flavors used predominantly in Vietnamese cooking
6. Name prevalent foods and flavoring ingredients found in Vietnamese cooking
7. Prepare a variety of dishes from Vietnam and Southeast Asia
8. Source additional information, recipes and resources key to expanding your knowledge and appreciation for these cuisines and culinary influences
9. Describe ways in which Vietnamese dishes could be modified and incorporated onto a contemporary menu found in a variety of food settings in the United States
10. Highlight key health benefits, profitability potential and presentation appeal opportunities presented by Vietnamese menu items

## **Regional Overview of Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia**

### Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia includes the countries lying south of China, east of India, and north of Australia. (See maps.) About the size of Europe, this area spans three time zones. All the countries within Southeast Asia share a similar climate due to the *monsoons*, seasonal winds. Each experiences a tropical climate with pronounced rainy and dry seasons. More than 1,000 languages are spoken throughout Southeast Asia. The major religions found in this area include Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and some Christianity.

### History of Vietnam

Chinese from the north and islanders from the south first settled Vietnam. As a result, the most common heritage found in Vietnam remains Malaysian and Chinese ancestry. China ruled this land for about a thousand years, from 100 B.C. until 900 A.D. After that time, Vietnam became an independent country.

In the ensuing years, people from India arrived seeking spices to trade, while people from countries in the west came looking for trade as well as lands to colonize. Vietnam's independence lasted until France gained control in the late sixteenth century. Prior to the French occupation, Vietnam functioned as an agricultural society; however, the French introduced industry to this country. France's rule lasted until World War II, when Japan invaded Vietnam.

With Japan's defeat in World War II, they lost control of Vietnam. France tried to regain command, but they ended up ruling the southern part while Russia ruled the northern portion of the country. What began as a civil war between the north and south of Vietnam in 1957 escalated into a war involving a number of countries that lasted until the 1970's. As a result of ongoing bombing and fighting, Vietnam and the Vietnamese people changed greatly, both physically and emotionally. Many rural residents moved to the cities seeking jobs and or shelter. Shelling, bombing and defoliation destroyed much land and property. Even today, many years after the fighting ended, significant impact from the Soviet Union and United States still remains strong in Vietnam.

Although influence from the Chinese is quite apparent in the north, the south exhibits remnants of the Indian and French presence. From the Chinese, the Vietnamese adopted chopsticks, stir-fries, bean curd, and a fondness for noodles. Curries came from the Indian influence, and the French culinary traditions introduced pâtés, French bread, sauces, and butter to the cuisine of Vietnam.

### History of Thailand

People from southeastern Asia migrated to Thailand around 4,500 years ago. Most Thai descendants are of Malaysian descent with some Chinese and Arabic ancestry. Today, Thailand remains a predominately Buddhist country with beautiful Buddhist temples called *wat* in every village.

The Europeans entered Thailand in the 1500s; however, they never gained control of the country. In fact, Thailand remains one of the few countries in Asia that was never ruled by a western nation, and other Asian countries rarely conquered it.

Much of the culinary influences that exist in Thailand today resulted from its geographic location. Situated less than 100 miles from Vietnam and China, Thailand shares borders with Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Malaysia. Evidence of culinary traits from these countries appears throughout Thailand.

### History of Indonesia

Known as the Spice Islands, Indonesia attracted traders from India, Arabia and Holland, seeking spices. The Indonesians learned kebabs from the Arabs. Applying their own culinary slant, the kebabs became *satay*, skewered marinated meats that are grilled and served with a peanut dipping sauce.

At various time in their history, the Chinese, Indians, Portuguese, Dutch and English ruled Indonesia. The Portuguese gained control in the 1500s, the Dutch conquered in the 1670s, and Indonesia finally achieved independence in 1945. Each of these ruling countries left culinary and other influences behind. The well-known *rijsttafel*, literally rice table, was developed by the Dutch settlers. This opulent display of rice and many different dishes required numerous servants to prepare and serve. No longer existing in the same profusion, the *rijsttafel* of today is more like a buffet.

### **Topography**

Vietnam lies in Southeast Asia, to the South of China. With the South China Sea bordering on its eastern side and the Gulf of Tonkin to the north, Vietnam contains more than 1,400 miles of coastline access to ample amounts of seafood.

Although mountains, forests and jungles make up much of the north, the land around the Red River Delta and the coastal plains provide fertile farmland where crops flourish in the northern region. The central portion contains mountains. Lowlands and fertile land from crops along the coast and the Mekong Delta comprise the southern region. All of Vietnam experiences tropical weather with hot, humid, rainy summers and drier, warm winters. The *monsoons* control the climate.

Also situated in Southeast Asia, Thailand is bordered by Burma, Laos, and Cambodia on its west, north and east. A narrow strip of land surrounded by the Andaman Sea to the west and the Gulf of Thailand to the east connects Thailand to Malaysia on the south. Rivers crisscross the country and provide the main transportation.

Until recent times, canals functioned as roads throughout much of Thailand. With miles of coastline and many rivers, seafood and fish are abundant and comprise a major portion of the diet.

Mountains, forests, dry plateau, and some fertile river valleys compose much of the northern section of Thailand. The central area contains plains, rivers and fertile farmland, and the south is made up of jungle, mountains, plains, and coastline. Like Vietnam and Indonesia, Thailand's climate is tropical and strongly affected by the *monsoons*. Hot, dry springs; cool, dry winters; and hot, wet summers prevail through most of the country with more moderate temperatures found in the mountains.

Lying between Australia and Southeast Asia, more than 13,000 islands comprise the country of Indonesia. About half of these islands remain uninhabited. Surrounded by the Indian and Pacific oceans, the islands of Indonesia stretch over a distance of 3,000 miles with the equator running through them. As a result, a hot, humid, tropical climate supporting abundant plant growth prevails, except at the high altitudes of the mountains. Some of the diverse land on these islands consists of mountains, volcanoes, and uninhabited, dense jungle.

### **Ingredients and Foods Commonly Used in the Cuisine of Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia:**

- Seafood and Fish
- Rice and Rice Noodles
- Coconut, Coconut Milk, and Coconut Oil
- Fish Sauce
- Shrimp Paste
- Curry Pastes
- Scallions, Ginger, and Garlic
- Lemongrass
- Aromatic Herbs: Cilantro, Basil and Mint
- Hot Chili Peppers and Hot Sauce
- Fresh Fruits and Vegetables
- Peanuts
- Bean Curd

## **Cooking Methods**

Steaming, boiling, simmering or braising, grilling or broiling, stir-frying, and deep-frying are cooking methods commonly used in these countries. Baking is not often seen.

Grilling meats, fish and bean curd remains popular. Meats are often cut into strips, marinated, and then placed on a skewer before grilling. A variety of foods are prepared by steaming, including whole fish, vegetables, custards, and rice. Like Japan's *nabémono*, people in both the north and south of Vietnam frequently cook foods in a pot of boiling broth at the table, adding various food items to liquid with chopsticks.

The Vietnamese, Thai, and Indonesians use less oil for stir-frying foods than is customary in China. Of course, stir-frying is sautéing over high heat in a round-bottomed wok or other pan.

## **Regional Culinary Influences**

### Vietnam

The diet of the Vietnamese consists mainly of seafood, rice, and vegetables. With its close proximity to rivers and the sea, fish and seafood remain the primary animal protein consumed in both North and South Vietnam. Squid, shrimp, lobster, and many varieties abound. Fish sauce, *nuoc mam*, is consumed at every meal.

Because of a lack of land for grazing, chicken and pork appear more often than beef. Poultry follows seafood in availability, and small amounts of pork appear in many dishes. Beef is reserved for special occasions except in the north where there are some pasturelands and plains. Lamb and mutton remain unknown. Various game meats and fowl thrive in the mountainous regions, as well as the jungles and forests. As with other Asian countries, small amounts of meat are extended with larger quantities of vegetables and rice.

The Chinese coveted Vietnam because of the fertile rice growing areas in the Mekong and Red River deltas. The Chinese influence on the cuisine of Vietnam is most apparent in the northern region with the use of bean curd, star anise, spring rolls, and soups. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese prepare stir-fried dishes, and they eat rice separately from the other dishes, rather than mixing them together like people from the south.

A foundation of the cuisine, rice accompanies all dishes like in the other Southeast Asian cuisines. The Vietnamese prefer fluffy, separate grains of rice rather than the sticky rice favored in Japan and Korea.

Rice and noodles dominate the Vietnamese diet, although French bread adopted during the French occupation remains quite popular. French influence on the cuisine is apparent, particularly with the use of garlic, sauces, and butter.

Generally, Vietnamese recipes contain a wide variety and ample amounts of fresh herbs; however, the use of spices varies from region to region. With fewer spices available in the north, the dishes tend to be less spicy than those eaten in the south. Influence from the Indian cuisine prevails in southern Vietnam and shows up with the curries and various rice pancakes.

The Vietnamese use little oil in their cookery; the simmering of foods appears more often than stir-frying. Thickening agents are rarely used; rather food is presented in a simpler, more natural state.

Soup, another staple in this cuisine, is consumed regularly. Breakfast in Vietnam often consists of *pho*, a North Vietnamese rice noodle soup in a beef broth strongly flavored with cilantro, garlic, and *nuoc mam* (fish sauce). Paper-thin slices of raw beef and rice noodles are placed in a bowl, and then covered with boiling broth that cooks the meat. A popular soup served at any meal, many consider *pho* the national dish of Vietnam. *Pho* is traditionally garnished with paper-thin onions, fresh herbs, lime, chilies, and bean sprouts.

Like most Asian countries, all foods comprising the Vietnamese meal are served at once. Typically, various hot dishes accompany salads and lots of rice. To compose a salad, any variety of vegetables (and perhaps meat or seafood) are wrapped in a lettuce leaf, then enclosed in a rice paper wrapper, dipped in *nuoc mam* sauce, and eaten. The Vietnamese table setting includes a saucer at each place setting for holding *nu o c man* dipping sauce.

### Thailand

In Thailand, the revered rice actually represents life itself. Like most of the countries of Southeast Asia, the foundation of the diet revolves around rice, which accompanies every meal. In fact, each Thai inhabitant consumes about one pound of rice every day. A prolific rice-growing region, this nation exports huge quantities of rice. A very important principle in the cookery of Thailand, *kaeng* means liquid. This refers to the amount of liquid in a dish, which determines whether rice can be mixed directly into the dish. The Thai cook plans the menu for a meal to create a balance of dishes and without abundant sauces or *kaeng*.

Hearty curries featuring large chunks of pork are served in the north of Thailand, whereas lighter curries flavored with coconut milk and small pieces of meat, poultry, or seafood distinguish curries from the south. The curries of Thailand contain a mixture of aromatics, peppers, spices, and coconut milk, and they differ greatly from Indian curries. Three distinct types of Thai curries exist: yellow, red, and green. The ingredients that make up the sauce determine the color of the curry. The mildest of the curries, yellow, obtains its characteristic color from turmeric. The red ones contain red chili peppers, and the hottest variety, green, is made with green chili peppers.

Many characterize food of Thailand as hot; however, the food is much more complex than that single word. Aromatic herbs and coconut milk combine with the fiery chilies to produce complicated flavors that dominate the dishes found in Thailand. Thai food is described as many layers of different flavors that marry together to create an interesting and multileveled taste sensation. Basil, mint, cilantro, lemongrass, ginger, garlic, shallots, coriander, and fish sauce are just a few of the commonly used flavorings. To further heighten the appeal of the dishes, the Thai cook pays attention to the color, texture, and taste of each of the various ingredients used to create a dish so the final dish attracts the diner with a variety of flavors, textures, and colors.

Fruits and vegetables play a major role in the cuisine of Thailand with one or more salads served at each meal. All sorts of food items make their way into salads, providing health additions to meals. Piles of bean sprouts, lettuce, beans and herbs accompany the spicy hot dishes and function to cool the spiciness. Fresh fruits normally end the Thai meal, but, when desserts are served, they tend to be less sweet than those consumed in the other Southeast Asian countries.

### Indonesia

Most of the population of Indonesia resides in the Greater Sunda Islands to the west, which includes Borneo, Java, and Sumatra. Java ranks as the most populated island. With miles of coastline and many rivers, seafood and fish abound throughout Indonesia.

As with Vietnam and Thailand, rice forms the foundation of the Indonesian meal. In fact, Indonesians eat rice daily at all three meals. Although people from many other Southeast Asian countries eat rice separately from the other dishes, Indonesians mix rice with their other foods. Combining the fiery, hot Indonesian dishes with ample amounts of rice makes them taste less spicy.

Typically, the Indonesian cook juxtaposes sweet, sour, salty and spicy taste sensations. Fiery *sambal*, Indonesian hot sauce, and coconut milk combine to form sweet and spicy flavorings. An important part of the Indonesian table, *sambal* accompanies the rice served at every meal.

Although most Indonesians practice the Islamic religion, the island of Bali remains a stronghold for the Hindu residents. Religion determines many culinary preferences, particularly regarding dietary restrictions with meat. Muslims do not eat pork, so other meats prevail in the Islamic areas. Although rare in much of Southeastern Asia, lamb appears frequently in Indonesia.

Each sect prepares ceremonial foods that continue as an important facet of the Indonesian cuisine. *Selamatan*, a ceremonial feast, marks important events in Indonesia. Many foods in Indonesia represent spiritual issues, and the foods served at *selamatan* include special foods such as *tumpeng*. Originally in Java, *tumpeng*, which means rice cone, graces the table at every important festival, including weddings and parties for newborn children. Traditionally, a variety of foods decorate this ceremonial pyramid of rice.



Significantly, differences exist between the cuisines of the various regions of Indonesia. The foods served in Sumatra are quite spicy, whereas inhabitants of Java prefer sweeter tastes. Many flavor similarities are apparent, however, throughout Indonesia. True for many countries with tropical climates, coconut milk and coconut oil appear everywhere. Also, sweet soy sauce (*kecap*), peanuts and fermented shrimp paste (*trassi*) flavor a wide range of dishes through these islands.

*Gado-gado*, a salad consisting of a variety of vegetables topped with a peanut sauce dressing, remains popular in most areas of Indonesia. Other well-known dishes include *satay*, grilled meat accompanied by a spicy peanut sauce, and *soto*, a chicken and coconut milk soup.

Isolation caused by the distance between islands has resulted in great variation in the preparations and methods of cooking the same ingredients and dishes throughout the country. With tropical growing conditions, many crops thrive. Corn, rice, coffee, tea, a variety of spices, peanuts, cassava, bananas, sweet potatoes, and many other fruits and vegetables flourish here.

Seventy percent of the world's nutmeg grows in Indonesia; cinnamon, cloves, and peppers also thrive on these islands. Interestingly, the Indonesians do not cook with nutmeg or cloves, but they cook with all sorts of peppers, including hot chili peppers and peppercorns of various colors.

Unlike most inhabitants of Southeast Asia, Indonesians eat with their fingers, not chopsticks. The food is rolled into a ball with the fingers on the right hand, then picked up and eaten with the same hand. The left hand is used only for passing food.

## **Key Commodities in Southeast Asian Cuisine**

### Coconut

The coconut holds an esteemed place in the cooking of each of these countries. With a lack of dairy cattle, the abundant palm trees provide coconuts, coconut oil, and coconut milk that forms the basis for many sauces. An ingredient used in curries throughout this part of the world, coconut pairs well with hot chilies by providing a sweet taste sensation to counteract the spicy hot. Grated or shredded, coconut meat appears in a myriad of dishes, both sweet and savory. Each of these countries feature a dish of seafood, chicken, or beef rolled in taro or banana leaf then steamed in coconut milk. Coconuts touch every part of the menu, from appetizers to beverages and desserts.

### Rice

Rice plays a major role in both the diet and the culture throughout Southeast Asia, as well as the rest of Asia. First, it functions as a staple food in the Asian countries. As a result, rice ranks supreme in importance as a food crop. Also, its significance is reflected in its constant appearance and importance in festivals, many which surround the planting and harvesting of rice. Finally, rice assumes a prominent role in cultural events. Rice wine is often drunk as part of the wedding ceremony, and newlyweds are showered with rice as a symbol of good luck and hope for fertility and prosperity in their lives together.

### Bananas

Many varieties of bananas grow in these countries, and like the coconut, this fruit appears in numerous forms and dishes. Sautéed, salted, under-ripe bananas often accompany the main meal. Ripe bananas are grilled, sautéed, cooked in custards, or coated with rice and/or coconut and eaten as a snack or dessert. As stated earlier, even the banana leaves are used. Like the cornhusks used to wrap *tamales* in Mexico and Central America, banana leaves function as a wrapper to enclose fillings for cooking. (usually steaming).

### Peanuts

Peanuts play a major role in these cuisines. Whether chopped peanuts are sprinkled over a finished dish or ground peanuts flavor the sauces, peanuts add flavor and texture to dishes through these three countries.

## **Culinary Focus: Vietnam**

A central tenet to Vietnamese cooking focuses on securing the freshest possible ingredients, and with minimal handling, combining them in a way that showcases their simple, natural goodness. Unlike the European approach of blending and harmonizing ingredients as one sees in slow braises and sauce reductions, the Vietnamese prefer to cook by layering flavors, textures and temperatures so that the ingredients remain separate and distinct. A good example is with the classic *pho bo*: the noodles and broth provide substance and by themselves the flavors are rather delicate. However, when eaten with fresh herbs, chilies, and limes, the flavors are immediately transformed, becoming spicy, aromatic and tangy all at the same time.

### Fragrant Fresh Herbs (*rau thom*)

The Vietnamese eat an enormous amount of fresh herbs. A family meal often consists of a table salad, which includes lettuce and different varieties of mint and basil. To eat, diners just snip off the sprigs and add to their bowls or plates, creating little salads as they go. Fresh herbs are also used as garnishes and accompaniments to soups, salads, and noodle dishes. Herbs common to the Vietnamese table include: Thai basil, lemongrass, mint, saw-leaf, and Vietnamese coriander. Garlic, hot peppers, shallots, and scallions also play a key role in the cuisine.

### Fish Sauce (*nuoc mam*)

Almost every Vietnamese dish is seasoned with the quintessential sauce. A liquid extraction made from fermented fish and salt, *nuoc mam* is used to salt and enhance foods and to make dipping sauces. In Vietnam, the best fish sauce comes from *ca com* or *ca linh*, both of the anchovy family, and are made by small, family run producers.

### Bean Sauce (*tuong hot*)

Made from whole or crushed fermented soybeans, this sharp-tasting sauce is used to season stir-fries and to make sauces. When used in a dipping sauce (such as one served with salad rolls), it's generally cooked with vinegar, puréed onions and sometimes sticky rice, then garnished with chilies and ground peanuts.

### Hoisin Sauce (*sot tuong*)

Made from soybean purée, and five-spice powder, this condiment is used in dipping sauces, marinades and stir-fries. When used as a dipping sauce, hoisin is prepared the same way as the bean sauce above. Many Vietnamese restaurants use this sauce for salad rolls and for serving *pho*.

### Ground Chili Paste (*tuong ot toi*)

An important condiment, this fiery sauce is made with coarsely ground red chilies, garlic and vinegar. It's used to garnish sauces and noodle and rice dishes.

Oyster Sauce (*dau hao*)

A thick brown sauce made from oyster extract, salt, sugar and spices, this seasoning ingredient is used to add savoriness to Chinese-style dishes. It is used to coat meats and seafood, giving them a shiny, succulent look.

Rice Paper (*banh trang*)

Rice papers are thin wrappers made from rice flour (sometimes in combination with tapioca starch), salt and water and are sun-dried on bamboo trays, which give them their distinctive pattern. They're available in round, square and triangular shapes. Dried rice papers are reconstituted in warm water until pliable. They are used to wrap salad rolls and spring rolls.

Rice Vermicelli (*bun*)


Sold as rice sticks, these dried small, wiry noodles are used extensively in Vietnamese cuisine to make noodle salads and soups. More fragile than pasta, they need less cooking time.

## The Role of Flavors and Flavor Balances in Vietnamese Cuisine

### Sensations of the Tongue and the Flavor Matrix

Tastes are detected by special structures called taste buds, of which we all have about 10,000, mainly on the tongue with a few at the back of the throat and on the palate. Taste buds surround pores within the protuberances on the tongue's surface and elsewhere. There are four taste sensations on the human palate, described and illustrated below:

**Taste Areas on the Human Tongue**



The diagram shows a top-down view of the tongue with four numbered taste zones. Zone #4 (Bitter) is at the back. Zone #3 (Sour) is on the sides. Zone #2 (Salt) is in the middle. Zone #1 (Sweet) is at the tip.

**bitter** - Bitter tastes (like the taste of tonic water) are mostly sensed towards the back and rear sides of the tongue.

**salty and sweet** - Salty tastes and sweet tastes (like sugar) are mostly tasted at the tip of the tongue.

**sour** - Sour tastes (like lemon juice) are mostly tasted at the sides of the tongue, at the middle and towards the front.

To truly understand the balance of flavors and layering of tastes in Vietnamese cuisine, the flavor matrix below provides examples of key ingredients and their key flavor sensations.

Taste Sensation	Key Vietnamese Cooking Ingredient
Salty	Fish Sauce, Soy Sauce, Bean Sauce
Sour	Lime, Rice Vinegar, Lemongrass
Sweet	Hoisin Sauce, Oyster Sauce, Sugar, Mint
Bitter or Astringent	Roasted Peanuts, Saw Leaf, Cilantro, Jicama, Vietnamese Iced Coffee

**Bibliography:**

Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table, by Mai Pham. Harper Collins.

International Cooking, by Patricia A. Heyman. Prentice Hall.

**Additional Web Resources:**

<http://www.ksvn.com/cooking/>

[http://www.sallys-place.com/food/ethnic\\_cusine/vietnam.htm](http://www.sallys-place.com/food/ethnic_cusine/vietnam.htm)

<http://www.angelfire.com/wi2/mayeshiba/Vietnam.html>

# Regional Maps



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## **Recipe Compendium**