

Street Vendors in Vietnam

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Perhaps one of the most interesting characteristics of the city of Saigon is that it abounds with various kinds of street vendors. Most of them sell food in the form of delicious Vietnamese delicatessen and sweets. Since the people of this country have throughout the centuries developed the inveterate habit of eating between meals, we assume these sidewalk restaurateurs are well patronized and that their small business provides them with adequate gains.

The bread vendor might wake you up early in the morning with his cry when he passes by your window, the little Chinese might disturb your siesta by tapping wildly on a sonorous piece of bamboo with a wooden stick — his way of announcing the approach of his father's hủ tiếu (vermicelli) cart, but there isn't anything you can do about it, and you have to adjust yourself to the local way of life.

No less than forty kinds of street vendors work hand in glove with one another to prevent your stomach from staying empty for long. In this article we propose to tell you about the most popular ones whose disappearance from our towns would bring about disastrous effects on the happiness of the Vietnamese.

Let us consider the bánh bò vendor first.

I. Bánh bò (creeping cake) is made of rice flour, leaven and sugar. The dough is set in a mould and steam-cooked. As the temperature of the water goes up the piece of dough spreads out in a crawling way to fill the mould while tiny eyes appear in the cake. Bánh bò is offered in triangular pieces

along with doughnuts. Vietnamese doughnuts take the shape of a beret (bánh-tiêu) or a shin-bone (già cha quẩy).

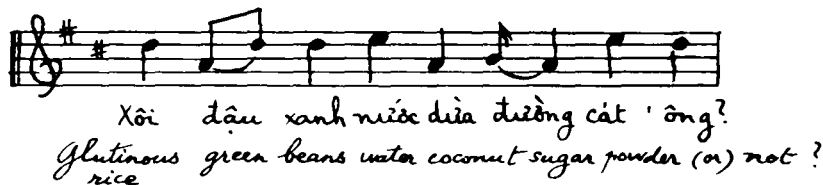


chants the old Chinese who visits your street twice a day, early in the morning and late in the evening. He keeps his bánh-bo in a sizable basket attached to the carrier of his bicycle, and every day of the week our man carries business from the city center to the quietest suburban areas.

Sometimes, a lady colleague precedes him by twenty minutes on his schedule, but she doesn't present much competition to him because on his two-wheeler he can cover a larger area than she can on foot, handicapped as she is with two baskets hanging at either end of a bamboo yoke which she poises on her right shoulder. Surprisingly enough her voice can reach much deeper notes than her male counterpart's. In the evening its monotony sends you to sleep. I wonder how with such a voice she can keep people awake long enough to sell them anything at all.

II. Xôi vendors :

Xôi or glutinous rice is prepared with a variety of rice (nếp) which is stickier than the variety consumed at an ordinary meal in Vietnam. Xoi should always be cooked in steam except when you want to make glue. It can be served either on a piece of green banana leaf with grated coconut and a mixture of sugar, salt and grilled sesame, or in a plate with a piece of roast chicken on the side



sings the woman who comes round every morning with a large basket carried against the right hip. It might be interesting to note that there are practically no men in the xôi business. In large cities xôi is the most popular breakfast for laborers, clerks and students. Main reason: cheapness. In the country it constitutes the second breakfast for farm hands in general and rice transplanters in particular. The latter always work in groups of ten, twenty or more. They sing while working in the flooded riceland, and at about seven o'clock, at the farther end of the dike leading to the field, appear two or three little boys who bring the day's second breakfast, steaming hot xôi cooked with green beans and coconut milk. This meal is included in the pay and everyone expects it to be decent.

III. Chè thưng vendors :

Like with the xôi market, the chè thưng business admits no male vendor. All dealers are women.



so chant those nightingales of Vietnam's pleasant evenings.

Chè thưng is a very thin marmelade made of green beans (đậu xanh) lotus seeds, translucent noodles (bột khoai) and vermicelli (bún tàu), Chinese cherries (trái táo) cooked in a deep mixture of water and extract of coconut. Customers generally prefer cane sugar to beet root sugar.

A bowl of sweet and warm che thung is a popular nightcap here. You might not be hungry but if the voice of the solicitor (woman vendor) sounds clear and rich, she has the right to be called in to serve you a bowl of che thung, and if her manners are good and her conversation pleasant you might be inspired to ask your house maid and your cook to join you at your own expense. All things considered, if a girl doesn't have a pleasant voice she had better not try to sell chè thưng.

IV. Half-hatched duck eggs vendors (Hột vịt lộn)

Half-hatched eggs are offered hard boiled and should be eaten while they are still hot. Relish the duckling and the yoke, and remember, do not throw away the juice! For seasoning use pepper, salt and a few sweet smelling herbs.

You can identify the vendors easily. They all carry a basket full of rice husk in which the eggs are kept warm. Their ages range from 14 to 50. They work in populous districts, public gardens and in front of temples where, in the evening, theatrical troupes perform and other delicacy vendors like to gather. Hột vịt lộn is a good intermission snack for a number of spectators who, squatting in front of the vendor, chase the duckling down their throats with a shot of burning rice whisky.



V. Nem nướng

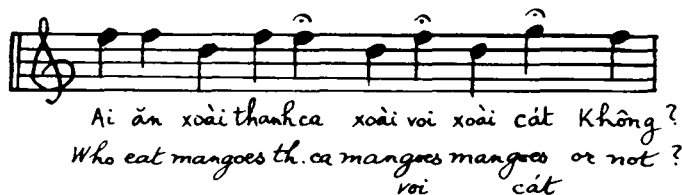
Delicious meat balls (usually pork) broiled on live charcoal, nem nướng attracts customers by the fat which drips on the fire and changes to an appetizing smoke. The balls are larger than the thumb but never reach the size of the big toe.



The chant makes your mouth water when you are hungry.

VI. Fruit vendors

They offer the fruits of the season. For mangoes the call goes like this:



For Bien-Hoa pamplemousse (bưởi) expect to hear:



Buy once, you will be a customer again, for the fun of buying. This country offers a large variety of fruits but the most interesting to eat are mangoes, pamplemousses and custard apples. You can choose your fruits and bargain for a price. Fruits are sold by the dozen (chuc co dau – ten with a head) except for durion (xoài riêng) which sells by the kilo.

VII. Phở vendors

To make a bowl of phở, take a handful of rice noodle (bánh phở), put it in a large bowl. Cover the top of the heap with small pieces of raw beef and slices of onion. Pour boiling beef consomme on top and serve with a slice of lime and sweet smelling herbs (rau quế or rau thơm.)

The phở vendor pushes his cart slowly from one street corner to another. He yells, "Phở!" When he crosses, he might block the street for a while but please forgive him. He doesn't mean to delay you. It is just that his cart is heavy and there are no ball bearings in its wheels.

Pho can perhaps be named the most popular breakfast in Vietnam. I do not know anyone in this country who dislikes a bowl of steaming phở, followed by a cup of good coffee. Phở is also a snack you can have at any time of the day. Twenty years ago it was introduced to South Vietnam by North Vietnamese immigrants. When it made its debuts here it had to fight for living space with its powerful Chinese counterpart, hủ tiếu. The main difference between pho and hu tieu lies in the fact that beef, the meat used to prepare phở does not enter in the preparation of hủ tiếu. The Chinese who cook hủ tiếu prefer pork, shrimp and crab meat, and add bean sprouts to their list of ingredients. The odds were against phở because at that time hủ tiếu was enjoying a monopoly over Southern stomachs. Phở fought and gained ground little by little. Today phở has as many customers as hủ tiếu, perhaps more, with the 800,000 refugees from the North, and phở vendors make as good a living as hủ tiếu vendors. The Southern Vietnamese are well taken care of, indeed.

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