



The Vietnamese Diet

by Nguyen Cuu Giang

Low-income Southeast Asia has been described as the land of the poorly dressed and hungry man. Much of this is true. In Vietnam however the general picture is a little brighter because under a tropical sun the perspiring Vietnamese needs only a few yards of light cloth to give his body a decent appearance, and much less food than the inhabitant of a cold country to stay healthy. Concerning food in particular, while most people eat for the taste, flavour and appearance, Vietnamese also eat for the texture of it. Our liking for the texture of food explains why we sometimes eat things that are not a bit nourishing although they fill our stomachs. However, living in a tropical country abundantly washed by the sea and watered by numerous rivers, the Vietnamese have one of the most diversified diets in the world. Here, as everywhere, the quality of the diet rather than the diet itself varies with the income bracket to which people belong.

The peasant. The easy-going Vietnamese peasant is not hard to please. He likes simple and practical things. His house is simple like his way of life and his diet. At mealtime, he sits in a circle with his family on a large campbed set in a room near the stable where the family's buffaloes are kept. In the center of the circle is placed a round tray containing all the dishes on the menu, and in front of each member of the family, a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Everyone has his legs folded in a manner similar to Shakyamuni's, his torso slightly bent forward. When the day is sultry the meal takes place on a mat laid on the beaten earth yard in front of the house. The head of the family or the oldest person in it is the first person to pick up the bowl and chopsticks. He hands the empty bowl to the mistress of the family to get it filled with hot rice. The rest of the family follows his example, and the meal begins. It may be interesting to note that in a Vietnamese meal, all the courses are served at the same time and that meat is chopped in advance. A person doesn't need a knife to eat and throughout a meal he can switch at will from fish to meat, from meat to vegetable, and then come back to fish.

Like all his fellow citizens, rich or poor, the Vietnamese peasant holds in his right hand a pair of chopsticks. He uses them to take a

small piece of food, dips it in *nước mắm* (Vietnamese fish sauce) and puts it on the rice contained in the bowl he holds in his left hand. With the lower ends of the chopsticks, he pushes the food and some rice into his mouth to make a mouthful of it. As he masticates and swallows the mouthful he begins to prepare another mouthful, and the same operation recurs throughout the meal, interrupted now and then by short discussions about some hamlet news or some commentary on the day's work.

The countryman's breakfast is at dawn, before a long day of work, his lunch is at 10 and dinner at 5 p. m.. The simple bills of fare vary with the time of year. Here are two standard ones :

1. Rice, fish and vegetable soup, fried shrimp, fish stewed in fish sauce (*cá kho*), scented leaves (*rau sống*) or bean sprouts (*giá*).

2. Rice, fish and pork stewed in *nước mắm*, salt fish (*mắm*), shredded banana stalk blended with cucumber and scented leaves, red pepper.

There's always enough rice for everybody. The average peasant can easily eat one kilo of rice a day. Throughout the year, every meal includes a soup, cooked with what is in season — shrimp, crabs, mushrooms, pineapple, tomatoes. The fish and crustacea usually come from the flooded ricefields or the shallow ditches which irrigate the farmer's orchard. The two vegetables the Vietnamese like most are germinated bean (*giá*) and bindweed (*rau muống*), a vinelike vegetable growing on ponds or other watery places. Both vegetables are cheap and can be eaten cooked or raw.

Nước mắm, the national fish sauce, has the advantage of being cheap and nourishing. Some peasants can make it at home, but most of them buy it by the *tin* — earthenware jar containing approximately one gallon of liquid. *Khô* — dried fish, and *mắm* — salt fish that looks like anchovy filets are the provisions country people always have in reserve at home.

Rice alcohol is often served at meals, but usually to the men alone. Vietnamese women do not enjoy drinking. Although it is against the law to make rice alcohol at home, each village sponsors one or two distillers who cater almost openly to the villagers' frequent need for intoxication. By reason of the fast consumption the liquor produced is not allowed to age in the wood in the Western manner. Rice alcohol is drunk straight, without any chaser. It is common practice to accompany a sip of spirit with a piece of food — a slice of acid fruit, some dried shrimp, peanuts, swine tripe, fried palm worms, snake or dog meat. Drinkers like to share. When a peasant, passing by a friend's house yells across the irrigation ditch, « Fourth brother, your yellow dog is getting fat, » he means : Slaughter it, prepare a nice meal and let me bring plenty of rice alcohol and friends.

Fortunately, all Vietnamese beverages are not intoxicating. The Vietnamese peasant ordinarily drinks tea — hot or cold, and rain water. The latter is collected in the following way : old areca trees are cut down, split into two halves, hollowed, and put under the edge of the overhanging roofs when it rains. The water dropping down from the roof is thus directed toward large containers (*lu* or *chum*) used as reservoirs for the dry months of the year. People start collecting rain water in May or June, after the first three or four rains

have washed from the thatched roofs the dust, dead leaves and cat dung accumulated there during the dry months. On a very hot afternoon, coconut milk, or pineapple freshly picked from the garden can be had.

City laborers.

The diet of the average city laborer is also very simple. Some categories of unskilled workers including construction laborers, cyclo drivers and taxi drivers cannot have their meals at home. At lunch time, they assemble around a street corner restaurateur, and for 10 piastres, can buy a meal consisting of a big dish of rice, some fried shrimp, omelet, fish stewed in *nước mắm* (*cá kho*), preserved cucumber (*dưa mắm*)... They eat squatting on the ground, and when the meal is finished, a bowl of steaming hot tea is served, accompanied by a pipe of *thuốc lá* (special tobacco for water pipe) or a cigarette. The tea (*trà Huế*) is brewed in a large earthenware vessel over a wood fire.

Between meals, a laborer can stop at a soup vendor's and have his choice of a variety of soups. The favorite soup for early morning and late evening workers is rice soup with hog intestines, liver and stomach (*cháo lồng*), and rice noodle in clear meat consommé (*phở* and *hủ tiếu*).

At home a laborer's diet consists of rice, bindweed (*rau muống*), salt fish (*mắm*), *nước mắm*, shrimp, a little meat (fat pork) and hard boiled duck eggs in *nước mắm*, or soya cheese. The wife has to feed a family of 6 on a budget of 50 piastres (about 70 cents) a day. It is understandable that she cannot afford expensive food. Her problem is to fill the stomachs rather than please the palates.

The Middle Class

While the middle class man doesn't have any more meals a day than his compatriot of the poorer class, his diet is a little richer. His three meals are scheduled as follows :

Breakfast between 6 : 30 and 7 : 00,

Lunch at 12 or 12 : 30,

Dinner between 6 : 00 and 7 : 00 p. m.

Glutinous rice with grated coconut and sugar (*xôi*), rice noodle in clear meat comsommé (*phở* or *hủ tiếu*) or rice soup (*cháo*) are eaten for breakfast. For lunch, the standard meal consists of rice (*cơm trắng*), meat and or fish fried with vegetables or grilled, soya sauce (*nước tương*) or salt soya cheese (*chao*) and fish sauce (*nước mắm*).

The menu for dinners is not much different from that for luncheons except that in the evening cooked vegetables are preferred to green vegetables.

Meat is roasted, grilled, fried or boiled. Some like it « áp chảo-ed » — cut in small pieces, dipped in blood, seasoned with onions and broiled. Pork is sometimes consumed in the form of *nem* — the lean part of it is pounded fine in a mortar, mixed with a powder made of grilled rice, then tightly packed in banana leaves and allowed to rest for two or three days, until it becomes a little acid. *Chả lụa* is prepared in the same way as *nem*, but with beef instead of pork. The pasta does not contain any grilled rice powder. Furthermore it is not allowed

to rest. Instead, it is cooked in steam after wrapping. *Tiết canh* — coagulated duck, pigeon or hog blood mixed with pieces of intestines, liver and scented leaves — is a dish peculiar to Northern Vietnamese although appreciated by Southern Vietnamese.

Fish is steam cooked, grilled, broiled, fried with vegetables. It is sometimes consumed raw, in which case only the filets are used. A large quantity of green vegetables and scented leaves is required, along with one or two glasses of medicinal alcohol (*rượu thuốc*) « to warm the stomach. » When a Vietnamese can afford it, he drinks *rượu thuốc*, rice alcohol in which various herbs and roots are left to steep for a period of time from one to many months.

The rich

In the diet of a rich Vietnamese there enter a number of rare and peculiar foods which Western millionaires would not dream of touching. Regarding rice, the Vietnamese main staple, and *nước mắm*, the inevitable sauce which enters in every Vietnamese meal, they are of high quality here. The favorite species of rice is the *nanh chồn* (fox fangs) and the *nước nám* comes from the island of Phú Quốc (*nước mắm nái Phú Quốc*) or from Phan Thiết.

The delicacies range from swallows' nests to *dà cuồng*, the Vietnamese name for electric light bugs or fish killers (*belostomalidea indica*) through octopus, fish bladder, shark's fin, abalone, half-hatched eggs . . .

The drinks are no less original. Goat's blood mixed with rice alcohol flatters the taste of aging gentlemen. Chrysanthemum flavored alcohol is a drink to be sipped gracefully during the cool months. *Mai què lô*, *Ngũ gia bì*, Chinese wines contained in ceramics flasks, and the various French wines and spirits give an exotic aspect to the liquor closet of a wealthy man.

The sweets include bean cakes — bean powder mixed with sugar and moulded in various shapes, lotus seed marmelades — lotus seeds cooked in sugared water. *Chè thạch* — seaweed jelly, shredded, refrigerated and consumed with sugar.

Rich or poor, Vietnamese have enough to eat. Their diet may not be rich, but it is varied and fairly adequate. Above all they are big fruit eaters. The coming to season of each of the numerous local fruits — mangoes, custard apples, watermelons, mangosteens, oranges, or tangerines — is an event which gives them all a bit of excitement. Some orientalists have described the civilization of Vietnam as a spiritual civilization and the Vietnamese as a people which holds in high regard man's intellectual achievements. The Vietnamese would not deny this, surely. But we also know that with their practical mind and common sense, they attach much importance to man's material welfare in general and the earthly pleasures of the table in particular.

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