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BON VOYAGE

Royal repast

The delicious street food in Hue, Vietnam, has an imperial legacy, discovers Tan Keng Yao

IN MAY, American president Barack Obama and chef Anthony Bourdain created a stir when they dropped by a street-side bun cha eatery in Hanoi for a meal of grilled pork with noodles.

Their visit also reaffirmed Hanoi's reputation as one of the best Asian cities for street food. But look beyond Hanoi and you will find many other places in Vietnam bursting with good food too.

Take, for example, the town of Hue in central Vietnam, a former imperial capital whose cuisine is regarded by many Vietnamese as the country's most refined — thanks to the legacy left behind by the Nguyen rulers.

Their picky tastebuds, which required the skilled cooks of the royal court to come up with an elaborate variety of eats.

Don't miss out on the good stuff. Here are some dishes to try if you visit Hue.

Bun bo hue

Bun bo hue is Hue's answer to Ha-

noi's pho, and also the most famous dish to come out of Hue. Like pho, bun bo hue is a dish of soup noodles, but the similarities end here.

While pho boasts a light, delicate beef broth, bun bo hue's soup is made by simmering a mix of beef and pork bones and then jazzing it up with a generous lashing of lemongrass and spices such as annatto. The result is an earthy, robust soup that is spicy, sour, salty and sweet all at once.

And although bun bo hue means "noodle beef Hue", it is served with not only slices of beef but also pork belly, congealed pig's blood, and sometimes, crab meatballs. The dish also uses thick, round, slippery rice noodles, unlike pho's flat ones.

To eat, top with herbs like cilantro, mint, basil, bean sprouts and julienne banana blossom, mix in a squeeze of lime and stir in some shrimp paste.

Where to try: Bun Bo Hue at 17 Ly Thuong Kiet



Bun bo hue, a rich beef noodle soup.

Banh beo

The Hue equivalent of chwee kueh, banh beo is a rice cake steamed and served individually in tiny ceramic bowls. Each one comes covered with chopped dried shrimp and crunchy fried pork rind, which give it an extra bite.

To eat, ladle on the accompanying fish sauce and enjoy. You won't stop at one, so it's a good thing these are usually served half a dozen at a time.

Where to try: Banh Beo Hung Cung An Dinh at 93/9 Phan Dinh Phung



Banh khoai

When translated, banh khoai literally means "delicious cake", and this pancake certainly lives up to its name.

Made from a batter of rice flour pan-fried till it is as crispy as a piece of keropok, it is topped with slices of grilled pork, ham, shrimps, bean sprouts, spring onion and hard-boiled egg.

To eat, break a piece off with your chopsticks, pile on the fresh herbs and dip it in a sauce made of ground flour, fermented soya bean and chopped peanut.

Where to try: Banh Khoai Hong Mai, 110 Dinh Tien Hoang



Banh khoai (left) has a delicious crunchy texture; Hanh Restaurant (above) is the place to go for banh loc. PHOTOS: TAN KENG YAO

Nem lui

This is almost

like satay, only

more elaborate.

Here, marinated minced beef and pork are hand-shaped around stalks of lemongrass and grilled over a charcoal fire.

They are served with half rounds of rice paper, lettuce, cucumber, pickled

carrot and green papaya (right).

To eat, layer the lettuce and herbs

over the rice paper, then carefully

wrap the whole bundle around the

meat to form a roll. Hold tight and

pull out the lemongrass skewer,

leaving the meat inside.

Then dip the whole bundle into

the accompanying sauce — a chunky

mix of coarsely ground peanuts,

fermented beans, sesame, shrimp

paste and shallots.



Where to try: Banh Khoai Hong Mai, 110 Dinh Tien Hoang

Banh loc

This translucent, delicate dumpling is made of tapioca flour stuffed with shrimp and pork, wrapped in lightly oiled banana leaves and steamed.

To eat this typical Hue snack, open the banana leaf parcel and spoon over some sauce made from a combination of fish sauce, vinegar, sugar and chilli.

Where to try: Hanh Restaurant (Quán Hanh), 11 Pho Duc Chinh

GuideLines

I took a Jetstar Asia flight from Singapore to Da Nang, then took the Reunification Express train to Hue, about three hours away.



A vendor wraps marinated meat around a stalk of lemongrass for the satay-like dish, nem lui.

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