

# How one chef in Vietnam uses fish sauce as the foundation for flavor

By Aniruddha Ghosal  
The Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam — The taste of banh te — a steamed rice cake with an enticing filling of mushrooms and minced pork — captures the quintessence of northern Vietnamese cuisine: Humble ingredients, prepared perfectly and often enjoyed with a funky fish sauce dip.

This balance of flavors is what Quang Dung, the chef and owner of Chapter Dining in Hanoi, sought in his modern take on the dish. His version of banh te is unapologetically fancy. The steamed rice cake is enriched with pork stock and served with a raw scallop and pickled daikon shavings. Freshness comes from coriander used several ways, sweetness from fried shallot oil, and a delicate floral essence extracted from a giant water bug used in northern Vietnamese cooking.

And then, a splash of fish sauce — or nuoc mam — brings it all together in a savory broth that suffuses the dish.

“Fish sauce is one of the foundations for flavor,” he said.

It’s also the basis for Vietnam’s diverse and vibrant cuisine. Just a drop of the amber liquid can transform a dish by boosting umami and savory notes. Made by fermenting fish — often anchovies that are getting harder to catch because of climate change — in salt for many months, the taste of each bottle varies depending on factors like the ratio of salt to fish or the length of fermentation.

Fish sauce is a staple across Vietnam, used in a variety of dishes. As a dipping sauce for spring rolls or savory crepes called banh xeo. In marinades for grilled meat dishes like Hanoi’s pork and noodle classic called bun cha. In salad dressings and in braised meat dishes like the southern classic where pork is cooked in bittersweet caramel and fish sauce. Much

## Climate change, overfishing threaten Vietnam’s ancient tradition

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iversity of British Columbia in Canada. In the most pessimistic scenario — temperatures rising by 7.7° F (4.3° C) — nearly all the fish disappear.

Phu, who teaches information technology by day, also works hard to perfect the fish sauce art handed down by his ancestors.

The anchovies are usually caught between January to March when they congregate off the coast of Da Nang. If they are the right species and size, they get mixed gently with sea salt and put in special terra cotta barrels. Sometimes worms or other ingredients are added to bring in different flavors. Phu ferments this for up to 18 months — stirring the mix several times a week — before it can be strained, bottled, and sold to customers.

The sea salt imparts different flavor depending on where it comes from. So does the amount of salt used, and makers have their own recipes; the Bui family uses three parts fish to one part salt. The time allowed for fermentation, and the potential addition of other fish, also affect the flavor of the final product.

But it is harder to get the perfect anchovies. The fish catch has decreased — fishermen in markets across Vietnam rue the fact that much of the fish they sell now was considered bait-size in previous decades — and it’s only the good relationships he has with anchovy fishermen that allow him to get the fish directly, avoiding high market prices. The unmistakable aroma of fermenting fish cloaks the homes of families that still make traditional fish sauce. But Phu said



of Vietnam’s cuisine is shaped by the decades of hardship during and after the Vietnam War, but today its economy and its cities are booming. And fish sauce is finding its way into unusual applications.

In Hanoi, fish sauce is used in some cocktails to add umami, and Dung has used it to add a Vietnamese twist to French hollandaise sauce and even flavor ice cream.

“It is very versatile,” he said. “A lot of fun to use and to explore.”

Dung’s culinary explorations began early. His mother taught him to cook at 10 so he could feed himself while his banker parents worked long hours. He learned how to make rice, fry eggs, and boil vegetables. Soon after, he was braising pork and making spicy fried rice. Growing up, he assumed everyone could cook — after all, his friends in Hanoi could. But it wasn’t until he moved to the United Kingdom as a teenager to finish high school that he realized this wasn’t the case.

He eventually studied finance in coastal Devon, but while working part-time in restaurants, he fell in love with all things

that many families are thinking of getting out of the business because of high anchovy prices.

That may affect Vietnamese plans for a bigger share of the global fish sauce market — projected to increase in value from \$18.5 billion in 2023 to nearly \$29 billion by 2032, according to a report by Introspective Market Research. Vietnam, along with Thailand, is the world’s largest exporter of fish sauce and is hoping improvements in food safety to satisfy standards in lucrative markets like the U.S., Europe, and Japan will help cement a national brand that helps advertise Vietnamese culture to the world.

It’s hard to overemphasize how deeply the condiment is enmeshed in Vietnamese culture. Students living abroad speak of how its taste transports them back home and a top chef says it’s the foundation for flavor in the country’s cuisine. The varying taste of different brews also means everyone — from top businessmen to daily wage workers — has their own opinions about which is the best.

Phu said that each family has their own secrets about making fish sauce. And, nearly fifty years since his father chose to stay back and take care of the family business, he’d like to pass those on to his own son. But he knows that it’ll depend on whether enough anchovies thrive in the sea for the craft to be viable.

“Fish sauce to me is not just a condiment for cooking. But it is our craft, our culture, our tradition that need to be preserved, safeguarded, and inherited,” he said.

*Associated Press journalist Hau Dinh contributed to this report. The Associated Press’ climate and environmental coverage receives financial support from multiple private foundations.*

food: learning from his peers, consuming cookbooks by top chefs, and spending all his savings to eat out at restaurants. “When you’re 18, you’re a sponge. You absorb everything,” he said.

He came back to Vietnam in 2013 and got a job working in a bank. But every evening, he worked a second job — as a junior chef for a five-star hotel in Hanoi at night. He eventually quit both jobs in 2015 and started a gastropub in Hanoi. That didn’t go according to plan as he “managed to do everything wrong.” More failures followed — he calls them “lessons in my dictionary” — but in 2021 he opened Chapter Dining, a fine dining restaurant in the heart of Hanoi’s Old Quarter that celebrates local, seasonal produce and the cooking traditions of Vietnam’s mountainous north.

The restaurant, with its facade of steel slats, leads to an open kitchen where Dung and his team regularly create a 14-course tasting menu that won it a spot in the coveted Michelin Guide Hanoi in 2023 and 2024.

## Majority of the world’s population breathes dirty air, report says

By Sibi Arasu  
The Associated Press

BENGALURU, India — Most of the world has dirty air, with just 17% of cities globally meeting air pollution guidelines, a report has found.

Switzerland-based air quality monitoring database IQAir analyzed data from 40,000 air quality monitoring stations in 138 countries and found that Chad, Congo, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India had the dirtiest air. India had six of the nine most polluted cities with the industrial town of Byrnhat in northeastern India the worst.

Experts said the real amount of air pollution might be far greater as many parts of the world lack the monitoring needed for more accurate data. In Africa, for example, there is only one monitoring station for every 3.7 million people.

More air quality monitors are being set up to counter the issue, the report said. This year, report authors were able to incorporate data from 8,954 new locations and around a thousand new monitors as a result of efforts to better monitor air pollution.

But last month, data monitoring for air pollution was dealt a blow when the U.S. State Department announced it would no longer make public its data from its embassies and consulates around the world.

Breathing in polluted air over a long period of time can cause respiratory illness, Alzheimer’s disease, and cancer, said Fatimah Ahamad, chief scientist and air pollution expert at the Malaysia-based Sunway Centre for Planetary Health. The World Health Organization estimates that air pollution kills around 7 million people each year.



**FLAVORFUL ADDITION.** Phan Cong Quang, left photo, makes fish sauce in his home in Nam O fishing village in Da Nang, Vietnam. In the right photo, dishes made with fish sauce are prepared at Chapter Dining, a fine dining restaurant, including a water bug, left, in Hanoi, Vietnam. (AP Photos/Yannick Peterhans)

“I can finally call it ... my restaurant, my food, my philosophy,” he said.

Central to that philosophy is sustainability. Each menu is seasonal — warm, comforting dishes for the cold months and fresh, lighter dishes in the summer — and the ingredients are locally sourced. Given the erratic weather in the climate-vulnerable country, this means that he can’t always be sure of what produce will be available. So the menu adapts, letting nature decide, and the bottle of fish sauce is never too far away.

“Fish sauce isn’t just about saltiness. It is as much about umaminess. It is magic,” he said, adding that he hoped more people would cook with fish sauce.

A good starting point, he suggested, is to use it to add a bit of that magic to the humble omelet. Three eggs, two teaspoons of fish sauce, a heap of finely diced spring onions all beaten together. Add pork fat to a hot pan and roll the eggs around.

“And then you’ve got a very nice fish sauce omelet. That goes down really well with rice,” he said.

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Ahamad said much more needs to be done to cut air pollution levels. WHO had earlier found that 99% of the world’s population lives in places that do not meet recommended air quality levels.

“If you have bad water, no water, you can tell people to wait for half an hour a day, the water will come. But if you have bad air, you cannot tell people to pause breathing,” she said.

Several cities like Beijing, Seoul, South Korea, and Rybnik in Poland have successfully improved their air quality through stricter regulations on pollution from vehicles, power plants, and industry. They’ve also promoted cleaner energy and invested in public transportation.

Another notable effort to curb severe air pollution was an agreement on trans-boundary haze pollution by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Even though it had limited success so far, ten countries in the region pledged to work together to monitor and curb pollution from large forest fires, a common occurrence in the region during dry seasons.

Shweta Narayan, a campaign lead at the Global Climate and Health Alliance, said many of the regions witnessing the worst air pollution are also places where planet-heating gasses are released extensively through the burning of coal, oil, and gas. Slashing planet-warming emissions to slow the heating up of the planet can also improve air quality, she said.

Air pollution and climate crisis “are two sides of the same coin,” she said.

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