AN EXTRA-SPECIAL VIETNAMESE COOKBOOK

ĐẶC BIỆT

NINI NGUYEN
with Sarah Zorn

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Photographs by William Hereford

Alfred A. Knopf New York 2024

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

www.aaknopf.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nguyen, Nini, author. | Hereford, William, photographer.
Title: Dac biet : an extra-special Vietnamese cookbook / Nini Nguyen, photographs by William Hereford.
Description: New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2024. | Includes index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2023019575 | ISBN 9780593535547 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593535554 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Cooking, Vietnamese. | LCGFT: Cookbooks.
Classification: LCC TX724.5.V5 N4946 2024 | DDC 641.59597—dc23/eng/20230502
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023019575

Cover photograph by William Hereford
Cover design by Kelly Blair

rhid_prh_7.0_148085660_c0_r0

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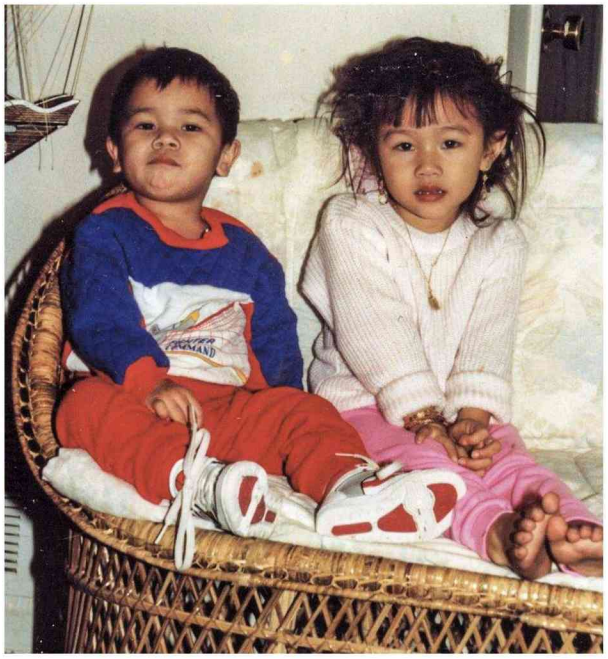
To my little brother,

BOBBY



Thanks for always

being my sous-chef.

INTRODUCTION

VIETNAMESE FOOD is sometimes clumsily described as a more delicate version of Thai food. But there's so much more to it than that. It's very herbaceous, very textural, and very much in balance, in that it only takes a few components to get the result that you want. Whether it's a bunch of family-style dishes served separately, or all grouped together in one bowl, every element—salty, sour, bitter, spicy, or sweet—plays a key role in your meal.

This approach means that *you* are your own chef. *You* get to decide what you want the next texture in your mouth to be. My grandmother never understood how Americans could consume just a single plate, like meatloaf and mashed potatoes. She'd use the Vietnamese word "ngán," which loosely translates to being bored of eating something. That's why we focus so heavily on creating different textures and flavors, because we want every bite to be interesting and engaging. Always avoid ngán…that is a rule I follow whenever I am creating a dish. Especially a Vietnamese one.

In America, we tend to be more familiar with southern Vietnamese food because of the influx of southern immigrants after the Vietnam War. Thailand and Laos share similar ingredients because of the similar hot climates and fertile lands, where you'll find spicy chilies and sweet, tropical elements like coconut and lime. But Vietnam is a long, skinny, coastal country (hello, seafood!) with tremendous geographic diversity—not to mention an extensive history of migration and colonization that is very much represented in our food.

China controlled Vietnam for over a thousand years. That's why we've integrated spices like licorice root, cardamom, and black pepper into broths and marinades, and why you'll find many traditional Chinese dishes available under a Vietnamese name. I grew up eating a kind of Vietnamese rotisserie, similar to Chinese BBQ, except instead of serving our xá xíu pork over rice, we used French bread to sop up the jus. That brings us to the French connection.

When the French colonized Vietnam in the nineteenth century, they fled from the heat and moved to the temperate highlands, like the city Đà Lạt, which is essentially the California of Vietnam. They grew coffee (Vietnam is the second-biggest producer in the world) as well as artichokes, beans, squashes…so much Westernized produce you'd think you were at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City. You'll also find a traditional technical French culinary refinement expressed through dishes like phở. We blanch our bones to remove the impurities and create a clear yet flavorful broth. I love reading the comments section when there's a phở recipe posted online. That broth better not be too

murky or too dark or Vietnamese readers will be more than happy to bash your subpar phở.

Speaking of phở, despite its widespread popularity in the south, it actually comes from the north, Hà Nội to be exact. You can kind of credit Bill Clinton for its demand there. He tried it for the first time during his trip to Saigon in 2000, and the publicity that followed created a big splash. Then, in 2016, Barack Obama sat down with Anthony Bourdain over a bowl of bún chả in Hà Nội while filming an episode of *Parts Unknown*. So, in a way, American presidents were some of the original food influencers. But it wasn't until I started seeing sriracha flavored this and that all over the place that I really knew we'd made it.

My mom's family immigrated from Phước Lâm to New Orleans in 1975. I was born in 1986 and didn't step foot in Vietnam until I was twenty-eight. When I got off the plane in Hà Nội, the air was so thick you could have cut it with a knife, just like in my Louisiana swamp. Not to mention the Popeyes fried chicken joint at the airport's terminal. Then when I got to explore more of Vietnam, I understood why my family and so many Vietnamese folks were so drawn to New Orleans. French influence distinctly pervades both Vietnam *and* New Orleans, which is expressed through food, architecture, religion (Catholicism), and language. Vietnamese uses French pronunciations, accent marks, and the Roman alphabet instead of characters. Geographically, the Gulf Coast is quite similar to the coastal side of Vietnam, with the fishing industry being the dominant industry in the area. Vietnamese families gravitated to New Orleans because fishing and shrimping was work that they were also familiar with.

Another industry that Vietnamese immigrants gravitated toward was the nail industry. My mom and my aunts, and most of the women in my community, were nail technicians. The wave of nail techs in the 1970s was a phenomenon and it allowed a lot of Vietnamese women to make money and to come home at a decent time to make dinner. Still, it took a village to raise me. My grandmother played a tremendous role in my upbringing, helped by my mom's siblings—they'd drop me off at school and my grandma would pick me up.

My grandmother shucked oysters for a living, sometimes leaving for work at three in the morning, and not returning until one in the afternoon. Every time I smell oysters, I can't help but think of her. She would pick me up after school holding her heavy work bucket filled with boots and tools, and treat me to the American snacks I craved, like Jolly Ranchers or Zapp's chips. But otherwise, the food we ate was almost exclusively hers, and almost exclusively Vietnamese (except for the time she went on a chicken nugget kick after discovering how easy they were to make).

But no matter what she served, everyone in the household knew to be present for dinner at 6:30 sharp. I loved helping her in the kitchen. The first thing she taught me to make was

steamed buns filled with pork, Chinese sausage, mushrooms, and egg—essentially a complete meal in a little pouch. And of course, she taught me to make rice in our rice cooker—an essential skill for any Asian kid. I especially loved when she entertained and I got to play host. I'd offer her friends whatever snacks I had on hand, and my grandmother would always chuckle in a moment of pride. That positive reinforcement became the basis for my love of hospitality. Enjoying everyone's face when you bring them a treat.

My love for grocery shopping comes from my grandmother. She'd take me to grocery stores and teach me how to pick out the best-quality meat and produce so that the next time we went she could stay in the car, trusting me to go in and select everything myself. You see, my grandpa died in 1979, within a few years of their coming to America, leaving her with their five children to care for, as well as five other children he'd had before they met, and my aunt/godmother who she'd had before meeting my grandpa. That's a total of eleven kids that my grandmother raised in her new foreign home. Then my little brother Bobby and I came along, so grandma needed to stress the importance of relying on oneself, not just to make things easier for her, but because she believed that good judgment, independence, and hard work can lead to success. "You see how hard I work, how early I get up?" she'd ask me one early morning as she boiled hot water to wash her face. "You need to go to school so you don't need to struggle like this." I did finish college as promised but ended up a chef anyway. Maybe my grandma shouldn't have taught me so much independence, because I always do what I want.

When I was nine, my mom met the man who would become a father figure to me. His name was Tu Tran (aka Dylan Tran, like after Bob Dylan) and he immediately introduced my brother and me to his family, and they welcomed us with open arms. I remember my grandmother looking at us, holding our faces in the palm of her hands and insisting that we call her Bà Nội. My dad's family exposed us to Buddhism, a different dialect called Nam (they were from the south), and a new family dynamic. My dad lost a younger brother and a sister in his teenage years, and this loss made his family more demonstrative with their emotions. Most Asian families don't usually express their love for one another or words of affirmation.... like, ever—but with my dad's family, we actually told each other how much we meant to one another. It was great. And perhaps the best part was that by normalizing the practice of sharing our feelings, we began to do the same with my mom's side of the family.

Of course, through my Bà Nội, I also learned about an entirely different, southern style of Vietnamese food. I didn't realize this regional connection until 2014, when I finally visited Vietnam myself; before then I just thought that my new southern Vietnamese grandma cooked very different and delicious meals (which made my other grandma jealous from time to time). My paternal grandma cooked simple but incredibly flavorful foods, with various layers of spicy, salty, and sweet. She made everything look effortless and approachable. She had an incredible palate. We'd go to restaurants and she'd say with confidence, "I can make that." I found it fascinating that she could taste anything, tell you exactly what was in it, and then re-create it at home. I strive to be just like her.

My younger brother Bobby loved cooking as much as I did. We watched the Food Network religiously as children, and he eventually also became a chef himself. We'd always play Iron Chef, with me as the chef and my brother as the sous-chef, because I was a bossy brat and always figured out a way to convince him that it was the sous-chef's job to clean everything. As we got older, I made a lot of weeknight meals for the family, and the way I felt from their positive reactions was addictive and euphoric. Many Asian children will tell you, it's *tough* to please Asian parents. Part of it, as I mentioned, is that they tend to be more guarded with their emotions. The other part is that they just don't want to admit that anyone cooks as well as them! If an Asian mom says, "That's okay," it pretty much translates to, "It's amazing!"

Now as far as a career went, I never thought I'd become a chef. I thought I'd study to become a pharmacist with solid hours and a good paycheck. I enrolled in premed at the University of New Orleans in 2004. One year later, Hurricane Katrina happened.

There was no more campus and pretty much no New Orleans, so my family moved to Baton Rouge and I enrolled in business school at Louisiana State University. LSU was known as the party school with a very good football team. Business school became an immersive course in Cajun cuisine for me. I would go tailgating, and old men would make jambalaya and cracklings and all this French Acadian food in huge cast-iron pots. I thought it was so fascinating because it was in equal parts similar to and different from what I'd come to know of Creole cooking in New Orleans.

By the time I was in my final year of college, the thought of cooking professionally had all but consumed my brain. Working in various hostess, bartender, and server jobs got me excited about experimenting with cuisines other than my own. It also fully ignited a passion for restaurant culture. It was a family—everyone ate together, commiserated together,

partied together after work. It was also a way to express my love for hospitality and feed my addiction to seeing the joy on people's faces when you bring them a plate of food.

Eventually, after cooking for two years in New Orleans, I decided it was time to make my New York move. I was warned that I'd have to work at a bunch of shitty restaurants before even attempting to break into Michelin-starred ones, but I figured it didn't hurt to try, right? I went for broke by applying to three of the seven Michelin 3-starred restaurants at that time. I felt unstoppable when I was offered a position at all three spots.

I decided to go with Eleven Madison Park, which was known in the industry as EMP, and unsurprisingly, it was the hardest I'd ever worked in my life. A forty-hour work week is pretty standard in New Orleans restaurants. My first week at EMP, I think I logged ninety-three. But this was what I moved to the Big Apple for, and though it kicked my butt, it was so exciting to learn how to cook on that level.

The kitchen at EMP had a world map covered with dots that represented where the staff was from. Not only was diversity acknowledged, it was celebrated and showcased during family meals. Getting to cook Vietnamese food for everyone was my moment to shine. Just as I'd hoped, my life in New York seriously expanded my culinary horizons, both through the different cuisines cooked by my coworkers, and from the restaurants I got to visit on my days off.

Most important, my time at EMP transformed me from a cook into a chef. I learned how to execute a vision. I learned how to advocate for myself while still holding myself accountable. And I was taught that leading by example is the only way to run a team—which at so many places is just lip service. It's a mentality that spoke to me deeply, and one I've retained to this day.

Which brings us to 2016. I had the opportunity to open a restaurant in Williamsburg. It would be my vision and I even took up ceramics, thinking I could make most of our plates. And then, my brother—who was just twenty-seven at the time—was diagnosed with Stage IV stomach cancer. The doctors informed us that it was extremely aggressive, and that he would only have a few months to live.

As children, Bobby and I fought like cats and dogs. It wasn't until we became teenagers that we became friends. Incredibly close friends, considering we were only a year and a half apart and both pursued careers as chefs.

In our family, food—more so than words—is an expression of love. Our happiest memories involve us sitting at a table eating together and spending time with one another.

When Bobby got sick, I wanted him to be able to relive all of those great memories. In order to cherish every last second we had with my brother, I returned to New Orleans to help take care of him. That April, *Top Chef*'s casting director called me asking for me to join the competition. Bobby, being the selfless person that he was, wanted me to leave to compete, but I couldn't imagine leaving him knowing I would never have that time back. So I promised that if they were to call again, I would do it.

Bobby's death is the worst thing that's ever happened to me. And it was only the beginning of a terrible year. Due to a zoning issue, the restaurant in Williamsburg never opened. I dropped ceramics. I became a private chef for a while, trying to figure out what I was going to do next. I eventually got the opportunity to develop a cooking school in Brooklyn called Cookspace, where I fell in love with teaching restaurant techniques to home cooks. And then *Top Chef* called again.

I'd watched enough seasons to know that contestants always did best when they stayed true to themselves, and not only did I already know what my culinary identity was, I was confident in the fact that it was exciting and unique. I mean, Vietnamese cuisine is compelling in and of itself, as is Creole and Cajun cuisine. But all of them together? That was my strategy. I was sharing a perspective people hadn't seen before and trying to tell my story through my food.

I may not have won my season, but my original hunch was correct. Every time I stuck with my gut and cooked for myself instead of the judges, I came out on top. This resonated with the audience. I'm still so touched by the positive response—for me, for my food, my story, and even my fashion. So much so that I got to come back for the following *All-Star* season.

As my second season of *Top Chef* was airing, the Coronavirus pandemic happened and I pivoted to a business teaching online cooking classes. No one could leave their houses at that time, restaurants were closed, and everyone had to learn how to cook. The truth is, while anyone can cook, not everyone can teach. It requires a depth of knowledge, as well as patience, flexibility, and a willingness to mess a few things up in the process. It's been validating to discover how drawn people are to my cooking classes. That said, I never could have predicted I'd have so many Vietnamese students in my Vietnamese-themed classes. These Vietnamese Americans who attended my classes, wanting to reconnect with their heritage, became my biggest motivator to write this book. They would tell me how they had lost their parents, or they have a language barrier that prevents them

from learning how to cook, or their parents would rather make them food than teach them how to prepare it on their own. This speaks to a lot of different cultures regarding recipes. When you ask your mom or grandma how to make a particular dish, their answer is, “You put a little bit of this and a little bit of that.” But they will never give you their recipe, and they won’t write it down. They want you to watch and learn in the same way that they were probably taught. Proper measuring cups and spoons did not exist in my household. For teaspoons or tablespoons, we had a spoon you use for coffee or a spoon you use for soups. And forget about measuring cups. Why would you ever use a measuring cup when you could have random small bowls that you eat rice out of instead? I can see it now, my grandma teaching me how to measure anything: “You see this bowl that I use? Add one of these bowls.” And god forbid one of these bowls ever breaks because you will never know how much to actually use. But don’t worry y’all, I have measured it all out in standard measurements for our sanity.

Vietnamese food is an enormous part of my identity. As a chef in America, I feel a responsibility to keep my heritage alive. I want my future kids to know what my mother’s homeland looked like, smelled like, tasted like. And the best way to go about it is to teach the younger generation—and to introduce new people to Vietnamese food, too. My logic is that if everyone knows these dishes, Vietnamese cuisine will be here to stay, and will—I hope—find its place in American culture.

WHAT IS ĐẶC BIỆT?

“Đặc biệt” is a well-known term in the Vietnamese community that refers to something special, distinctive, or fancy. The younger generation has also adopted it as a kind of slang. Not only is it used to order, say, a bánh mì with *everything*, it’s a way to call something (or someone), a little bit “extra.”

But being a bit extra doesn’t mean heaping caviar on top of things, though that would be very đặc biệt. It’s not code for spending more money or effort. Đặc biệt can mean adding a surprise note of ginger to a sauce, or using a nontraditional cut of meat. Coming from restaurants, the đặc biệt element for me includes the finesse, technique, and thoughtfulness added to every dish.

HOW TO MAKE EVERYTHING ĐẶC BIỆT

- Go for high-quality ingredients where it counts. To me, splurge-worthy upgrades include premium fish sauce used for dipping and organic or farm-fresh eggs and cultured butter (you can 100% taste the difference). Butter is considered a đặc biệt ingredient in Vietnamese cuisine as is, but imagine sautéing shaking beef in richer, more flavorful cultured butter instead of the regular stuff!
- I love using finger limes instead of regular limes in dipping sauces like nước mắm. They are a bit harder to find but when you have them, they are like nature's citrus caviar that pops when you bite it. Another great substitute for lime juice is yuzu juice, a Japanese citrus, which gives the sauce a nice floral bright note.
- Try using palm sugar instead of plain white sugar for more complex caramelly notes instead of just sweetness.
- Always keep sauces on hand like Roasted Nước Mắm Sauce (this page) or our version of chili crisp, Lemongrass Chili Oil (this page), for an instant and effortless flavor upgrade on just about anything.
- Makrut lime leaves (also known as kaffir lime leaves) are incredibly aromatic, but difficult to find. So if you ever come across them, hoard them and keep them in the freezer so you can add them to curries and soups or infuse them in custards and caramels.
- It's common to just boil meat meant to go in dishes like phở or spring rolls, but I much prefer braising or marinating meat first so it develops flavor, or allowing it to slowly cook in the broth so it lends flavor to the liquid and vice versa. In Texas, Vietnamese restaurants are big on smoking their meats…you'll find giant smoked beef ribs sticking out of your phở. It doesn't get more đặc biệt than that.
- Another traditional treatment of meats like chicken wings is just to chop them up bone-in. It's flavorful, but I don't love having to avoid shards of bone in my braise. I prefer to cook chicken wings whole so you still get the gelatinous umami quality from the skin and bones, or substitute boneless, skinless chicken thighs. Just as tasty, easier to eat.
- Having many different elements to a dish is key. Consider flavors and textures and plate things purposefully in layers, so you can always get the perfect bite.
- Set out a plate of lettuce and assorted herbs with dinner. This is a standard Vietnamese practice but it works with so many different cuisines. It adds texture and a freshness that keeps things interesting.