



SAIGON SANDWICH

Vietnam's crunchy cross-cultural creation

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photos by CHLOE APTEL

IT WAS SIX YEARS AGO, but I still clearly remember the first time I tasted banh mi, the internationally popular Vietnamese sandwich. My cousin and I had bought the pork-liver pâté filling from a market in Ho Chi Minh City. When she handed me the little plastic bag filled with brownish paste, I was surprised at how warm it was as I held it in the cup of my hand. At home, we slathered the thick, fatty spread onto fresh bread, and voilà — it was the best breakfast I had ever bitten into.

This was banh mi (pronounced "bun may") in its original form — a sandwich derived from French-influenced ingredients, a relic from colonial times in Vietnam. Its simplicity recalls skinny Parisian sandwiches with nothing but butter and sometimes ham. But unlike its denser French counterpart, banh mi — which refers to both the bread and the sandwich — is about half the length and usually made with a mixture of wheat and rice flours, giving it a light, crackly crust and an airy crumb.

To the basic bread and pâté, mayonnaise was added, another French-inspired touch. At our home, making mayo was a family affair, with one person slowly dripping oil over a bowl while the rest of us took turns frantically stirring the egg yolk with a pair of chopsticks, beating the orange goo slowly into a creamy lemon-yellow spread that my sister and I licked up with our fingers. Banh mi shops must have a more efficient process, but the best ones still make their mayo in-house with fresh eggs.

In Saigon, the basic sandwich got jazzed up, with a variety of fillings ranging from eggs fried sunny-side up (op 1a) for breakfast to heartier Vietnamese meats, including grilled pork (*thit nuong*), grilled chicken (*ga nuong*), meatballs (*xiu mai*), and shredded pork

skin (*ba*). The version that's become most popular is "the special" (*banh mi dac biet*, also known as *banh mi thit nuoi*), layered with thinly sliced Vietnamese cold cuts such as pork roll, ham, and headcheese encased in pig skin.

To offset all the rich spreads and salty meats, cooks add julienned strips of carrot and daikon radish picked to a tangy sour-sweet perfection. And what is Vietnamese food without fresh herbs and vegetables? The meats are topped with a couple of sprigs of cilantro, along with a spear of cucumber and a few slices of chili pepper or jalapeño. The finishing touch is a dash of the Swiss seasoning sauce known as Maggi, though in a pinch, soy sauce can also work.

In the United States, banh mi has long been popular in Vietnamese enclaves in Southern California's San Gabriel Valley, as well as Houston, Texas. At the chain Banh Mi Che Cali, the sandwich is sold at an ongoing buy-two-get-one-free deal. Old-timers who recall when

banh mi used to cost \$1 still gripe about the whopping \$2.50 price tag now attached to the sandwich.

During recent years, the banh mi craze has spread to the rest of the United States, and the sandwich has attracted a cult following from coast to coast. Because who wouldn't love the banh

mi's mash-up of Eastern and Western influences; its melding of sour, sweet, salty, and spicy flavors; its satisfyingly creamy, crunchy, and crispy textures, all packed into one bite?

In New Orleans it's been affectionately dubbed the "Vietnamese po boy": in Philly, the "Vietnamese hoagie"; and in other places, the "Saigon sub." Food trucks like Nom Nom in Los Angeles and Rebel Heroes in northern Virginia bring the sandwich to the people, announcing their locations each day via Twitter.

In New York City, where everything gets a makeover, the banh mi has been reinvented into a hip urban sandwich. Though down-to-earth favorites like Banh Mi Saigon Bakery in Chinatown are still popular, trendy delis and cafés with catchy slogans and clever designs have popped up all over the city. Xie Xie in Hell's Kitchen sells a sandwich inspired by *cha ca Hanoi*, a dish of turmeric fish and dill. Baogette, which has three locations in Manhattan, serves a Sloppy Bao that includes spicy curry beef and green mango. Williamsburg is a hive of hip banh mi joints in itself, home to Nha Toi, where you can get a *banh mi phu* inspired by Vietnam's classic beef noodle soup, and Northeast Kingdom, where the Bushwick banh mi includes pig's head and foie gras mousse.

A product of cross-cultural exchange to begin with, perhaps banh mi is a natural vehicle for continuing innovation. But for many Vietnam natives, including me, nothing satisfies like a good ol' *banh mi dac biet* — that no-fail, on-the-go lunch companion, that road-trip meal of choice, that perfect late-night snack. ♥

