



## What About Vietnam – S4-2 – Fine dining Vietnam

**Kerry Newsome:** 00:18

Xin Chào and welcome to "What about Vietnam!" When you think about Vietnamese cuisine, I'm not sure whether you do the same thing as I do. But the first thing I think about is bánh mì, my absolute favorite snack food. I think about Vietnamese phở and I'm thinking about all those beautiful, fresh aspects of Vietnamese cuisine because they're fruit, vegetables, seafood, etc., is just so fresh. It's straight from the farm to the table. And the flavors are definitely rich. I think it's those flavors and the variance there is available for chefs coming to Vietnam or developing their skills and their training in Vietnam that is really springing forth some "fine dining" experiences that are worth talking about.

01:34

And worth talking about with my guest, Raj Taneja. Raj has a very deep level of understanding of fine dining, as he's very heavily involved with La Chaîne. He's going to tell you more about that involvement, and really where that fits in developing the Fine Dining industry within Vietnam. We're going to meet some chefs. He's done a fabulous job in being able to step inside some of these restaurants to have a quick word with some of the chefs that are really changing the landscape of what the "Fine Dining" experience can be for us in Vietnam now. So, we really get inside their heads.

02:21

I'm hoping that's going to make it a richer experience for you, when you go and visit some of these restaurants. I know certainly, I'm going to check them out. So, stay tuned for the episode. It's a real different mix this time because we do have some interviews, so you'll have to be a little bit forgiving of some of the noise which really belongs to Vietnam, it's a bit of a noisy country. So, it's really hard to clip those out. Raj has got some great insights for us to better understand the growth of fine dining in Vietnam and what we've got to look forward to at those tables. Please welcome Raj to the program. And please enjoy.

So, Raj, maybe tell us a little bit about what you do and how fine dining with great chefs, hotels, sommeliers, is broadening the scope of food experiences in Vietnam.

**Raj Taneja:** 03:26

Right. So, Kerry, my name is Raj Taneja, and I'm the president of an ancient culinary organization called [La Chaîne des Rôtisseurs](#). We were founded in 1248. So that's 774 years ago, by King Louis IX, now known as St. Louis. He was an epicurean, a very special king in the era of the Crusades of France, and very well respected for his love of food. And also his straight pointed approach towards things like law and settling disputes. So, the way that I got involved with this organization was that I started as a chef when I was very young, at an Institute in my hometown, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. And I became aware of the chain at that point in time.

04:15

The organization itself was very difficult to join, so they actually have a limit on members. The organization is a group of people that enjoy or love fine dining. And the idea of this group is to both celebrate conviviality, so celebrate coming together on the table, but also to challenge and improve the world of fine dining and hospitality. So, here I am in Vietnam, looking around, and going where's this great organization that promotes fine dining culture and is great with hospitality? I'd go to the host hotels and know everyone and that didn't exist here.

04:54

So, it was kind of odd to see that Vietnam, such a vibrant food country and such a rapidly advancing country didn't have this association. So, I put my hand up. And I thought it would be easy. I thought I'd come to Vietnam, and I would basically find my successor and make some friends and have some great dinners. Then be able to go on my way as sort of an advisor, what it's really become is my life's work. It's become a really hands-on thing. And I'm really grateful for being able to do this here.

**Kerry Newsome:** 05:25

Okay, well, I imagine with that kind of challenge on your plate, so to speak, no pun intended, there would be a lot of opportunities for exploration and experience and meeting new people, trying new food, testing out different locations, all sorts of things. So, talk to us a little bit about just how you've gone about establishing this. And what are some of the experiences that you can share with us?

**Raj Taneja:** 06:01

Right. So, look, I've been active in this market, would say I've been looking at this market or looking at Vietnam since 2014, hosting events or dinners almost monthly since 2016. We consider our dinners to be challenging dinners. So, when we go to a hotel, or we go to a restaurant, we say this is who we are as an association. Although most expats chefs and most expat hoteliers will know who we are, they understand that we carry a lot of weight. They understand that when we host an event, their peers are watching. So, their peers are actually evaluating whether or not they're doing a good job. And it can mean a lot for career advancement for people, if they do a great event with our association, we make sure that it gets to the right people.

06:50

We have been doing that type of work since very early on. And that's very similar to what you'll find in many other countries, whether you go to the US or to Germany or France or Italy. But really our work in Vietnam is a lot more. My job as the president means that I'm continuously in the air. I'm continuously trying all sorts of food throughout the country; I'm trying all sorts of hospitality. So, if there's a new hot five-star hotel being built out there, if there's a new restaurant that's opening, I try to get there. I try to interact with the chefs and the owners, as well as, the hoteliers in this country. Really, that's the first step of it.

07:31

Behind what we do, obviously the dinners are great, they produce great photographs, they produce great media and attention for this country. And because of that, certain groups are definitely looking at Vietnam to invest in this country, because they see us as a trusted organization within Vietnam. So, they can look at Vietnam through our lens and see how Vietnam is performing, whether positively or negatively based on the type of activity and the amount of activity we're getting. We also do things like, we work with young chefs, and we're actually trying to host international and national competitions.

08:10

The other thing that we try to do is we're trying to provide international food support and aid to those in need. So, we're working with groups like [STREETS International](#) and [La Boulangerie Frances](#), two great groups. It's actually a unique opportunity, they take the impoverished people and try to break the chain of poverty. This country has a really beautiful set of indigenous people that really could use the help. And I think it's a great idea to be able to

tap this fantastic resource of people and bring them out of what they're doing now into what could potentially be the world's greatest chefs in the future. So, it's a huge opportunity to take the indigenous and teach them some skills that will change the course of their lives and of course of their family's lives forever.

09:00

Finally, we're also working to develop training in the hospitality, food and beverage industries. What that means is by bringing an accredited organization, accredited school, not just vocational but something that carries weight. So, someone can go to school in hospitality, or someone can go to school in food and beverage and use those papers, use that certificate to work anywhere in the world that will then open a lot of doors for Vietnam.

**Kerry Newsome:** 09:26

Okay, so if I am an international luxury traveler, and I'm aware of your organization, I possibly have attended some dinners in other places. How would I go about finding those restaurants or tracking those restaurants down? Do you have some particular favorites you'd like to share with us that we can warn everybody about including myself?

**Raj Taneja:** 09:58

I'm certain that we're going to grab dinner at some point in time when I get back to Vietnam. So yeah, there are some favorite restaurants. It's unfortunate because of COVID, some people have packed it in, but others have persevered. So, the top of my mind is obviously T.U.N.G Dining. Tung is a very special chef. He's now been in Vietnam for three years. He comes from a fairly humble business family and had never wanted to or had been told not to go into the culinary arts. He found himself in Scandinavian countries, really falling in love with this and came back to Vietnam.

10:36

I believe it was something like 2017, he competed for the James Beard Foundation here in Vietnam solo against hotel teams that had five or six people and came in third place. That's when he sort of said, "Maybe I need to be here in Vietnam." I guess a few months later, he founded this company called [Tung Dining](#). This is the first chef that has brought the biggest tasting menu to Vietnam.

So, imagine going to a restaurant and they say, "Okay, this is the menu." And someone might say, "Well, I want this and this." And they say, "No, you get everything on this menu." People are really perplexed. He changed the food culture in this country and he's a maverick.

**Kerry Newsome:** 11:17

Raj managed to catch up with the Chef at Tung Dining just very recently. So, let's just go to that interview now and then we'll be back to the main program.

**Raj Taneja:** 11:33

How would you describe the food here at Tung Dining?

**Chef Tung:** 11:36

I think, I really don't do the fusion because it's about a lot of different things from me, but I do a lot of modern cuisine, and contemporary cuisine. I don't want to make any borders for the food, like I feel the need to cook specific kinds of food such as French, Vietnamese or Western. My duty is to bring the best flavor, the best experience to the guests through the tasting menu. It can come from different corners of the world. Maybe I get inspiration from Nordic, get some very local hobo in Vietnam or something but for me, I'm a person who combines everything to make a slightly more memorable journey for the flavor. It's quite contemporary modern and for me I cannot specify what type of cuisine it is. I mean, it's quite International.

**Raj Taneja:** 12:28

Well, now that we're recovering from COVID, have you thought of your cuisine? You thought about this restaurant, is there anything new you're bringing to the table?

**Tung Hoang:** 12:37

The menu I'm thinking about coming up with is always questioning the local things. What does the Western world think about that? I put my foot on the balance so both the experts can enjoy it and most locals can enjoy it. It's quite an international flavor. And that is the way I want people to get used to. I don't go too extreme, you need to do a lot of fish sauce, and you need to do a lot of different kinds of local things. I don't go too much or borrow too much of everything. Because I'm Western chain, I use a lot of high Western techniques, but I also try to put some touches that can satisfy the Asian flavor.

13:22

That's the way I think and how I come up with the food here and COVID is just the right thing to do. Before COVID 60% of the Western, 40% of the local, something like that. And after COVID, locals still come to us because our flavor also can satisfy them. If the experts are not here, tourists are not here, but we still fight on the way around. It's a good test for us. Our concept is the right way to make both locals and foreigners enjoy it.

**Raj Taneja:** 14:03

So, what is it that you would say is the ideal person that comes to this restaurant?

**Tung Hoang:** 14:07

I mean, open minded people because I think for this cuisine, the most important thing is open minded. Because the cuisine is very diverse and the taste is also very personal. So, whenever you come to the testing menu, the beauty of that is that you try things that you never tasted before. You have the experience of some techniques. If you don't have an open mind, like you have already had a real-life stereotype, you shouldn't come. If you say phở need to be like phở or something like this needs to be like this. For me, it's not a tasting menu. For a tasting menu, you need to be open minded, the cuisine has no borders, and when you come to a restaurant it means you go inside and you test their work. To me it is the most important thing to be open minded.

**Raj Taneja:** 15:01

Okay, final question. Where are you located and what's the best way to book?

**Tung Hoang:** 15:06

My restaurant located in the 2C P. Quang Trung, Hàng Trống district in Hà Nội, and in Saigon we have another restaurant in the 31-33 DANG DUNG STREET TAN DINH WARD, DISTRICT 1. To book at the restaurant, we have the same booking system. You can book through our social media. Many people are booking through Facebook, Instagram or an email or even you can call directly to us to book. So after that we will send you the confirmation asking you about how many people, allergy, any notification or some special event. We will make sure you have a good reservation, and you can reach us through different channels. Now, we have the social media world so it's very easy to get connected with yourself.

**Raj Taneja:** 16:11

He has two restaurants in this country now. We have one in the north, which is T.U.N.G Dining. And then we have one in the south which is "Å", it's actually "au" because it's the A with the circle on top, it's a Scandinavian letter by two. So, those are two restaurants you must absolutely try. The second one is beautiful, and they are both equally delicious to eat at. We also have a restaurant called [Cugini](#), which is helmed by Chef Nico Ceccomoro. And Nico is an Italian chef who works from the heart. He is extremely skilled. I think he's probably one of the two top skilled Italian chefs that I know in this country that is really just balanced, smiling, lovely, and always positive and constructive. Just someone I have the ultimate amount of respect for, and his food is great.

**Kerry Newsome:** 17:04

So, let's just jump very quickly with Raj again, as he was able to catch up with Nico, and Nico was talking to Raj in Hà Nội. And we're just going to have this little quick grab, which I know you're going to love. And then we'll get straight back to the main show.

**Raj Taneja:** 17:27

I'm sitting here with Chef Nico who is the owner, partner, Chef, and mastermind behind the restaurant called [Culina](#) which is in Hà Nội. So, chef, please introduce yourself.

**Nico:** 17:40

Hi, everybody. I'm Nico. I'm an Italian chef and I have lived in Hà Nội for over eight years. And we finally launched a new restaurant with a different concept where we are focusing on delivering a new kind of dining experience to guests. So, our cuisine is mostly focused on delivering worthwhile products with the best quality that we can find in the markets. And we match them a little bit with local spices and herbs, and with the vegetables that are actually beautiful in Vietnam. So that's thinking about something tropical like the fruits that we have, the super fresh herbs that we have here.

18:23

And so, the idea behind this is actually to be able to deliver some food that is suitable for most nationalities. We don't have any flags to expose ourselves as a particular restaurant that could be another one like my Italian restaurant, which is called Cugini. So, this one is more focused on developing taste that doesn't represent any nation whatsoever, but it's still very suitable for most people that can go there and enjoy it. Over that we are specializing ourselves on doing dry aging. This is not only about beef, but we also have a nice selection of game foods. So, ducks, pigeons and quails. Sometimes porks from three different countries, including Spain, Japan and Australia. And then we also are doing a new batch of seafood at the moment. So, we are searching for fresh seafood, such as tuna or Buenos or salmon. And these kinds of beautiful fishes and we dry age them to then serve to guests.

**Raj Taneja:** 19:28

Have you had any experience during COVID time, and did it change your concept at all? Or were you always focused on this no flag dining?

**Nico:** 19:37

Yes. Actually, COVID was very effective in not having much success because the restaurant would have been launched about a year ago now. So, it was a pretty long time ago. But unfortunately, we had these lock downs and whatever else coming through that didn't allow us to complete our mission. We changed a little bit and we tried to unify the concepts. It's still offering pretty nice and versatile grand options for our guests. But right now, besides continental breakfast, we also have a menu that's got larger choices for lunch than for dinner. Probably, you know we have a very nice open space with a view on the lake. The kitchen is right in front of guests where they can see exactly how the food is cooked for them.

20:28

And now we keep our equipment and the way that we treat our ingredients. So, I think this is a new thing in Hà Nội because they are still missing a little bit of contact between the back of ours and the guests that come into dine. That, I think, is one of the strong points that we have in our place.

**Raj Taneja:** 20:53

Right. With the open kitchen and the ability for people to look into the kitchen. But not only that, see the smiling chef. And by the way, you have a very smiling chef back there.

**Nico:** 21:01

Thank you, Raj.

**Raj Taneja:** 21:02

Who is your ideal customer?

**Nico:** 21:04

Well, ideal customers are whoever are happy to share time with each other and enjoy time together with a drink and some nice food. So, we do not target somebody in particular, we definitely are in Vietnam. So, I obviously would like to focus mostly on Vietnamese people, because I am welcomed in their country. So, in exchange, I like to give them a service that is missing. So, I think that's really important. But then we have Japanese customers, Koreans, and whatever, from Europe or somewhere else. So, it's actually multinational restaurants so far, which is pretty good. I think that's also because of where we are based. A lot of experts live in the area where we have the restaurant. So, it makes sense for them to be kind to our place.

**Raj Taneja:** 21:57

In terms of your restaurant, what is it that makes you stand out? Or what differentiates you from other upscale dining in Vietnam or even in Hà Nội?

**Nico:** 22:07

Well, I think there's a lot of beautiful places these days in Hà Nội, or in particular, in Vietnam. In my case, I think we are lucky to have a location where there's so many restaurants, but I wouldn't say most of them are actually pretty good. So, I think restaurant owners are still a bit confused on how to develop the business and some of them, maybe copy paste successful restaurants somewhere just because they want to become successful as well.

22:46

In our case, I think we have a lot of passion inside. We try to dedicate our thoughts and our philosophies on the food in a way to actually be understood and appreciated by the guests. Every time we do new concepts, we are trying to do market research, and give guests what is still missing and not what is already existing. So that, I would say, is one of the strong points that we have.

**Raj Taneja:** 23:16

So, where's your restaurant located?

**Nico:** 23:19

Karina is located in the Tu Hao area, or better called West Lake. And it is right in the street in front of the lake, very close to the Sheraton Hotel. Pretty easy to find us.

**Raj Taneja:** 23:33

Perfect. Thank you very much, Chef. It was a great pleasure to interview today. And he's just opened up a new restaurant in Hà Nội called Culina, which is funnily enough, Australian modern bistro dining. So, it might be something of very big interest to you Kerry.

**Kerry Newsome:** 23:54

Yeah, funny about that. I don't necessarily go to Vietnam to have this trade. Just note to self.

**Raj Taneja:** 24:05

Well, let's see where that leads us. The other one, of course, the other Italian chef, that is very dear and close to my heart actually is in Da Nang. His restaurant is somewhat of a question mark right now, because it is temporarily closed because of the harsh closures in Da Nang. It's a restaurant called [EL PECK](#) and the chef's name is Alessio Rasom. So, Alessio has a very decorated past in culinary and is a really interesting guy. He never considered

Vietnam and what happened is working, I believe it was at Mirazur in the south of France and working for the executive chef who was touring around the world.

24:47

He basically took a short trip to Machu Picchu in Peru and met this lovely lady, Miss Bing, at the base of Machu Picchu and fell in love with her. And then after their climb to the top of the mountain, somehow, she went back to Paris where she was working. He went back to Italy, where he was working with France. They continued to communicate, and then he decided to move to Paris. He was working in Paris, and at some point, in time, they both decided, "Well, let's go back to Vietnam." So, she convinced him to come back to Vietnam. They got on bikes and rode 18,000 kilometers over the course of two years, from Paris to Vietnam.

25:34

It's an extraordinary story. And he's an extraordinary chef. And he's extraordinarily skilled. He's the type of chef that wakes up in the morning at like four in the morning, goes out to the fishermen's boats and picks whatever's fresh, and that's on the menu for the day. So, the concept is, obviously, tourism has to be in full swing in order for his restaurant to be viable, but that's the concept. So really cool. Another chef that is really notable is a chef by the name of Joonhyuk Chi and currently, he's in Hà Nội. He has one restaurant called [Labri](#). And they're about to open another restaurant. Chef Chi is a Korean chef that was trained in Osaka and did his stach in Tokyo. So Japanese trained Korean chef, doing an interpretation on French food in the north, really fantastic dining.

**Kerry Newsome:** 26:27

We jump very quickly to the noisy stach in Tokyo. Once again, Raj has been able to catch up with Chef Chi. and I think you're going to be very interested to just hear his interview. So, let's just jump to that very quickly. And then we'll be right back to the main show.

**Raj Taneja:** 26:52

Chef, please introduce yourself with your full name and your restaurant.

**Joon Chi:** 26:57

My name is Joonhyuk Chi. I'm from Korea, and I'm the owner and chef of Labri Bistro.

**Raj Taneja:** 27:06

Tell me what type of food you serve. And what's the dining experience here?

**Joon Chi:** 27:12

Yeah. So, we are looking for the fine dining quality of food and wine. But the atmosphere and price are like a bistro concept more casual, like street, fine dining concept. I'm an Asian chef, so I wanted to put some Korean, Asian and Vietnamese things on my food. So, based on French techniques, our concept is oriented neo-bistro, which means the dining experience is the most important part of our restaurant, to dine and enjoy the bite and drink wine, it's a different story.

**Raj Taneja:** 28:00

What makes you different from other fine dining in Vietnam?

**Joon Chi:** 28:06

I don't want to be really serious about the food and fine dining culture. Because sometimes when you go to a fine dining restaurant, we are kind of nervous. And we want it to be posh but sometimes we really want to enjoy it, and be very comfortable.

**Raj Taneja:** 28:30

So, it's about comfort and accessibility. Being able to have people that come to your restaurant and feel at ease.

**Joon Chi:** 28:40

Yeah, just enjoying food and wine. Because Labri means shelter. So, escape. So, don't think about other things, just focus on the food and wine, and just enjoy.

**Raj Taneja:** 28:54

It's been lovely talking to you. Thank you very much for this tidbit. This is a Kamsahmida.

**Joon Chi:** 29:02

Kamsahamida.

**Raj Taneja:** 29:10

If we go to the south, like I said the South was probably hardest hit. So, if we go to Ho Chi Minh City, I can say that we're at a real dearth for what I think qualifies as fine dining at this point in time. I think there is still upscale and there's still casual dining, but it's something that has come to my attention. Starting to hopefully come my way.

29:35

But right now, we only have one restaurant that I think is really notable, or I should say one chef that I think is really notable. And his name is Sakal. And Sakal, he's a Cambodian native, but he went to France, grew up in France, served with the military in France, basically was cooking for top brass and generals in the French military and wound up here in Vietnam.

29:44

And again, Sakal is the always smiling, humble, but extremely skilled chef. He's got two restaurants in Ho Chi Minh City. So, he's got one restaurant called Le Carto which has been there for ages. I think I might even say 1999, if I recall correctly, because he did the dinner for the state visit of Francois Mitterrand, when he came to Vietnam. He's also got a relatively new restaurant called P'ti in Thao Dien, or district 2. So, I'm hoping to see more chefs come back to Vietnam. I think that there is a great amount of talent in this country.

**Kerry Newsome:** 30:42

What's so lovely about talking to you, Raj, is that when people go to these restaurants, normally, they wouldn't know these background stories. They wouldn't know the journey of that Chef to be in that location, to be cooking that style of food to have that origin. So, it's really beautiful. And I'm really delighted that my audience, everyone listening, is going to be able to go there and say, "Oh, is this the guy that rode the bike from Paris to Vietnam." I think I read or heard that on Kerry's podcast "What about Vietnam!" This guy named Raj Taneja was talking about it. That's really gold in my book.

31:28

I want to talk a little bit and maybe take a step back in the sense that is there something about Vietnamese food as in its natural produce, as in its seafood, is that what draws chefs to Vietnam? Or is it the opportunity to bring that wonderful fusion together? You've spoken about Italian, French, Korean, Japanese, and that kind of eclectic mix must really produce some exquisite food. But is it actually the produce in Vietnam because everybody talks about Vietnamese food being so fresh, very fresh to the table. Seafood in particular, is high quality, and it certainly has been in my experience, but everything kind of tastes richer? I don't know. Even the vegetables, the herbs, and the spices seem to have strong aromas. They seem to just have more to them, than possibly what I'd find in my supermarkets here or even in the organic tables that I would buy from. Is there any truth to that? Is there anything that inspires chefs to want to be in Vietnam and explore that further?

**Raj Taneja:** 32:59



I do believe there is a correlation when people do land here, especially if they travel through the region. So, if you've been to Thailand in Laos and maybe you've been to Indonesia or Cambodia, Vietnamese produce is the standout. Whether it's the chicken eggs, which are almost like neon on the inside, and just taste beautiful. If you're making chicken and the confit that comes out of that is superb. I cannot describe the flavors that we get from the local produce.

33:32

Vietnam has been in the produce game for a very long time. I think what put Vietnam on the map in the 1960s was the export of lettuce and cabbage from Da Lat. And we still see that there's a lot of products that leave Vietnam not even touching local shelves, because it's so good. So, Vietnam is a great growing region. I even learned from your podcast that tulips that are in the Netherlands are actually grown in Vietnam. So, there we go, you're a wealth of information for me, as well.

**Kerry Newsome:** 34:05

I've spoken to people about pepper in Phú Quốc, and I was talking to Miguel. And he was telling me, "Don't just think about pepper. What about the honey?" Apparently, the honey is amazing, as well. So, you do find those golden nuggets of information that you would have just kind of strode past and not even given a second thought. I mean, I know there's a lot of talk about fish sauce as well, the quality of fish sauce with anchovies, and that sort of thing. I mean, I don't have a lot of knowledge, but just the little bits that I've picked up from some of the food people that have been on my show have really opened my eyes.

34:50

So, I actually go into a place now and when I'm tasting something, I'm thinking of it in a different way. I'm thinking about, do those peppers hard or the chili, or I can taste the marine flavor that's coming from that, the fish sauce. It just gives me a kind of a richer experience, I guess. And that's what I want for the people who listen to the podcast. That's what I want for them. So, it's just good to get your feedback on that.

**Raj Taneja:** 35:20

Well, you don't need to go too far about the fish sauce item. Actually, a lot of the fish sauce in Vietnam gets repurposed into Western brands. So, you may have heard of worcestershire sauce or you might have heard of even the soy sauce, Kikkoman. Some of that is partially made in Vietnam. It comes from there's fish sauce factory in Phú Quốc, there's also a fish sauce factory in Phan Thiết that supplies to these companies. So, they are doing their purchasing here because obviously, we produce a great product. With respect to pepper, I think Phú Quốc gets a lot of credit for their pepper. But there are multiple varieties of pepper throughout Vietnam that are really great.

35:20

There's the Verbena Pepper as well, which can be used both as a skin product, as well as a food product, which is located a little bit further up into Vietnam. I think that also Vietnam faces really harsh competition from the Cambodian pepper component, which is actually very close to Phú Quốc. So, that whole region is full of pepper. Thanks to the influence of Indochina and the French in the past.

**Kerry Newsome:** 36:14

Raj, tell us about some of the five-star hotels.

**Raj Taneja:** 36:36

Well, maybe I shouldn't be saying this. A great hidden secret of Vietnam is that luxury is extremely affordable.

**Kerry Newsome:** 36:46

You should be saying it!

**Raj Taneja:** 36:47

A five-star hotel in Vietnam, sometimes less than \$100 US a night. It's okay, maybe they'll raise the prices after I say this. Sometimes, it's very enjoyable to be able to go. For example, I go to Sa Pa and stay at the [Hotel de la Coupole](#), which is an Accor hotel, but run by the General Manager. His name is Joseph Colina, and he's quite an epicurean. He's also a really friendly guy, and he knows how to run that place. The food and beverage in that hotel is spot on, if you want to try fusion.

**Kerry Newsome:** 37:23

I'm trying to get him on my show.

**Raj Taneja:** 37:25

All right, okay, well, I'll send them a good note. Alright, so I will let him talk about that at some point in time. So that's one. We have these mystic hotels like the [Legacy Yen Tu](#). Again, it's Accor hotel, it seems like I'm going to have to talk about a different brand after this. The Legacy Yen Tu is situated at the base of Yen Tu Mountain, which is a trek, I think, 3.5 kilometers up, which leads to a shrine. It's quite a dramatic experience. It feels like you're up in the clouds when you're able to maybe possibly talk to the monk if he's there. So, that's pretty interesting.

38:06

We have a new hotel that just opened in Hà Nội called the [Capella](#) hotel, the Capella Group of Singapore, making waves with ultra-high end luxury and they've got Bill Bensley trying to put a story together for that. So, I think Bill Bensley was also in the Legacy Yen Tu and also at the Hotel de la Coupole in Sa Pa. So, those are three hotels that I think are notable. Within Ho Chi Minh City, there are currently hotels being built. We will see how they are after launch. I can't comment before they're open. One of my favorites that I typically stay at regularly, just because it's relatively modern, and has a great rooftop bar, is the [Mgallery](#) and being a member of their group brings a lot of privilege. So, I like to go there. Basically, I'm stuck in the hotel all day due to the privileges that they give me. So, there's a lot of that.

39:04

One of the things that I get to do now that I've experienced a lot of the five-star hotels throughout the country, is I get to now go to boutique hotels. So, although I've been spending a lot of time in the upper range, you're going to start to find that a lot of my intelligence will shift down one notch. The other thing that we're working on with the Chaîne is actually creating a guide. Because we're in 90 countries, we have 25,000 members. Our membership, 7,000 of them are professionals in the food and beverage and hospitality industries. It's poignant.

39:38

You mentioned that you don't know these stories about these chefs. Well, if I was to say, Kerry, here's a guide that talks about, here's the chef, here's the restaurant they're at, there's a small little story about who they are. Basically, being able to do this food, beverage, hotels, maybe even suppliers and groceries because if I'm coming to a country. If I might not just want to go out and eat, I might actually want to go to a fine grocery and cook for myself at some point, especially in Vietnam.

40:06

So, it's basically, being able to launch in Vietnam, we're going to launch probably this year in Vietnam, and it will be ready and radiate outwards. So, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, maybe Indonesia, and then probably I have to go back to my home country and give some homage to the chefs that really supported me early. So, we'll do Canada. Hopefully at some point in time, I'll be able to come and shake your hand in Australia as well.

**Kerry Newsome:** 40:31

And this guide, you're saying this is for Vietnam? Or will this be all the countries that you kind of mentioned?

**Raj Taneja:** 40:40

Yeah, so we'll do it addition by addition, based on, obviously, we don't want to make it a humongous direct rate.

**Kerry Newsome:** 40:48

It could be a big book.

**Raj Taneja:** 40:51

Yeah. So, it's going to contain a lot of content based on one-to-one interaction. So, to tell the world that this is someone special, we'll do an addition probably to start for Vietnam. Then I might have to, because obviously, the content for fine dining in Vietnam is quite small. So being able to say, okay, we'll do Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, maybe in one edition. I think it's still something that can fit in your suitcase, and then we go, we'll do another edition for other countries. Again, I don't think it'll be 90 editions immediately. There is a goal to maybe have several 100 editions, depending on how many markets and the size of our guide.

41:35

The other thing is, I think street food is a very important aspect of eating culture in a lot of countries, whether it be Rome, or whether it be Hà Nội. So being able to not invite these street food vendors into our association, which is incorrect, but to say if someone within our association probably is an expert in that realm. Having them curate a piece of the guide, saying, okay, give us five or six venues that you absolutely adore. Let's go and eat at those places, and let's take photos, and let's put them within our guides. So, people have options now. So, I think it's a little bit better than what's currently available to the market. I think someone would want to put that in their handbag, they probably would want to read it on a plane over and then be fully prepared and fully interested in the life story of some of these chefs that they are going to meet.

**Kerry Newsome:** 42:28

Well, certainly for this show, we'll be able to put the transcript together. So, all of your restaurants that you've mentioned, your chefs, etc. and links to your website will all be there. I imagine with your events; you do kind of an announcement to that and obviously send out invitations. Is that how it works?

**Raj Taneja:** 42:53

We certainly do. So, what we do is have a mailing list for Vietnam. We typically like to say that we have our events planned out for the year, although they tend to get canceled with COVID closures and restrictions. And we're hoping that now that Tet is over that we will see some clarity, we expect the reopening. So, let's cross our fingers, Kerry. I need you on this one.

**Kerry Newsome:** 43:17

Raj, I've got big hopes for the year of the tiger. So, let's be brave. Let's be bold. I'm going to be bold in asking one last question. Do you have a favorite dish in Vietnam that is kind of your go to favorite?

**Raj Taneja:** 43:34

I spent a lot of time in the south. So, although there are some phenomenal dishes in the north, for example, the origin of phở so phở is always a treat. It's always some sort of comfort food for me. I find myself in the south enjoying broken rice. So, cơm tấm, sitting there with the grilled meat out on the street corner. There are some special places that used to exist in Saigon, some of them closed. But being able to go out seven or eight at night and sit there with that chili sauce, and that piece of pork and the rice is something that touches my heart to the point where I was in Nha Trang about two weeks ago. I walked by a stall and I was getting late for my flight and I said, "You know my flight can wait." I sat down at the stone, and I had a lovely natural compound which isn't exactly as good as what they have in Saigon, but pretty good. Then I rushed off to the hotel to get in the car to go back to the airport.

**Kerry Newsome:** 44:36

Way to go. It's been really great to chat with you. I'm looking forward to staying in touch. I'll make sure we put the links in especially those two streets internationally. I know you have a very deep heart and affection for that organization. As I do. I've had [Neal Bermas](#) on the show talking about Streets. So, we really want to see Streets international back in Hoi An, as far as the board is open. Obviously the work you do there is much appreciated. Any last words for my guests before we close out?

**Raj Taneja:** 45:14

One thing that I'd love to say is that for those that are looking to come to Vietnam, and really make an impact, definitely you do need to touch base with these organizations like **Streets**, like **La Boulangerie Frances** and basically see how you can help. So, I'm happy to be a liaison for that. They're always looking for something. So, let's see what can happen. My heart goes out to anyone who's trying to support the people in this country.

**Kerry Newsome:** 45:44

Okay, thanks very much for being on the program, Raj.

**Raj Taneja:** 45:48

Thank you very much, Kerry.

### **Restaurants featured during the show:**

Labri Bistro - <http://www.labribistro.com/>

Le Corto - <http://lecortovietnam.com/>

T.U.N.G Dining - <https://www.tungdining.com/>

Cugini [<https://www.facebook.com/cugini.tongocvan/>]

### **Hotels mentioned:-**

[Hotel de la Coupole](#)

[Legacy Yen Tu](#)

**[RaJ Taneja](#) – Representing [Chaîne des Rôtisseurs](#)**