



What About Vietnam – S5- E7 - The Rise of Unique Dining Experiences in Vietnam

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to What About Vietnam. So here we are folks, we're in the silly season. We're in December, Christmas not far away and as per usual we're all going a little bit crazy as we're trying to figure out we're going to have a holiday? How are we going to get together with friends and family? And we're thinking about Christmas dinner and food. So, I wanted to finish up the year with a show that would be speaking to, you know, some of the fun things that we can do with food. And in particular, I want to talk to you about where food culture, trends, where the vision of food is kind of heading in Vietnam. Because if you were to think about Vietnam in just the sense of street food, you would be seriously doing it a disservice because it has exploded in the last few years with new kinds of experiences and the flavors, the new chefs, the variety of mixing and matching with food and beverages. And I wanted a guest on the show that could really speak to that with authority. And I'm delighted to have Jovel Chan on the show. I want to tell you a bit about. Jovel comes with a very strong background in this area. In the last three years,

She has been in Singapore as a food writer and blogger, consultant, culinary event organiser. But now she's really got her eyes set on Vietnam as she's based in Ho Chi Minh City. And certainly in the area of developing different cuisines and expanding the horizons, I guess, of experiences in restaurants with different chefs. That focus is primarily in Saigon and in Hanoi. In the last three years, she's actually been tracking the ins and outs of the industry, covering trends, you know, like new openings and happenings, and sharing them through her blog, chevellecharm.com. She became the first Vietnam food and beverage consultant for the Singapore tourism board, adding to an already stellar F&B client suite. She recently founded Saigon Social. Now that comes with some really clever and unique experiences. She's got the Saigon Supper Club, things like cocktail cinemas. And she's really into a very creative sense of connecting with people, sharing great food, sharing great beverages as well, you know, with different gins and craft beers and wine, etc. You're really in for a treat in this show. That's all I can say. It's just something that I think is going to really just put that extra spice of insight into the food scene and hopefully get you even more excited about your trip to Vietnam.

Before we jump in, I wanted to just say a quick **Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. This is actually the last show for the year. I'm taking a short break and I'll be back on your podcast channel early February.** It's a break I really need to have. I've got, you know, lots of things I need to do. I've got a family that I want to have some downtime with and just all of those things are going to make it so that when I come back in 24, I'm refreshed and ready to go. And I have a really exciting plan

for the shows next year. So I hope you'll stick with the podcast because there's lots of wonderful stuff happening. I hope you are going to have a wonderful Christmas yourselves. I really thank you for your support over the year. I hope you're enjoying the program. Please sing out if there is a subject matter or something in particular that you'd like to talk about. I'm always I'm always ears and I love to get your feedback. Anyway, I'm talking too much, taking up too much time on this. I want to introduce you to Chevelle. Let's welcome her to the program.

Jovel Chan: Great to be here. Great to be here.

Kerry Newsome: We've got a lot to talk about. So maybe if we can dive in really early and just get your take on where you think Vietnamese cuisine is heading? What can we expect to experience with cuisine in Vietnam in the future? And yeah, just give us a little look through that peephole to see what's ahead. What can we expect to find when we visit Vietnam? I know my travellers are going to want to know where to go, where to eat.

Jovel Chan: I definitely believe that we are at just the start of seeing where Vietnam's dining scene can go. In the past few years post-pandemic, we did see a lot of chefs, both from Vietnam and also from overseas, come into Vietnam, notably Saigon and Hanoi, to set up shop and start catering to hungry tourists and also curious locals who are interested to experience differently and both of them are looking for something beyond just street food itself. I foresee with more five-star hotels also entering Vietnam. and a lot more malls that are also opening up in Vietnam, what you start to see is a very diverse dining scene of different kinds of cuisines, but also at the same time a lot more, a lot better quality. I think it's just a lot more refined and it's a lot more, for the lack of a better word, it's a lot better quality, better dining in terms of interiors, in terms of, you know, even the food itself and also down to service and yeah, the entire experience of dining out.

Kerry Newsome: Now, I've heard you say, and I'm cheating here, I've heard you describe the food scene in three words. And I'll give you those three words back and you can maybe expand on them for our guests. So, the first one you mentioned was the dining scene is very hungry. So, describe for us what you mean by hungry.

Jovel Chan: So I've been writing a monthly new openings guide in Saigon where I cover new restaurants for the past almost two years. And it's very safe to say that there has been no shortage of new restaurants entering the market even during the pandemic. And it's almost double or triple the rate that it was for obvious reasons during the pandemic versus now since. And this month, I just rallied up not just new restaurant openings, but I also started doing pop-ups, chef residencies and chef pop-ups. So what I mean by when they are hungry, it's really, first and foremost, everybody wants to open up a restaurant. There's so much talent that is happening, there's so many things that are happening. And it's not just opening a restaurant, it's just everybody also wants to come here and try to do something, you know, they're popping up, they're collaborating with each other. You've got chefs from abroad that are doing things here, there's always just something happening. And it's always new. So everybody wants a piece of the pie right now.

Kerry Newsome: And that's what I mean by that's really interesting. And I can kind of see that myself, even between visits. I only, you know, like I visit three times a year at least. And even in that three, four months away, I come back and there's something new. There's that place that's just opened up around the

corner where it wasn't there when I was there last trip. It's quite amazing. And as you say, it's in the decor, you know, it's in the actual you know, layout and design, the way the tables are set. I love the creativity that is also coming about, which is absolutely fabulous. And then, as you say, the chefs, the new chefs, homegrown chefs, too, that are coming through. So, it's really exciting. You've got another word that you use to describe, and I'd like you to expand on that one, and that's defiant. I love that word, defiant.

Jovel Chan: That's your favourite word, isn't it?

Kerry Newsome: Maybe I kind of align myself to that.

Jovel Chan: So, yeah, so rightfully so, like what I mentioned, the industries also, the chefs themselves are very defiant. So, you know, what we see as creativity to them is kind of like, you know, they're trying to take back something, right? So, I think a lot of them, they don't want to be defined by Vietnamese cuisine. Ironically, but they don't want whatever people think about them to just be limited to banh mi and pho. Because to so many of these homegrown chefs, Vietnamese cuisine and ingredients are able to compete with the likes of cuisine in Japan, of ingredients in Japan, where people treat Japanese cuisine as a premium cuisine. So to many of them, you can hear them say, you know, the number of hours that we take to make pho and what goes behind making a simple bowl of pho like this is the same as making a bowl of ramen, yet nobody is giving us the same credit or willing to pay what people pay for ramen in Japan. So there is this defiance and this is fueling a lot of chefs behind these finer dining kitchens to showcase and storytell about Vietnamese cuisine.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, and I think it's we do need to be careful about stereotyping Vietnamese food. I mean, I even get asked, you know, like, what happens if when I go to Vietnam, I don't like Vietnamese food? And it's like, well, there's, it's a multicultural city that you're visiting. So, you can get any cuisine in the world from pizza to you know, to Greek, to Italian, to whatever. So, you know, don't think of Vietnamese, as you say, just limited to what you know at this point. You know, keep an open mind, coming to the country and, you know, be open to try these new restaurants with these different fusions of flavors and just experiment with the new dining scene. I think that's what's key for people is to experiment. Because you talk about, you know, in your third word, which is nascent, you know, I mean, that deserves definite explanation.

Jovel Chan: So Vietnam's dining scene really, really I would say picked up in the last number of years. This isn't to say that there weren't restaurants before, of course there were restaurants before, but dining as a culture in Vietnam with more than just maybe a burger joint or you know the Park Hyatt Saigon and and the ubiquity of it now, and the price that it's now accessible at. I was just writing an article yesterday where 10 to 15 restaurants on it were in the range of 300 to 500k. That's less than \$20. So you now have these chefs who are coming in and doing such great things and serving up food where people can enjoy at 300, 500k. It's still a lot higher, but it's a lot less. Before you had dining where it was 2 million. Now it's becoming a lot more affordable and it's a lot more accessible, right? And that's what I mean by the dining scene is it has just really started in the past number of years where people are actually dining out and there is a dining out culture. where people are able to start going out maybe even twice a month and that's something that's within their means. But this only really started in the past two years or three years or so after the pandemic fueled by the likes of the Michelin. So that's what I mean by it's really, really nice and everything is so new and yeah, so much room for opportunity. It's a really exciting time to see where everything goes.

Kerry Newsome: Yes. And so, you know, if you are a foodie and you're looking at, you know, your time in Vietnam and best places to go. Now we're talking about dining scenes that are primarily focused in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, aren't we? Which would you say would be the one, if you were a real foodie, to focus on? It's a tough one. Oh my gosh.

Jovel Chan: I can't say this in public.

Kerry Newsome: I can't say this in public. It's a hard one, I know. I really know it. But people say, oh, if we're into food, should we go, should we spend more time in Ho Chi Minh City or should we spend more time in Hanoi? And I find it hard to answer that question myself. You know, and while I can say to them that, you know, the cuisine in the North traditionally is very different to the South. You know, those, even those flavors have started to, you know, meld a little bit because, you know, people that are opening up restaurants in the North are opening the same ones in the South and, you know, vice versa. So, there isn't quite that division in the new and upcoming, certainly in traditional, there probably is more definition. But yeah, like, what do I say? Help me out!

Jovel Chan: I definitely enjoy, you know, food from all the cities, but Hanoi, eating on the streets, but in Saigon, dining out. And if it were up to me and I had five days, I would spend perhaps a day or two in Hanoi and then come down to Saigon and contrast it, yet see those similarities between what you see from, you know, the traditional street food freight, street food favorites up in the north and then come back down with the understanding and the grasp of what it is to Saigon and check out some of the bars and restaurants and what people are doing here. A lot of what I see in Saigon, even on the street food, is that there's a lot of them that are also adjusting to cater to the younger people here, to the experts here. So some of the banh mi here, you see a lot more banh mi kebab here, you see a lot more innovation even on the street food. So I think heading to the north, get your fix, come down here and see how that's kind of evolving and moving a little bit. For a foodie, I think that's definitely like, you know, you can run the gamut from everything that's traditional and see how that moves and changes with Vietnam's growth.

Kerry Newsome: That's a really good answer. I'm going to use that one. No, it's a really good way to explain it because I think there's some novelty factors still very present with the new traveler to Vietnam and sometimes, you know, the new traveler to Southeast Asia to experience street food, to sit on the little red chairs, to sit where, you know, the average local person is having, you know, a meal. with their family and, you know, doing some beers, celebrating with family, that sort of thing. So there's a really nice feeling about that and I think people are very keen to do that. But then, like you, I can go from that, and then I'm really keen to explore the wider circle of other restaurants and other cuisines. And as I said, their decor, they're really wonderful ways that they can use color and art and, you know, their designing is just fantastic. And I really, I like that ambience, you know, that way that a restaurant can make you feel like I really want to hang about here. I want to stay here. You know, I want to have another glass of wine and I want to have, I want to try that other thing on the menu that we didn't start with, you know, that kind of thing. You really want to invest your time and stay. So, in that vein, talk to us about some of the latest trends coming through that you're seeing now, you know, especially since the Michelin guides come out, that sort of thing. So, what are the really big trends coming through?

Jovel Chan: Modern Vietnamese cuisine is very, very, very popular. Around Southeast Asia, there's a boom of Southeast Asian cuisine and chefs at the helm. And there's a much larger spotlight that's being placed on Southeast Asian cuisine and chefs themselves. So that's something that's also being reflected here in Vietnam. And when the Michelin came in, we saw three out of four of those one-star restaurants

being awarded to modern Vietnamese and Vietnamese restaurants. So the narrative became one of going global by going home.

Kerry Newsome: That's interesting. Going global. Yes.

Jovel Chan: We saw a lot by going home. We saw that people, there was almost like, there was almost a, it's not favoritism, but a curiosity amongst people in the region as well as overseas who naturally want to come to a country and try what the modern version of that local cuisine was. And when they saw that awards were being awarded for such cuisine over perhaps some of the other cuisines, naturally, right? A lot of the restaurants had that signal to become, OK, I need to be more Vietnamese or I need to be modern Vietnamese. So even a lot of these perhaps traditionally French or modern French restaurants and the likes started playing around with, hey, we now use Vietnamese ingredients. Hey, we start, you know, a little bit, you know, playing on that Vietnamese card a little bit more. So because of that, we did see this year more than, you know, almost 10 new modern Vietnamese restaurants open. And we saw a little move even from those quintessentially Western restaurants into using Vietnamese ingredients. So that's a trend that I did see particularly this year. And I know that we will continue to see this trend for the next number of years because of these global movements. But also at the same time, like I said, Vietnamese people are very prideful in their cuisine. I don't see many Vietnamese chefs coming out and trying to do something else.

Kerry Newsome: Perhaps not by choice. That's interesting. Very interesting. So, if we were to start looking at making suggestions to people about special experiences with food, And this is kind of going to be a little segue into what you do as a main theme. But like food, as you say, is becoming an experience to experience that restaurant, to experience that food. I'm seeing a lot more of the combination with you know, fine dining and then alcohol or, you know, different kind of combinations of that pairing where that was never kind of an option before, even just before COVID really. So, you know, can you talk to us about some of the experiences that are now coming through that people are getting excited about?

Jovel Chan: So like I said, there are a lot more pop-ups and a lot more events that are happening this year. In the alcohol industry in Vietnam, we also had a gin festival for the first time a couple of years ago. We had a whiskey festival for the first time last year. So we're getting a lot more of this food and drink driven events and pop-ups that people can discover. A lot more restaurants are also going in the way of more fun dining than fine dining. So that's another trend that we see happening a lot more as well, fun dining.

Kerry Newsome: And that's what I'm keen to talk about.

Jovel Chan: Yeah. Fun dining is injecting an element of social and also it's just injecting elements of, yeah, mostly social and fun into the traditionally more stuffy, you know, concept of dining out. right? And the reason why that's taking off here in Vietnam, I mean, first and foremost, it's very much a global trend. I think the new generation of, you know, travelers, you know, with millennials or even Gen Z, they're going to high-end restaurants and going to your traditional like Ritz Carlton and stuff, it's not something that is really appealing to them anymore, right? Which is why hotels are also changing. Now you have younger and cooler brands, like the edition and the like, right? So the hotel industry moved towards something like that because they could see that these big name brands did not appeal to the next

generation anymore. Exactly. But in the same way, fine dining and sitting down on the white cloth and having that table side service just isn't what that same generation is looking for anymore. They want to be at the chef's counter, seeing the fire, interacting with people and having these exclusive experiences that meant a lot more for them. It wasn't about going to these really stuffy brands anymore and saying that they were there. They wanted to be one of the only few people to have this really cool thing that was happening and experiencing that with their friends, perhaps in a private setting. So that's what we're seeing, and that's the fun dining aspect. And that's what also inspired me to create these experiences. Because personally, as somebody who writes about the industry and get invited to many of these events, a lot of these events were very stuffy for me. It was always a steak and wine dinner, and I would have to sit down for four hours and drink wine next to people I didn't know. And I didn't want to do that, right? And I saw that those were the only things that were kind of happening in Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam. So I said, hey, you know what? There are just better ways to experience food that are more fun. but still achieve the objective of trying and experiencing this new wine and dining out with people. And so I created these experiences just to almost show the industry that there are just other ways to do things. And consumers would much prefer to attend such things. So we started doing that under this brand name called Saigon Supper Club. and bringing people together. And six months later, we've done about 10 dinners and dined at least 200 people.

Kerry Newsome: And I think that that's clever. I think that you doing this in a social sense is really key because I think some of the the experience is like, I'll use the restaurant called, I think it's called Noir, the one that you go to in Ho Chi Minh City, where you actually dine in the dark. Like, you're totally in the dark. And funnily enough, a friend of mine went, and I wasn't able to go on the night, but she came back and she said, you know, out of the 10 courses that I ate in the dark, I couldn't even pick the whole 10 correctly. I only picked two out of the 10 dishes. correctly for the experience. And she absolutely loved about it. So, it wasn't just the food that was a great experience and fun. It was the fact that, you know, every other sense in her body was being tested to figure out the texture and the taste and, you know, what the smells were and things like that to try and figure out what that dish was. So, you know, I think that was one of the first examples I had of moving away from traditional stuffy type environments where, you know, you are just having one experience, which is just that set meal, to adding on another layer of the experience to have fun and guessing and things like that. And I see what you're doing with the supper club is where you're getting a mix of, you know, expats, some locals, some tourists, you know, curious people, you know, of all areas, regions who are coming in, who can get to meet other people. Because, you know, travel is about meeting people as well. And I think this is another lovely way to do it. So I'm really keen to hear more about that. Before we just jump into that, I'd like to, because my my listening audience, and I'm talking to you guys out there now, when you do come to Vietnam and you're going to be coming into the two major cities we're talking about, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. And people do, I know you ask, how long should I allow to stay in these places? Now, that's another interesting question to answer because if you do want to start enjoying the food culture and the food experiences, you'd need a few days to do it because you can't kind of gobble it all down in one day or probably even two days. So, you might need to allow, you know, some extra time in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi to take advantage of these other aspects of enjoying Vietnamese food and the dining scene as we're seeing and talking about it now. So, if you were to look at... Let's do Hanoi first. If you were to pick a... Say, okay, Jovel, I'm coming into Hanoi, you know, I'm bringing my family, you know, we're really looking for a really nice restaurant, you know, we eat everything. So just, you know, where should we head to? Just give us a few and we'll check and see, you know, if we can get a booking and that sort of thing. So maybe, I went through your website, I found it very hard to pick which street.

Jovel Chan: So, I think one of my definitely favorite restaurants is a restaurant called Gia.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, I've seen that. That's Hanoi. Yeah.

Jovel Chan: Yeah, so Gia is it truly is one like so this year it got one star but I visited them back in 2021 when it first opened and I knew that it was already something that was very very special because it does modern Vietnamese But the way they do it is really by... So in a lot of modern Vietnamese restaurants, a lot of the techniques are very much still very Western techniques.

Kerry Newsome: But with a Vietnamese spin.

Jovel Chan: A lot of the techniques are recognizably and distinctively Western, but perhaps the flavor, right? They've used Vietnamese herbs and spices. So in some of the modern Vietnamese restaurants, you can still see a beef tartare, which is very much from a French dish, right? But they'll use a Vietnamese quail egg. But in Zia, it is very distinctly Vietnamese. It's almost like imperial Vietnamese cuisine. It feels like that. Nothing really feels like it's from the West. It's just a pure elevation of everything that you've had in Vietnam, done in a way that is very noticeable in Asian and Vietnamese. And I think that's why it's so, so special.

Kerry Newsome: Okay, so that's Gia in Hanoi. So what's the second one?

Jovel Chan: Yeah, so Los Fuegos is a restaurant and it is a Brazilian steakhouse. I know it's very ironic, but it's from a guy and he is from South America and he spent quite a bit of time in Australia herding cattle. So he really knows his meat. And it's this really quaint little outdoor steakhouse space. And we have a very private area at the back where he has handcrafted this entire barbecue from scratch. So he's made it out of pure love. And it's such a nice little quaint space. And you go in there, and it's gorgeous, gorgeous meat and very, very well done. And more importantly, it has certain ingredients that are not particularly legal in Vietnam. And I don't mean anything, you know, like, too, too, too off the record, but they have like, you know, brain and certain, you know, innards, certain ingredients, you know, for some reason is banned. It's not allowed in Vietnam that he has it, which is a very traditional part of the cuisine. So I really appreciate going there and having that. And number three? Number three has to be, I think the cafes there are really, really, really good. I definitely enjoy the cafes there a lot. So if I had to pick number three, I would choose a cafe.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, but there's so many of them. I mean, I like some of the very well-known, even the Runam. I love the Runam. They are so quaint.

Jovel Chan: Oh. Okay, so it has to be a restaurant. Oh, this is tricky then. Okay, I think one of my favourite restaurants in Hanoi then has to be, I think Labrie. Labrie is really good. L-A-B-R-I. Bistro.

Kerry Newsome: So it's cafe, bistro, that kind, is it?

Jovel Chan: Labrie is dining. I've heard really good things about Chapter and Dung, but I've not been yet to be very honest. But I've been to Labrie and I thought it was really good.

Kerry Newsome: Let's move on to Ho Chi Minh City. Number one for Ho Chi Minh.

Jovel Chan: Ho Chi Minh City.

Kerry Newsome: This is very, very hot question to ask. When I get asked that question, I actually picked one of the Michelin star restaurants and that's Anan. Anan is, has never let me down, like seriously, anyone I send there just comes away with that many photos about food, even people that

never take photos of food before, all of a sudden they're sending me photos of food from Anan, it's outstanding.

Jovel Chan: Yeah. And then he just opened up a smaller, not a smaller, but a sister concept in the same building on the third floor. Oh, really?

Kerry Newsome: Okay. I must check that out when I'm there.

Jovel Chan: Yeah. So it's in the same building. It's got one by far, molecular far. So, you know, another place to stand. Excellent. All right. As for me, If ever the day Anan becomes really full and you need an alternative to send your guests to, my go-to modern Vietnamese restaurant is An's, a place called An's, A-N apostrophe S. N apostrophe S, that's conveniently. I know. So interestingly, An's is helmed by the ex-right hand of Peter,

Kerry Newsome: Right, so a breakaway.

Jovel Chan: Yeah, it's a breakaway, but the food is very different, I would say. Okay. Very different, but it's still very much modern Vietnamese. Yeah, with a chef counter and everything, it's a lot more quaint and less, I would say, creative and playful with the molecular and the one bite, but in the same vein as Zia Hanoi, it really elevates it from the core of Vietnamese cuisine. So it retains the sanctity of it a lot stronger.

Kerry Newsome: The only other restaurant I have been in this sort of league, if for want of a better word, was A by Tung. That 20 degustation, oh my God, that was just outstanding.

Jovel Chan: That's a really good one.

Kerry Newsome: Oh my God, I was just in awe. I was totally in awe by that restaurant, but it's very expensive, but it's absolutely outstanding. So if you had a third, what would you pick for your third?

Jovel Chan: A third restaurant in Saigon. I would say, oof, wish I had more time. I think for some, I always think, the place I always bring a lot of people to is Moi. I bring a lot of people to Moi, Moi Craft Sake, which opened up a year ago. Sorry, is that M-O-R-E? And M-U-A.

Kerry Newsome: M-U-A, mm-hmm.

Jovel Chan: Yeah, mùa is the word for seasons in Vietnamese. And the chef is a very, very talented chef that opened up the restaurant first in Hôi An by the rice fields and everything. It's a very gorgeous restaurant. And then opened up mùa kraft sake, which is a lot more of like You know, it's very casual. It's like a hundred seat space in District 3 and you'll see a lot of people there drinking beer and craft sake. And this craft sake is made from Vietnamese rice and it's Vietnam's first sake. And it's actually really well done. So this chef, he loves Japanese cuisine and spent some time there. And he came back and created a menu that really nicely married Vietnamese and Japanese cuisine together. You've got that izakaya and you've got that street niao culture of eating and drinking in Vietnam. put put them together and pet it with beer, local beers and local craft sake together. So any point of time you go there, it's really busy. Energy and everything is really affordable. It's like, you know, that's in the 300 400 Raj telling you about So I bring everybody there just for like a good dinner so that they can still see what like Vietnamese cuisine can be beyond just street food, but at the same time, try things like they've got the tasting flights for Vietnamese sake. And yeah, it's always a good time.

Kerry Newsome: Jovel, is there any particular sort of cuisines influencing other cuisines? Like we've talked about Vietnamese cuisine influencing some Western cultures, but is there some other cultures that are influencing Vietnamese? Like, is there some Japanese influence into Vietnamese? Is there, you

know, some Korean influence into Vietnamese food? Is that coming the other way, working the other way back?

Jovel Chan: I think Vietnamese cuisine in particular is very influenced from First and foremost, it was a country that was colonized its entire life, right? Vietnam was just continuously colonized by the French, obviously, you can see in the food, by the Chinese. And then you had a lot of people migrate out of Vietnam. They left to Europe and they left all over the world, the US and Australia. So when we come back and see Vietnamese cuisine, which is why I love looking at the dining scene, it's because when you see a lot of these restaurants, and depending on where the chef is from, most of the chefs, at least a year ago, don't spend time in Europe. So his food is Nordic. He calls it Nordic Vietnamese cuisine, right? Peter came from the States, Anan Saigon. You have a lot of these chefs, and depending on where they're coming from, it's influencing Vietnamese cuisine. And it's so interesting to tell people when you look at the cuisine itself, it's almost like a history story. Like you can tell exactly why. If you go to Ngo's restaurant in District 3, he spent time in Indonesia and Australia. So his modern Vietnamese cuisine and what he does is very different to what a lot of other chefs do. But everything, I went to a Vietnamese, a modern Vietnamese restaurant back in Singapore, and the chef went to the US and spent a lot of time working in Mexican restaurants. The food that came out was also very different, but still very uniquely Vietnamese. So when we look at Vietnamese cuisine, especially modern Vietnamese cuisine, those that are helmed by the second generation, like overseas chefs, right? grew up abroad and had to create and adapt to Vietnamese cuisine in that country, that also tastes different to whatever is from Vietnam. So there's a lot of these things. And that's why seeing the dining scene here, as compared to other countries in Southeast Asia or any other country, is very, very much reflective of that massive diaspora and in the 80s when everybody just left.

Kerry Newsome: Our show is actually going to be the last show for 2023. So really, really... Oh my goodness. You are a Christmas gift, Jovel, all wrapped up in tasty food ideas. See, that's why I thought this was perfect, absolutely perfect. So, and I have so many travelers coming over for Christmas and New Year and then coming for TET and things like that. So, if we are to talk about, and I want us to explain, help me out here, I want us to explain just how Vietnam celebrates these Western culture events like Christmas because obviously Vietnam is not necessarily, it's a Buddhist predominant country. So, whilst it goes nuts in Saigon with Christmas decorations and Christmas fair, it's kind of still hard to isolate. What does Vietnam do for Christmas? You know, where do I, where do I book, you know, a Christmas dinner or a Christmas lunch or, yeah, can you help me out there? I really need some suggestions for Christmas fair and then New Year's Eve. What, where do people go for that? And then we're going to finish off and talk everything about that Saigon Supper Club because I think that sounds fabulous. I want to join.

Jovel Chan: That's all right. Thank you. So let's start talking about Christmas. So Christmas in Vietnam, if you're traveling to Vietnam for Christmas, you've definitely got no shortage of options, especially in the hotels. All the hotels will do some set menu. A lot of them will also do your Christmas brunch. and a number of restaurants here and there, but in terms of a Christmas market or Christmas festival, there isn't something that exists here on a grand scale. You have the neighbourhood Christmas markets, which are a showcase of local artisans and brands that come to the fore, that are usually hosted by individual restaurants, like let's say Luzin, and stuff like that. There are small little pockets of Christmas markets, and I believe if you go along Nguyen Hue Street, you can see a couple of lights and a few baskets doing

here and there. But if you're looking for a full-on Christmas outfit like in Europe, then you're definitely not going to see that here.

Kerry Newsome: It's more the neon lights.

Jovel Chan: But that's not just anywhere. Yeah, it's more the neon lights and, you know, the wiener house, Christmas music that comes on. And of course, it's always a party that follows after. So we saw that with more of the Western holidays here in Vietnam, like, you know, Halloween, let's say, or the like, are big reasons to throw a party. So, you know, head for dinner at perhaps, you know, one of the restaurants or a Christmas brunch to get that festive spirit. And then thereafter, you know, definitely I'm sure the bar scene will take that over a lot stronger than let's say the dining room.

Kerry Newsome: And then New Year's Eve, is there any good spots for New Year's Eve?

Jovel Chan: So New Year's Eve, similarly with Christmas, you'll see a lot of hotels during New Year's Eve. Mainly hotels, especially for brunch. A lot of restaurants don't necessarily do a New Year's Eve brunch, they'll do a set menu. Yeah, because, you know, wastage and costs and if you want people to work on these public holidays, you would pay them three times as much. At that point of time, I think a lot of the restaurants are like, hey, you know what, we probably won't get that many people because, you know, we've got our own festivities or perhaps they're not in Vietnam celebrating. So why do we want to do a brunch? So it's usually for the hotels to take over.

Kerry Newsome: I have a prediction. I reckon in the next few years they'll be doing more around Christmas and Christmas lunches because the Westerners are coming and they've got to have Christmas lunch or dinner somewhere. And obviously places that cater to that are going to be in high demand. Jovel, let's finish up and I'd really like to throw it to you now to talk about what you're doing with the Saigon Supper Club, you know, just your passion behind it. I'm really keen to, because it's new and it sounds fabulous. So, over to you.

Jovel Chan: Oh, thank you. So Saigon Supper Club are basically dinner experiences where people come. It's very much a food but also social experience where we host groups of 10 to 15 people in very unique spaces. So we've done ones on rooftops, we've done ones in farmhouses, we've done ones in wine cellars. And in the same vein as fun dining, it's to make dining fun. And we also bring people such as the bartenders and the chefs and they also all get involved to interact with the people and the diners and also showcase at the same time modern Vietnamese cuisine and also other products such as craft gin. We've done rum before, we've done chocolate pairing. So in this one little dinner, you get to really interact with a lot of things that allow you to also indulge in the food culture that is super new in Vietnam, right? The dining scene here. So that's what we've been doing with Saigon Supper Club. And we're in the midst of launching new experiences. We're doing Cocktail Cinema Club, where it's basically outdoor cinema experiences where we bring in our food and beverage partners. And what we're trying to do here in Vietnam is to create occasions for people to enjoy food and drink. Right now, you can only experience it within the four walls of a restaurant. But that's not how you should be enjoying or learning how to dine. or how to enjoy food just within the four walls of the restaurant. So we need to create these events and festivals and make it fun and attract people by coming out to do something new and novel, like an outdoor cinema on the rooftop in the middle of District 1. And through there, be like, hey, you know what? Here's a glass of wine. And get them to try new things in this manner. Otherwise, it will just always be stuffy. Otherwise, for the first time, people are trying wine and it's in a restaurant in perhaps a way that they can't afford it. So that's what we want to do. We want to make dining and drinking and

going out and experiencing food very fun. That's why it was also the inspiration to create a lot of these events and experiences to just encourage people to come out, meet other like-minded people and build habits that encourage them to take the second step and make dining in Vietnam a lot more sustainable beyond just something stuffy like steak and wine. We're launching our first cocktail cinema In Christmas time, we're showing Love Actually. We managed to get it with subtitles, fully licensed. And we have an audio solution provider that allows people to just watch the movie with their own AirPods or earphones, you know, no crazy sound systems and stuff. So it's going to be a really, really... Do you have a date for that? We are finalizing the date with the venue at the moment, but once I do, I'll let you know. We will invite our craft beer and cider and wine friends to come in here to do You know, that's the place where people can actually try it in a very casual, fun and local way.

Kerry Newsome: And I think that social interaction, you know, where you can, you know, you can stand around with people and say, what do you think? And you know, that tastes a bit like this. Did you try this one? And it's just all that sharing is so much fun and makes it just, I think that much more enjoyable. In just closing up, Jovel, is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't ask you when we're talking about dining and the dining scene in Vietnam? Should I have asked you something and I didn't get around to it?

Jovel Chan: No, but you should be asking me, you know, when the next time you're going to be in Vietnam and go out for coffee, very offended about that. Asking me when you can take me out for lunch, perhaps?

Kerry Newsome: Yes, I will. Definitely. I'm writing that down as we speak. I'm going to make sure that I put your links so that people can go to your website because your website's fantastic, by the way. It's got some great information and your blog. Thank you so much. You've really got some great information. So, people, get onto that website and check out. all her information on the restaurants. If you want some great ideas to share with your family, friends, or when you're over there, don't miss out on that link and it'll be in the show notes. Jovel, I just want to say thank you again for being on the show. You've been a wonderful guest and I'm just grateful for your time.

Jovel Chan: Thank you so much for having me. Happy dining.