



What About Vietnam - S2-23 – Cooking classes in Vietnam, why you should do more than one!

Kerry Newsome: [00:00:36] Xin chau and welcome to what about Vietnam? I'm very excited about today's program because it's not often that I get somebody as talented and as gifted in the art of cooking as my guest today, Chef Tracey Lister. I'm going to give you a little bit of background about her because she has a long history, having lived in Vietnam and she's been part of some very interesting growth areas in the area of cooking classes, etc. And I just think she will bring a lot to the program. We're going to be talking about cooking classes, which is a really fun thing to do in Vietnam and a great way to learn about the country and the culture of the country through its food. So about Tracey. Tracey has, as I said, been going back and forth to Vietnam for over 20 years. She did actually live in Hanoi back in 2008. She's a well-published author. "A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam" was released with her husband back in 2008, sold over 9000 copies around Australia, Japan, UK, and the USA. She brought out a second book in 2011 called "Vietnamese Street Food", and that's been translated into German and Finnish. And her most recent books in 2017 called "Real Vietnamese Cooking" and "Made in Vietnam" came out and is a really great third addition to her list of writings. She is currently based in Australia, in Melbourne, and she's opened up her own restaurant and cooking school called "Brunswick Kitchen". I really suggest if you come to Australia or you live in Melbourne to check out her restaurant. I'll put the link in the notes. It's a fantastic opportunity for you to learn the art of cooking Vietnamese food, but also extends to the art of even making your own gnocchi. So there's lots of opportunities for learning there just to end off some history. Tracey was very instrumental in forming [KOTO](#) and KOTO is a grassroots charity and restaurant that helps street kids to free themselves from the poverty cycle through vocational training. I've been to the restaurant several times over the years. It's a fantastic project. She was a major contributor to the training aspect of some of these kids to make it what it is.

And it is a great culinary experience. If you do get to visit Hanoi I and I suggest that you definitely go to the KOTO restaurant. I hope you're going to enjoy this episode. Tracey has a lot to offer and advice in choosing a cooking class to attend what you can expect to get from the class and just all of the stuff that you would come to expect on this show. Let's welcome to the program. If I sound a bit excited, I am. Tracey, welcome to the show, we're going to talk cooking, one of my most favorite things to do in Vietnam. How are you?

Tracey Lister: [00:04:25] Hi, Kerry. I'm great. Thanks very much. Yes, talking about Vietnamese food is one of my favorite things, too.

Kerry Newsome: [00:04:33] Ok, look, one of the things that does come up on a tour to Vietnam is definitely the option for people to do cooking classes. So what in your experience and considering you've been at the front of the room mostly of late doing cooking classes, what can a person expect to get out of a class? I mean, I'm taking into consideration that, you know, not everyone's into cooking. And sometimes, you know, for couples traveling to Vietnam, maybe the guy's not that interested. So what would you say to that?

Tracey Lister: [00:05:14] Well, I think doing a cooking class in Vietnam is well worth it. You will walk away with it being one of the highlights, even the people that don't want to do it and totally enjoying it because the food is fantastic, but it's so much more than the food. It's really about the culture and traditions associated with that. Most cooking schools will take you to the market and the market is the soul of a Vietnamese community. You know, you go there to find out the latest news and what's happening. And it's busy and it's vibrant and just a fabulous experience. Even if you're not really into the cooking side of things, you do get to eat some delicious food afterwards.

Kerry Newsome: [00:06:02] There's a character that goes with the cooking class itself, because I think if you take into consideration things like the location of the school, you know, there's always something of value to that. Like the actual if it's a restaurant, it's usually got some history to it. So you learn something from them and then a lot of them, as you say, don't just minimize it to, you know, chopping, cutting and cooking. The class is usually about a half day event.

Tracey Lister: [00:06:49] Yeah, that's correct. And so you keep going to the market as well. I think you need to do them everywhere you go, because food in Vietnam is very regional and as you say, there's all different characters, but there's always wonderful regional differences. So I'd do a class, Saigon and do one in Hoi An where there are plenty of cooking classes. But don't forget Hue. Hue has amazing cuisine, has rich vegan history and culinary traditions because of all the pagodas there in the imperial city. And then you've got Hanoi food. And then even when you go up north into Sapa and around the Chinese border, the cuisine changes again. So do them where you go, I think, and just make sure that when you're doing it, class is not repeating the same thing.

Kerry Newsome: [00:07:56] I agree with you. So walk us through just roughly what a school would include from start to finish. What would it typically include?

Tracey Lister: [00:08:13] Well, generally, a welcome and an introduction to Vietnamese food and a bit of advice about how to navigate streets in the market before you head out. I would spend probably a good forty five minutes to an hour at the market. It might seem like a lot, but it is such an exciting place and it is so different to what we're used to here. Like, I would walk and talk about the rising importance of fish sauce into the market, looking at all the various eggs, including, of course, the fertilized egg and then there is somebody selling votives. So for a funeral paying respects at the old church, you can purchase your votives there.

So when you go into these markets, there's no refrigeration, there's no running water, but there's no odor. They are so clean. And that's because the women (and it is mainly the women who work really hard to clean.) A busy market will have two kills a day. The meat is killed in the morning and that's for lunch. That's all gone by around 11:30 or 12:00. Ladies have a siesta and then it's back on again at 3:00 with a fresh kill. I'd loop back around and go

through all the amazing products, including a woman that would be selling bouquets for hair washing. So she was your pharmacist basically so she could put a little bouquet together for you to wash your hair and beautiful aromas from that. And that's a very small space, but probably about a quarter of the size of your average big chain supermarket here.

Kerry Newsome: [00:11:32] And I think all that fresh produce that you mention, I can remember in very early days when I took someone to the markets because of the no refrigeration, because of the space elements and because it is in normal circumstances kind of open and out there, isn't it, it's kind of as you say, the meat is freshly chopped and cut in front of you. There's eels jumping around in a plastic tub and crabs in similar kinds of circumstances. So for me and certainly for people that have never seen that, it's a little bit in your face, isn't it?

Tracey Lister: [00:12:20] It can be very confronting. And I have had people that have had to leave the tour. I'll always have someone with me and they would take that person back. But in 10 years, maybe five people have had to go back because of the humidity and all that sort of stuff as well. Yes, I tend to get warnings. So, you know, it's coming up to it, chopping the heads off so you can go another way. The rest of us will walk around that way. Same with the fish, they're not killing chickens in the market anymore since bird flu and the porks are killed at an abattoir. But it comes in as a dead pig in the west, where you see a very sanitized fillets and no bones. And we've got so far removed from what we're actually eating. We don't even have to acknowledge that it's a dead animal. And I know, I really think the Vietnamese approach is much better. There is no wastage. They're not squeamish about having the blood of the duck or any of the organs. In fact, they're all the best bits. And the bits that would go first for staff meals. But it's. You know, we don't see that in the West. I totally understand being a vegetarian. Or a vegan, but if you're going to eat an animal, you need to acknowledge where it comes from and you should also eat the whole thing and not have the wastage that we have here in the West.

Kerry Newsome: [00:14:15] Yeah, and I think that's where some of the education that comes in, one of the things that I learned very early on was the way that they would make use of absolutely everything, whether that's a plant, whether that's a vegetable or whether that's an animal and just how they could talk about the loaves and fishes. I mean, man, oh, man, they really know how to do that well, and as you say, we live in such a high wastage environment where we want to cut the fat off and we trim it. And it's hardly recognizable in the end, as you say, where it really came from. So I think it's a really good point.

Tracey Lister: [00:15:01] And you mentioned not wasting fruit and vegetables either. So that's not being wasted, taking the peel of citrus fruit, drying it out with beautiful oils in there and taking them home and using it for hair washing or selling it so it's not a waste.

Kerry Newsome: [00:15:39] And I think one of the other things I'd like to mention at the markets, which I found fascinating, was making noodles.

Tracey Lister: [00:15:49] Yes, the noodles.

Kerry Newsome: [00:15:52] And tell us a little bit about why these noodles are better than ours in the sense that they don't kind of clog up my gut like noodles at home. Talk to us about that.

Tracey Lister: [00:16:07] Noodles in Vietnam have a shelf life for three hours. They don't throw them away after three hours. Again, no wastage. They will sell them cheaper. They might have them themselves for lunch. Often you get two baskets of noodles and that's for breakfast, but your breakfast tray and then you get another delivery coming through a couple of hours later with noodles for your lunch. And when you go there, you can actually touch the baskets that the noodles are in and they are still warm. They've been delivered from one noodle village into the markets and they're still warm. And when you go to a street vendor, you'll see motorbikes coming in all the time with fresh noodles. And you see the motorbikes around town, I might have five baskets on the back of the motorbike and stacked up on top of each other with the fresh noodles. And unfortunately, we just don't get that freshness here.

Kerry Newsome: [00:17:28] It's just it was one of the things I first noticed, and in particular in Hoi An with the dish Cau Lau which has got noodles and one of my favorites; are they still made from wheat?

Tracey Lister: [00:17:48] It depends on what noodles you're talking about. the most common noodle that would be for banh pho which is what goes into the soup and they are a flat rice noodle. Bun is another one, and that's a smaller rounded noodle, and that's when you grill pork belly and pork patties. and the rice in the noodle is slightly fermented. So the majority of noodles, I would say 90%, are rice. There is a little bit of wheat noodle. And then, of course, there's cellophane noodles which is what you put in a fried spring roll, or you might be certain other soup dishes, and that's made from some sort of starch. ht be certain other soup dishes, and that's made from some sort of starch.

Kerry Newsome: [00:18:54] Right. So if you have gluten intolerant people on a tour, what dish would you steer them to then?

Tracey Lister: [00:19:03] For traveling and being gluten intolerant in Vietnam and is pretty easy. Well the staple in Vietnam is rice, rice and fish sauce, and they can appear on every table and so pretty good with that. I'd just stay away from the Banh Mi. But there's so many other options and so many varied rice dishes and noodle dishes. Every village has its own kind of noodle dish or every region has its own dish that you have to try. There's not a lot of soy sauce used in Vietnamese cuisine, so again if you're gluten intolerant, It's not like going to mainland China where it's kind of appearing everywhere. My sister's gluten free and she visited quite a lot and it was never a problem.

Kerry Newsome: [00:20:02] I think that's good to know. So what would be some of the dishes you would learn to cook? Well, in a class we mentioned.

Tracey Lister: [00:20:19] On a talk about banana flour well banana flour is just absolutely beautiful, beautiful long purple bell shape. And as you peel off the outer layers, you can see what would become the banana, the hand of bananas underneath. But they are immature. So they are generally not Asian. You see the ladies in the market doing it and I do it with a knife no chopping board straight into water with a bit of acid. But chop it finely, as you can get it, put it in some water. It's a little bit of lime juice or some vinegar and that just washes off the slime because you'll feel your fingers are quite sticky and it also softens a little bit and stops going brown. Then it will start to brown a little bit in the same way a banana does want to cut. And then depending on what you want to put with it, it could be some carrots and beans. And again, there's all sorts of regional differences. There's a beautiful, vegan one where you use tofu and fresh lime to make the dressing.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:03] How selective should you be? Should you kind of look at the menu each time that they offer or see what they're going to cover in the class? That would be definitely a good class to do versus another one.

Tracey Lister: [00:22:46] A lot of cooking skills or some cooking schools will have different menus they offer at different times of the day or on different days. So I'd look at that. And maybe when you're planning your schedules have a look. We would offer six different classes.

Kerry Newsome: [00:23:13] And this is when you were doing these in Hanoi.

Tracey Lister: [00:23:16] Yeah. And a very good friend of mine, she does amazing cooking classes and I know she has a couple of different menus and is very happy to adjust them or cater to people's tastes and requirements. So I just find out what's on offer. When I was in Hanoi, we would have six different classes, so we would have street food class food from Hanoi, a vegan class, one just about spring rolls, a seafood class.

Kerry Newsome: [00:24:01] oh, that's a good variety,

Tracey Lister: [00:24:02] Yes, so you could just look at the website and choose which one on a particular day you might want to do. And perhaps if someone is already locked into food from Hanoi, people will often say, let's go to the mausoleum. But to stop for supper when I come back, that's when you're doing your vegan class. So I look around and say, see if there are different classes on offer from the one that's I.

Kerry Newsome: [00:24:30] Yeah, that's a good point. So we've kind of mentioned a little bit about the locations as in and your suggestion, I think to do a cooking class in each location that you visit, I think is a definite great idea. But talk to us a little bit about just what those differences are. So what's the difference between something that you choose to visit in Hanoi versus Hoi An versus Saigon? So give us some food.

Tracey Lister: [00:25:04] In Vietnam it is very regional. What is consistent throughout Vietnam is the concept of five flavors. So Vietnamese meals need to be balanced, sweet, salty, spicy, and sour. So not in every dish, but in the five dishes that are making up that meal. Those flavors should be present some way, one or two might be more at the front, but might be more salty with the fish sauce and chili, but the other things might be there in the background like it's part of the salad mix. So that's consistent throughout the use of rice and fish sauce.

It gets quite cold in Hanoi in December and January. People can often be a bit surprised when they get off the plane. It's very much like a Melbourne winter, but it is short and only goes for about two months. So the food reflects that. There's a lot of hardier dishes in the north. For example, the spring roll that's very common in Hanoi is poached seafood bound with mayonnaise in a rice paper, wrapped egg and bread crumb and fried. So it's picking up a bit of the French tradition. It looks like a little croquet, but the mayonnaise is there, and that's perfect for the winter food. There's also the use of Chinese influence in the north because of the proximity to China. And I suppose in some ways it's a little bit more austere in Hanoi not to show, you know, it's kind of a quite a sort of place, a bit more conservative. Yeah. It's like Sydney, Melbourne, you know, it's kind of Sydney's beautiful and it's out there

and it's bright and that's kind of Saigon and Hanoi. You've got a look for things a little bit more, but it's all there. And it's the truth. It's when you get to choose to find that and explore that. So when you get down to the centre a little bit more of the Thai influence, it's coming again because of the proximity to Thailand. So more lemongrass, more chili, the food gets to be hotter around more than people often prefer Hoi An food because it's probably more similar to what they've had back home.

Tracey Lister: [00:27:43] They're probably more familiar with Thai food than they are with Vietnamese and as you get further south, getting more of the tropical fruits coming into a fruit can be used either to sweeten the dish or it can be used. If it's not, fruit can be used to sour the dish. And then we've got a lot more use of coconut milk down south. And then when you get down around the Mekong, you're picking up a lot of those could be in Malay spices coming into it. So the chicken curries that you might have had back in Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane or whatever, they're generally from down south. But it's all delicious.

Kerry Newsome: [00:28:33] It is delicious. Yes, I don't think I've had a bad meal in Vietnam. I really don't. And that's a rarity, I think, So, yes, I suppose I have a bit of an inside running. And, you know, for people listening, I'm hoping to give them the inside running to so that I can come away with a great experience. So when we talk about some of the cultural aspects of food and cooking in particular, I think you and I both agree that a great way to learn about Vietnamese and just some of their cultural history is through their food. You and I, the other day, we're talking about some of the funny cultural things to come out of what you know, and I think there was an egg story. Do you want to start with the egg story?

Tracey Lister: [00:29:31] Oh, yes. So if you're taking a child to school and they're going to be sitting an exam, you don't want to give them a hard boiled egg on that day because an egg shaped like zero and you don't want them to get zero. That would be bad luck. But, you know, that might be strange to us. But when I was in Vietnam and we used to make hot cross buns every Easter for the expat community, the Vietnamese staff would just ask what is it putting on top of what is the cross and why are you doing that? So we have our own kind of tradition. But otherwise in Vietnam, it is linked more to culture and traditions and the diet will vary greatly. So foods are hot or cold, not the temperature, what it does to your body. So if you've got some sort of skin allergy, your blood's too hot. So you need to have foods that are going to come down. And that's kind of just ingrained in a lot of people in Vietnam. But wonderful food traditions like- don't eat ducks on the first of the lunar month. That's very unlucky. Not for the ducks, obviously, but for the very unlucky day. And maybe these things were originally about breeding cycles, these traditions in the same way in Europe, there are different Starkweather being different things on different days or don't eat at all. So I think that it probably related to perhaps breeding cycles at some point, but it's become part of the culture and the traditions. There's another great one that I love and particular day of the year you eat fermented sticky rice and it just suddenly appears and it's everywhere and you have to eat on that day and that gets rid of any worms. And I don't know whether it worked, but I certainly ate that fermented sticky rice on that day every year because it links you in and it brings you part of the community. It's something to do together. I mean, sharing food is such a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Kerry Newsome: [00:32:06] Exactly. And I really love the reverence they have for food. They kind of treat it with respect. They use it as a means, as you say, to bring people together to share. They are always so welcoming. So no matter what there is on the table, if someone

comes in, they'll always make room for you to join them. And I've had that experience many times and just overcome by their generosity.

Tracey Lister: [00:32:42] Yes, there is a saying in Vietnam, which is “have you eaten rice yet?” most people probably know anyway. And that's really saying, are you being taken care of, are you nourished?. And I used to find that really weird when I first lived there and it's like, why are you asking me all the time? Have I? And it's not like you had breakfast? It's eaten rice because rice is central. And yes, it is very important to have certain dishes you put on your altar at certain times of the year and then that all the food from the altar, of course, is always Asian and it's very special to have that food from the old. And so if someone takes an apple from the altar and gives it to you, even if you don't want to eat that apple, that is such a beautiful, generous gift and they pass on any good luck to you.

Kerry Newsome: [00:33:39] Yes, and of course, the special food that comes out when they celebrate!!

Tracey Lister: [00:33:46] Isn't there yet. So the Lunar New Year is the most important holiday in Vietnam and the most important food item for Tet. It is a sticky rice cake that in the center of it has mung beans and pork, it's wrapped in leaves and then it's cooked and it has to be cooked over flame. It can't be cooked on an electric flame or gas it has to be a wooden fire that it's cooked under for about nine hours. So generally everybody has a role like the children in the family will wash the leaves. The women would wash the rice, the men would cut pork, and then it's assembled and generally you might. 20 of them, it's a bit like your auntie who was in charge of the Christmas puddings for the family and she'd make 10 of them and give them out spread between the family. So somebody would be in charge of that. And actually riding around Vietnam on your motorbike a few days before Tet you'll see lots of big pots out on the footpath or on the road with the wood underneath and people just sitting around watching the cooking. And that's probably the most important. Dish, but. It's also one of the reasons why it is important that no further cooking is required, so you don't actually want to; you don't want to be cooking on the first couple of days of Tet.

Kerry Newsome: [00:35:48] Yes and you know, we won't go too much into Tet some of the ceremony around the first day and we won't go too much into that because that's that's a whole episode just on its own just to talk about Tet but what I would like to grab you and your thoughts and your experience obviously in is social enterprise in the sense of the work that you did with KOTO. And and once again, one of my favorite places to visit in Hanoi.

Tracey Lister: [00:36:22] Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: [00:36:24] Is it particularly very special, so maybe for people as a great starting point and a means to, I think, give back if that's the best way to describe it to Vietnam? I always recommend a visit to KOTO. But because you have had such a very big role in KOTO, I thought maybe you might speak to us a little bit about KOTO history and what KOTO was about.

Tracey Lister: [00:36:55] KOTO an amazing project training restaurant in Hanoi. I was lucky enough to meet Jimmy Pham, who's a Cabramatta boy, Vietnamese Australian man at that time he was only twenty-six. So he was quite young, went to Vietnam as a tour leader and just met the kids on the street, started buying meals and paying for them to go to school. And what they said was what we really want to do if we want to work and we want to take care of

our family. And he said, well, what do you think we could do? And like a lot of people, I said we could run a restaurant. And that's where I met Jimmy and heard about his vision and thought he was crazy. And he's like, oh, look, I came back and there were problems along the way, but it's still going strong. So when we opened in 2000 had 17 kids off the street and KOTO is now recruiting, I think, class 30. And it's about 200 kids going through the program at any one time. And it's a two-year program. They receive a Certificate three from Australian training institutions. So it's very important to me that quality training was given and they stayed with the program for two years and covered things like life skills, integrating them back into the community, sometimes the kids are quite frustrated because. Estranged from their families and society. So it's sort of linking him back in money management, numeracy and literacy skills. So yet an amazing program and it's helped thousands and thousands of kids and their families all. I'll go and visit the families of some of the first and second classes that were my students. And when I first went there, they had a dirt floor. And I bet now they've got towels on the floor and they've got an extra real bathroom. All that sort of stuff. So it's an amazing program. So, yeah, when you go to visit them, make sure you go there. It's open for breakfast, lunch, dinner and coffee. You can go and have a Lamington. It's great for kids. So, you know, sometimes you're a bit exhausted after traveling. The kids are getting restless. And you want to take them somewhere with that great energy from you working at KOTO plus being able to have a toasted sandwich perhaps, or pasta, just settle down a little bit. So it's a good great spot.

Kerry Newsome: [00:40:12] Yeah. And as you say, the food's good. The service, when you understand the history, the people that are serving you are really doing it from the heart. And you know that as a student, they're in a learning kind of phase. But the whole vibe, the whole energy of the place is always divine. And as you say, if you want a bit of a treat that reminds you of home or you're a little bit over rice or noodles, et cetera, you can definitely get some of those home traits.

Tracey Lister: [00:40:45] And its supporting kids through the program.

Kerry Newsome: [00:40:49] Exactly. As far as I'm concerned, Tracey. Look, I could sit and chat with you for hours about this subject, but I know you're busy, lady. I'm going to put some links to your restaurant and your cooking school in Melbourne, the Brunswick Kitchen. And so everything will be there for everyone that wants to get in touch with you and maybe attend one of your classes, because I know that would be fabulous. I know you're an author, so we're going to put links to your books. And I've also got a copy of that, which is most handy at times.

Lovely to have you on the show. Really grateful for your time, your expertise and knowledge.