



## What About Vietnam - Series 3 - 13 – Everything you didn't know about Vietnamese noodles!

**Kerry Newsome:** 00:35

Xin Chào! and welcome to What about Vietnam, one of the main aims of the podcast programme that I put together for you is to try and choose subjects and get to you information that is going to make your experience of Vietnam so much more meaningful.

00:58

I do not know about you, but when I am travelling, there is just so much to take in and especially with a new country, with an exotic country, with a country that is very foreign to you. You can be experiencing things but not really understanding or get a full context of that experience. So, one of the things that I wanted to include in my programme is an episode about noodles.

01:26

Now you may ask, gosh! a whole episode just talking about Vietnamese noodles. Yes! and it's really warranted, because most of the tastiest dishes that you're going to try in Vietnam are going to include one or other type of Vietnamese noodle, you will see the noodles in various places, in various markets, in various cities and I've asked Neal Bermas to come on the show today because he's got a stack of knowledge about noodles and for lots of reasons why.

02:02

Neal is the founder and board chairperson of [STREETS International](https://www.streetsinternational.org/) (<https://www.streetsinternational.org/>). It is a social enterprise that offers programmes for street kids, orphans, and disadvantaged youth, and they train them in the hospitality industry. Connected to the programme is a restaurant that he coined **Oodles of Noodles**. So now, you know why he is on this programme and why he knows a lot about noodles. Which you are absolutely going to find out in this programme.

02:36

A bit more about Neal. Neal has received lots of honors and distinguished awards in the ensuing years of his career, in particular, or to just to name a few. He was awarded a membership to the Clinton Global Initiative in 2014. He was also honored to be selected CNN's Hero of the Year in 2018. He is a fun New Yorker with a heap of experience and knowledge about the making of noodles, there some of the history, some of the different flavors you are going to experience. You are just going to have a bowl with this episode, because if you do not, then I am doing something dreadfully wrong because I had a bowl.

03:32

Neal, Welcome to the What About Vietnam Podcast. How are you doing today?

**Neal Bermas:** 03:37

Thank you. I am delighted to be here!

**Kerry Newsome:** 03:40

Look, I am delighted to have you on the show because we are going to be talking about a favorite subject of mine, which is noodles. Now I want to just preface this for my listeners by saying that Neal and I talked about this before that we have all grown up with noodles, kids love noodles, we have had them in our lives for most of our lives, and probably originating mostly from Italy.

04:07

However, in the course of my going back and forth to Vietnam, I have experienced a totally new kind of noodle and as Neal has set up an organization called [STREETS International](#) and is the founder. He actually developed this really cute programme called "Oodles of Noodles". And if you would like to check his website out, they actually had tasting tours and training sessions around noodles in training people how to make them and then how to use them with various dishes. So, I am going to dig into the trenches with Neal and I am going to get him to explain to me some of the aspects of noodles that we do not know about Vietnamese style. So, Neal, kicking things off, tell us what is the basis of Vietnamese noodles and why are they so different or so unique?

**Neal Bermas:** 05:11

As somebody who also grew up on boxed, perfect sized and shaped noodles, that I think my mom probably stored for years at a time.

**Kerry Newsome:** 05:24

Absolutely.

**Neal Bermas:** 05:25

The noodles of Vietnam are quite different. As you will know, having been a frequent visitor and part time resident, I guess we could say. The noodles in Vietnam are a form- that in addition to rice, of course, the noodles of Vietnam first of all, are not wheat-based noodles, like we are used to, they are all made of rice. It is a rice growing country. So, noodles here, first of all, are made from rice, which makes them quite different. But they also form the fabric of so many of the great Vietnamese foods that travelers love to experience here. Whether it is street food, or in the restaurants, noodles are really key

to the fabric. We could say Vietnamese food income, as I hope will talk about in many different- related but many different forms, and almost always fresh. Something we also, in the West and most parts of the world are not used to. Fresh means you use them in a few days, or as we do in our restaurants, they go to the pig farm, we do not throw them out, but they go to the pig farmers and the pigs enjoy them, but they are only good for a few days because they are legitimately fresh noodles. And that is true pretty much throughout the country.

**Kerry Newsome:** 06:42

Yeah, and I think that was one of the most fascinating aspects of them. When I first visually saw the noodles, I was in a market, and I want you to explain that a bit more. But I know in 2019, I took my grandson, and we went to a market in Hội An and I said I want to show you noodle making and noodles, and a typical 16-year-old, he went "Oh gosh! What are you going to tell me about noodles? They come in a packet blah blah blah". I said, "Well not exactly". This is a whole new spin, and you could just see his eyes roll when he saw these fresh noodles in rattan baskets etc. and you know a girl actually making them on the spot, right in the middle of the markets alongside everything else. So, talk to us a little bit about that making process and how it all comes together and selling in the markets?

**Neal Bermas:** 07:48

Okay. I would be delighted. By the way we call those, typically women, "Noodle Ladies" in the market.

**Kerry Newsome:** 07:56

Okay, I did not know that. Noodle Ladies.

**Neal Bermas:** 08:00

And that is with a lot of respect and reverence. And Hội An, which is where we are based, is I think some of the most beautiful authentic markets in the country, because it is not such an urban area. The noodle ladies are the ones that make and then sell a variety of different homemade noodles and in Hội An, and the center where we are particularly famous for a few noodles, which we will talk about, I am sure.

08:37

Some families specialized for generations in making a particular type of noodle. For example, we will talk about later. For example, Cao lầu is perhaps the most famous noodle dish special to Hội An in the central regions of Vietnam. Cao lầu made by the same family- really the best Cao lầu, there are imitations, for sure. But the best Cao lầu that most places serve are made by the third generation of the same family in Hội An and the noodle ladies, back to our noodle ladies, they do not make Cao lầu, they buy it from the Cao lầu families. For example, because Cao lầu making is a different type of noodle than all the other noodles.

09:33

Now to talk about how noodles are made. Almost all of the noodles that we talked about and that we eat, and we love in Vietnam, as I said, are made very simple. The noodles are not simple to get right but the recipe or the formula is pretty simple. It is ground rice and water, simple. And then an overnight soaking process. Now that is simple, and as you mentioned, our cooking programme that we are going

to talk about later, in Hội An, we make some of this ourselves, the challenge is getting the proportions of water to rice correct! When you mix up, you are making, you are ending up with like a paste or gruel, some people would call it. And some noodle makers say, it is one to one. Some noodle makers say it is two to one, some say it is one and a half to two. And I have lived here in Vietnam over a decade, I have a Vietnamese family. So, I probably know noodles as well as a foreigner could ever know noodles.

**Kerry Newsome:** 10:53

That is why you are here [laughing].

**Neal Bermas:** 10:56

I think that the difference is that if you could eat the same noodle, in different locations, it will have a slightly different consistency and also different rice comes apart when you grind it in different ways and a quintessential Vietnamese noodle maker will know that as soon as they look at the rice, and that affects how much water. This may be more than most people want to know but anyway, it is a simple formula and that is why the ratio varies when you ask, or you try to make it yourself a little bit differently because I think of the consistency in a particular rice.

11:40

So that when you have made this paste, some people call it a gruel, you could call it a batter. So that you have made that and that is the same for many different kinds of noodles that are eaten all over Vietnam, many kinds of different dishes, then you take that gruel or paste, and you have one form or another of how you cook it. But it all comes down to the same way. In the old days and still many families would do this and the noodle ladies, some of them must do this over a wood burning fire. There will be a large cauldron, a large pot of boiling water and over the top of that will be some sort of, we call it a skin, some form of a very light, maybe a cotton or other material that hopefully has less chemicals rather than more chemicals in that paper or the skin, and that's tight over this boiling water underneath it.

12:49

So, in a sense if you could picture it, it is a steamer. It is an open-air steamer, but the first step in cooking and making Vietnamese noodles is, you steam them. So then on that skin taking what we in the West would call a ladle. Although in Vietnam we use, and I think many of our guests like to buy these and take them home I am sure you have seen them. It is half a coconut shell, cleaned out with a branch or some other bark from another tree put through it and that forms your very authentic wood ladle, that you put into this rice paste. Remember the brown rice and water? And just like you make pancakes, you form typically some kind of circle spilling that out gently onto this skin. Depending on the size of skin, you can do one very large one, you could do two or three different sizes, etc.

13:50

In our restaurant we do it over a simple cooker, a pot cooker. We are very careful about the cotton we use, that is an organic cotton with no or with virtually as far as we know no chemicals in it that is stretched through the rim over this pot of boiling water. We do use the coconut ladles because I love them. They just look good, they feel good, and it just reminds us, I am not sure-

**Kerry Newsome: 14:18**

Where you are.

**Neal Bermas: 14:19**

Where we are! And it is good to be here and then- just like a pancake, but of course like pancakes, you can also mess it up. If it is too thin, you start to get- it bubbles through. That is not good. If it is too thick, when you go to take it off, which is the next step, you cannot get it off in a clean sheet. And then you take it off again, there is a flat stick, you can use any tools like you might have pancake spatula, and you very slowly pick that up. Now you must remember that it is thin, and not easy to pick up. The pancake is much easier, the pancake is thicker, it is really thin skin.

15:12

And you then take that without falling apart, or what it wants to do is curl up on you. It is just dying to curl up on you, and you just do not want it to curl up. And I can tell you when we do this, and many guests doing this, it looks so simple and then of course the people that work in our programme and a lot of them are teenagers, they are very good at doing this and our guests even we have chefs start to pick up these skins, that they are falling apart and there is a lot of laughter.

15:52

Okay, so now you have the skin, and you are trying to get it to wherever you are going to do your cutting. Now, this is also one of the most important fascinating parts of the Vietnamese noodles, because they still are largely hand cut. They're either just like I've said their hand cut meaning, you lay them down on a cutting platform and you cut them the way you want. I'll talk in a minute about the different types of noodles and what they go through, what some of us who are lucky to have, maybe grandmothers had a hand driven noodle cutting machine and you take this thin rice, let's say it used over pancake and you put it through this machine, a hand machine there's no electricity, no battery, and then your noodles come out the other end.

**Kerry Newsome: 16:47**

And then they roll even-

**Neal Bermas: 16:49**

And then they are kind of even- different, even as hand cutting, not machine, not really fancy, geared up machines. And there you have your noodles, and you can eat those. And we in our classes, we taste them, and they taste really quite good. And that is your fresh noodle, that forms the basis of almost all noodles in Vietnam.

**Kerry Newsome: 17:19**

I have seen, as you say, many times, a person thinks very positively that they can just grab that stick and just slide that under that [inaudible 17:33] and they are looking very confident and then all of a sudden, that does not go where they wanted to, because as you said, it does curl up, and everyone is watching them, because they're going to do the demonstration on behalf of their family or group members or whatever and it's been hilarious to say that those noodle ladies are doing that all day effortlessly.

**Neal Bermas:** 18:08

They never drop or mess or one up. So, that is the basic, so that is pretty amazing in itself, no chemicals, no fat, very healthy fresh noodles. That is the basis, then depending on what kind of noodle for what kind of dish, you can do more, more things happen then, and I will tell you about three or four of them.

**Kerry Newsome:** 18:39

Let us go, let us talk about three or four of the main noodles.

**Neal Bermas:** 18:42

Most noodles that our friends and travelers will experience, they have not already yet. Okay, so the quintessential dish of Vietnam, H $\ddot{u}$ i An too. Of course, most people know it is Pho, and this is just an amazingly delicious noodle base soup, takes many hours to make really well. It is all fresh and we eat it throughout the country as you all know. We eat it on the street with many excellent and clean street vendors, of course we do not eat it from the street vendors who are not like that and almost I think it is fair to say if not all majority of Vietnamese restaurants regardless of their approach have Pho on the menu.

19:33

Vietnamese eat it early in the morning for breakfast or before and for lunch and for dinner and for a late-night snack. Pho can be made- basically there are two types, beef, or chicken. Pho Bo which is beef, or Pho Ga which is chicken, and they taste different because of the stock it is made of. But let us get back, noodle is the same. Now the Pho noodle, you can do it two different ways. You can take the noodle we just talked about if you have cut them long and thin and that is a Pho noodle. More commonly because Pho is such a popular dish all over the country. So now you start to think about shipping and moving the noodles around the country without going bad, because remember, these are fresh noodles and get very perishable and there are no preservatives.

20:35

So, the next step for most Pho noodles and a few others is you bake them or dry them. And the way, I say, bake a little bit tongue and cheek. You bake them in the sun, not in ovens and there are almost no ovens except commercial kitchens in Vietnam and even then, we try not to use it because it is so darn hot here all the time, that who wants to make more heat. But those noodles and one of the-- especially in H $\ddot{u}$ i An, as you know Kerry for people that want to stroll in H $\ddot{u}$ i An as you will know the UNESCO World Heritage Site. And the scent, the old historic center is a walking area, you can walk in very safely. You can still walk down these alleys today. Not right now during the pandemic, unfortunately, but soon we will be back I am sure stronger than ever. And you can see in front of families and noodle ladies' houses, reams and reams on what we would think of as screens for Pho and other- but let's stick with Pho noodles, stretched out drying in the sun and that's how they get baked.

21:58

So that dries them. And there will be tons of them and beautiful photographs that people love to take of noodles, drying in the sun outside of the yellow wash and orange wash local homes. And that

preserves them. So now that noodle, once it is sun dried, is good for a long time. I do not know what the shelf life is, they do not stamp it here, but they are good for a very long time. Families keep them for months and months at least. So that is your Pho noodle then is sun dried. It is almost we could say crispy or the same- it is like the noodles we are used to coming out of a box.

**Kerry Newsome:** 22:36

Now I know that the baking process actually was a form of preserving it. I did not realize that, because in some places I have visited, they have had the noodles, almost like on a clothesline, they have been draped over the string line and then some will be flat, and they will be just kind of lying out in the street. I did not realize that the baking process actually preserved them for a longer time. But it makes sense as you say, if they are going to move the noodles around the country, of which, like, there's just 1000s of places and, we are going to talk about some dishes, that it is quintessential that they have the noodle because it is part, it is intrinsic to the dish. Now, It is kind of gelling in my brain, now that is how they get it, fresh and baked, it is not artificial. It is not coming out of a box ever.

**Neal Bermas:** 23:50

That is right. It is not coming out of a box ever. So that is the Pho noodle, one of the quintessential- because that is the quintessential dish.

**Kerry Newsome:** 24:00

It is.

**Neal Bermas:** 24:00

As you know, of Vietnam.

**Kerry Newsome:** 24:03

I know what you mean, like I live in Australia, and I have travelled all over the world. If I go to a Vietnamese restaurant, they are really hard pressed, to deliver up to me the Pho that I know, in Vietnam, and I think as you say, it is because of that long cooking process of the broth. The magic is in the broth. And I think as much as- I have had a go at it, and I know other people would probably do far better than me but in Australia, it is very hard to get that, because to spend the time required and to find the freshness of the ingredients. Without preservatives and organic, all of that is hard to do, where in Vietnam, the aromas that come from its steaming will draw people in and as you say, it starts early in the morning, because they consider a more savory thing- they don't necessarily have something sweet for breakfast, they have something more savory and Pho is the optimum, sometimes you can go to try and get Pho, and it's only nine or 10 o'clock and it's gone.

**Neal Bermas:** 25:29

They are sold out.

**Kerry Newsome:** 25:30

Yes, it has gone because everyone has come early and had first, so, I totally agree with you, it is always my go-to, and I make sure I get as much of it into me as I can while I am there. So, I remember, yes.

**Neal Bermas:** 25:47

So that's Pho and yes, there are not many people getting up, unless it's their career, many families getting up to start broth at 04:30 in the morning anymore and are a little bit busier and more hectic world. And that is what it takes, and just to agree with you, and I think also is the herbs. I mean when the herbs that we use, the family use, that we use in our places here. I mean, those herbs came from a farm within a close distance by bicycle, or motorbike, and probably were harvested that day or within two or three days before I buy an urban Melbourne or in New York or I am from London, that herb has not seen ground in weeks.

**Kerry Newsome:** 26:47

It is so true. [crosstalk]

**Neal Bermas:** 26:52

It has probably seen the back of a truck for the last two weeks and so we use a lot-

**Kerry Newsome:** 26:59

Can I just interject with that? With that comes some shock systems for our tummies. Now, it is fair to say that we are not or the average Western person that would be visiting Vietnam would not be experiencing this level of freshness and the soil is very different in Vietnam as well. So, when those herbs hit your tummy, and those broths and things like that, sometimes you can have a reaction and not a necessarily favorable one. But I tried to warn people about that, because I want people to have a good experience of the food and not automatically just painted, as if there is something wrong or the food is not fresh, that is most likely not the case. It is more the case that you are experiencing some different levels of tastes and flavors, herbs, spices, and all sorts of things that your tummy is just not used to. So sometimes a probiotic is a very good idea.

**Kerry Newsome:** 28:23

I've mentioned that in my trip planning episode, back when I first started this, so, you can take that a couple of days before you arrive into Vietnam and that kind of gets your tummy a little bit used to things and, you may have to take some anti-diarrhea or etc., that kind of thing down the track, but it usually settles down in two or three days and then you can kind of march on and really enjoy it but I think, I just wanted to interject with that.

**Neal Bermas:** 28:54

I am glad you did. Your experience and your advices are terrific. It is spot on. It is not a big worry in Vietnam, as it might be in some of the surrounding Southeast Asian countries. I have had food poisoning all over the world, including one of the best restaurants in Paris and a pretty notable friend's but still notable restaurant in New York. I mean, you get food poisoning, we do not really love, it is just part of life from all kinds of things. But by and large in Vietnam, because it is so fresh, and not preserved, that when they are bad, they show it and smell quickly. And I think also some of the things you said, it's mostly not always- mostly a question of just getting used to it and just to add to that point, for Pho, when Pho is served, it's a large bowl, this amazing broth, and depending on whether it's chicken or beef, parts of that protein in it and then it's topped with an assortment of herbs, and often



bean sprouts and lettuce, but correctly and almost everyone will do this even the most local places, it's served on the side and you decide how much you want to take or not take.

30:24

What I encourage people to- just like you have said Kerry, is to start out with just a little bit the first day or two and let your stomach get used to these different herbs, different grounds, etc. And the beansprouts which are really delicious. If a little tip on that is, the more modern way is to serve them steamed. The old way was to serve them raw completely. Most places and even I and I'm pretty well adjusted here, to my stomach is anyway, you can ask any restaurant including a local noodle stall, if they give you your bean sprouts fresh and raw to please steam up and even if you don't speak Vietnamese, you can show them and they'll understand quickly and that's a good way to also sure that you don't get sick and you can still enjoy the local food.

31:24

So that is fun. Let us move on then to probably the next most popular and well-known noodle called **Bun, spelled B U N**, a noodle that in recent years, the former president of the United States, Obama made very famous because he had a Bun dish in Hanoi. so, Bun is another noodle, but it has a little twist to it. And it is made with many different dishes. It starts out exactly the same as Pho, except there is an extra step in the Bun noodle.

32:03

In the Bun noodle, after you can go back to the noodles, you have this rice and water paste that you make it sat overnight, the rice has to sit overnight. And then you could use the paste in the morning to make your noodles. The Bun noodle has a second overnight when it has been made really the artisanal local way, a second night of soaking. If you will, after it has been made, it is soaked in salt water, because if you have ever noticed, Bun noodle has a slight smell to it. It is just slightly fermented. Once in a while a very foreigner will pick up and at first, they question "What's that smell?" because they are not used to it. It is a very light hint of a fermentation. And in fact, it is a white fermentation, which makes it a little bit stickier. And it does have a slight flavor to it of this fermentation from salt that is all, a little salt water, a second night of soaking. And then Bun as you know is served, typically at room temperature. You must also serve that Bun noodle- if it is past its expiration date, which isn't stamped on it, is about three or four days it really starts to smell because the fermentation gets going, and so you'll know that if it's really strong.

**Kerry Newsome:** 33:32

It might bake that as well?

**Neal Bermas:** 33:34

No, bun never can be baked, Bun always has to be fresh noodle.

**Kerry Newsome:** 33:40

I am loving this, Neal; I didn't know this. This is great!

**Neal Bermas:** 33:44

My favorite, and you will see Bun, it is spelt like we were spelled Bun like we spell Bun for people when they get here. It is served in many different ways, room temperature, a big bowl of Bun with different types of things on top. My favorite is called and if you are in Hội An, this is one of the dishes not to miss called Bún thịt nướng. And you know this very well. It is just an amazing dish and basically what we would think of as barbecued pork. It is a particular cut of the pork that is, marinated very thin and herbs served on this Bun, Bún thịt nướng, nướng means barbecue, thịt is a type of pig or pork. It is very good. It is not fatty, pork in Vietnam sometimes can be fatty, we use pork belly a lot. So, it does have the fatty quality, but this is a very lean and really if there is one bun dish to try after you finish your first bowl of Bún thịt nướng and it is really good.

**Kerry Newsome:** 34:48

Definitely going in the list and on the show notes for sure Neal, absolutely. It has some spicy bits to it too, a bit of a crunch.

**Neal Bermas:** 34:57

Yes, they are often and that is important to say throughout Vietnam, and particularly for Bún thịt nướng, it traditionally will have peanuts. So, for people that are sensitive or have allergies, Vietnam is a place to be careful of. People who have those allergies, know how to be careful. But it certainly is indigenous to the food here is peanuts. They are grown here. They are sprinkled on a lot of things.

**Kerry Newsome:** 35:27

You can also have that on the side. I get a lot of people asking me about those things, it is gluten free and all that stuff.

**Neal Bermas:** 35:37

Yes, and then that is a use of the condiment in this case that they are on the side as well.

35:49

So, that's Bun. Now- and those are throughout the country. And they are a little bit different. I always encourage people that are taking some great journey north or south or south or north, have Pho in Hanoi in the north, right the capital and have Pho in the south and Saigon, (it is) very different, both delicious, but they are very different. And then Bun is everywhere because it has been made in all kinds of different ways. And we do not have enough time for me to go through all the different ways, but it is great.

**Kerry Newsome:** 36:22

Yes! part of the adventure, Neal.

**Neal Bermas:** 36:25

It is part of the adventure, just if you get a little bit of smell, it is correct. It is fermented.

**Kerry Newsome:** 36:29

Yes, that is good. That is a great tip!

**Neal Bermas:** 36:39

There are two other noodles I want to talk about. There are two of the most famous noodles for people who have travelled Vietnam and people I think, have really enjoyed Vietnam and they come from Hội An, which is where we have our eateries and where I have lived for many years. And they are both amazing noodles. So let me talk about them, and they both have particular stories to them.

37:05

So, the first one is called Mì Quảng. Two words Mì and Quảng. What that means I will translate because I think it is interesting. Mì In Vietnamese, it means noodle and Quảng is Vietnam province, which is the major province of the central region where Hội An sets, so Mì Quảng literally translates into noodle of the province. Few people know this.

**Kerry Newsome:** 37:35

No, I do not know that either.

**Neal Bermas:** 37:36

Mì Quảng is probably from [inaudible 37:39] Mì particularly for me is the most interesting, most delicious noodle that you can have. It is not the most famous, but it is most delicious.

**Kerry Newsome:** 37:49

I do not think I have tried it.

**Neal Bermas:** 37:52

So **Mì Quảng**, the way that I first learned about Mì Quảng, I was wandering the streets early in the morning because Vietnam, certainly in the countryside as well, comes to life at 5:30 in the morning. Now that was a pretty bitter pill for a late night New Yorker to swallow on the first [inaudible 38:12]. I have adjusted.

38:18

So, Mì Quảng, Vietnamese most typically will eat, like you said, they like something savory in the morning. And they will have Mì Quảng, although you can have it all day, it is typically an early morning food. I walk around and see this noodle dish that people are eating all over in the streets of Hội An and Penang a bit and I did not know what it was, it has different colours in it and it would just look, and I finally braved that. I have followed the same rule for many years travelling. I am sure you have similar rules like you just said but hot food to be hot cold food to be cold and if a vendor's hands are dirty go to the next vendor.

**Kerry Newsome:** 38:20

That is just common sense.

**Neal Bermas:** 39:04

Yes, that is no matter how good the food may look. So, I found the place and I had this Mì Quảng dish and wow, it was amazing. It was again, a similar noodle to Pho but thicker and in many different very uneven cuts and it is not necessarily a dish for vegetarians, although we make a vegetarian. It has

shrimp and egg and pork all mixed into this and herbs. Again, I am not a full time vegetarian, but I appreciate it, but this is not a vegetarian dish at all.

**Kerry Newsome:** 39:46

Into the noodle?

**Neal Bermas:** 39:48

Yes, and as I have learned and just delicious as it could be.

**Kerry Newsome:** 39:56

Nothing like Bún tào?

**Neal Bermas:** 39:58

No, this is, Mì Quảng and I just kept eating it and it was not in any of the restaurants, it was with the street vendors.

**Kerry Newsome:** 40:11

The street vendors, wow!

**Neal Bermas:** 40:12

I could not find it in any of the 15 or 20 years ago. None of the restaurants had it and I started to ask around, what about this dish and why did not anybody have it in the restaurant. It was so delicious, not spicy at all and full of flavor. I learned that it takes easily four or five hours to cook the stock again. The stock is made from all these ingredients but then the ingredients are put back on top, so you have a fresh egg, typically quail eggs here right small really delicious eggs and fresh shrimp, not the shrimp necessarily that was used to make the stock and that sauce. It is really good.

**Kerry Newsome:** 40:52

Oh gosh, it is going on my list.

**Neal Bermas:** 40:53

Even my mouth is even watering. So, I asked Vietnamese friends that in restaurants that owners and operators of good local restaurants, "Why didn't you serve this **Mì Quảng**?" This dish is freaking amazing. People love this, we can get our hands around this. There is no snake in this.

**Kerry Newsome:** 41:17

Wait, we are going to talk about this. Do not jump to it.

**Neal Bermas:** 41:22

Okay, so here was the reason, now this is- when I was first really poking around 15 or 20 years ago things had changed a lot and the reason was the following: it gets back to what we said in the very beginning of the noodles we were used to. These are really hand cut noodles. Hand cut means lovely but imperfect. So, you did not go to culinary school. You are trying to finish your noodles so you cut them with a big Noodle cutting knife on, this is flat as we talked about before this flat round typically laid

out maybe we could call it a pancake again. So, it turns out, some pieces are thicker, with the width, some are wider, some are less wide, some capture the end of the arc in a different place. So, the end of the noodle is different and the responses to me were pretty damn good responses. Are you kidding? You foreigners think all noodles come out of the box and if they are not perfect, you should not eat them.

**Kerry Newsome:** 42:28

There is some truth in that, absolutely.

**Neal Bermas:** 42:32

There is truth to that, especially and I have learned a lot about that. Through the years now, when my foreigner friends, not foreign to me, foreign to Vietnam, come to the restaurant, about what gives them pause, because they are being careful about eating like everybody should be. We talked about it, and you see noodles, that are kind of misshapen and you are used to your pasta coming out of a box, you say “Whoa! did they cut the mold off in the end?”

**Kerry Newsome:** 43:09

Like, cut the mold off the end.

**Neal Bermas:** 43:11

I am saying that maybe one would imagine an American or an Aussie first time seeing that. Anyway, I just got that the flavor was so delicious, and it was so great. We were the first restaurant in Hội An to have Mì Quảng in our menu, in our first restaurant and we tell the story of it of course as well. And as you know, we have opened a separate restaurant that always serves Mì Quảng. it is “Oodles of Noodles”, and we see 10,000s of guests every year, now all the restaurants have it so that's Mì Quảng.

**Kerry Newsome:** 43:53

See this, if I can just interject, see there is the gold in education and knowledge, so you are giving that background story you know explaining fermentation and explaining not perfectly cut noodles, have not had the mold cut off, they were cut imperfectly but still perfect. There's gold in that. That is fantastic, Neal. I am so glad you shared that. I am learning heaps here and I have been 1000s of times and I go, because I try lots of things when I go, but I have not had that in Hội An. Gosh! It is on my list.

**Neal Bermas:** 44:36

I will make a special bowl for you and although it is in classic form, it is completely as I have said the ingredients not a vegetarian dish at all. We also figured out a way to make a vegetarian sauce using some fresh tomatoes and Tofu, and I would say we make a very I do not know if anyone else's doing it. Usually when they get it, we are doing it and they figure out how to do it also, but we make a really delicious effect. I prefer it, as I am becoming more vegetarian myself.

45:15

This is a good one to end up, because it is the quintessential, most famous guidebook any tour person will talk about Cao lầu and that you must eat Cao lầu in Hội An. It is a dish that has been made famous and made principally only in Hội An.

**Kerry Newsome: 45:36**

I cannot get it anywhere else.

**Neal Bermas: 45:38**

No, and by the way I do not work for the Chamber of Commerce I just had an early and ongoing job with Hội An.

**Kerry Newsome: 45:46**

Same.

**Neal Bermas: 45:49**

Cao lầu, you should not eat in some restaurants, and they will try to serve it in Hon Gai or sometime in Saigon which is Ho Chi Minh City but do not have it there. Again, it is a fresh noodle, and it has been made only by two of the same families that made it by the same somewhat secretive and folkloric recipe for generations and now if you have ever seen Cao lầu, it is a little bit brown. And it is a little bit thick, like some thick Japanese noodles that we are a little bit familiar with. It has the dimensions of that and even the consistency of that, but as I said it is a little bit brown rice a little bit brown colour.

46:34

Now I will tell you how **Cao lầu** noodle was made. I do not know the secret, but I have a general sense of how Cao lầu is made again, it is made similarly to how all the other noodles are made. However, in the noodle, again going back to that paste or that gruel right before we steam it. Cao lầu uses- you put some ash from a wood burning fire and a wood that has to come from Chàm Island. For those of you that do not know off the coast of Vietnam, Chàm Island, a Vietnamese island that you can go to visit a great snorkeling fishing village Island. From certain trees, like an ash type tree, you burn those to ash and some of that ash goes into making the noodle and if you think to make it a little bit more westernized, it is similar to adding a little bit of lye a little bit of an acidic to a recipe, and we are familiar with that. We do use that. We think of lye as poisonous and for drains, but a certain type of lye can be used. For example, it can be used in western dishes as some acidic component, and that's how Cao lầu is made. And then you need some ash from a wood burning fire.

48:08

Now, I have never seen those trees being brought in or the ash from Chàm island in 20 years but there is ash in it. Let us say that maybe I am just not there at the right time. The second part of the folklore is that the water that is used to make the Cao lầu noodle has to come from a particular well below, the Ba Le well, which is down one of the streets in Hội An not far from our restaurant. I have to tell you again, I know that well. There is definitely an old well there. There is no doubt about that. One, I am not sure I would want to eat anything that had anything to do with what was in that well, but I have been around the streets of Hội An, morning, noon and night. I have never seen anybody take any water that well. But the folklore is, and it could happen when I am not there but that you must use the water from that.

What I do know well, is that there are really only two families that make Cao lầu the really good Cao lầu that they then sell to the noodle ladies, of the noodle ladies, and this is the most famous, but it really

just comes from Hội An. So, it is a bit heavier noodle and again, it is typically served in a bowl and on top of it will be a slice for Westerners, usually lined with pork. A little bit of a grilled line of pork, thinly sliced, what we would call a crouton, kind of a crispy crouton.

**Kerry Newsome:** 49:39

It is very crispy, lovely.

**Neal Bermas:** 49:41

Some herbs and a brown sauce that comes from making the pork, poured all over it and that is delicious.

**Kerry Newsome:** 49:49

Absolutely delicious.

**Neal Bermas:** 49:51

So, I think we have talked about a lot of great noodles.

**Kerry Newsome:** 49:54

Neal, I have truly learned a lot today, and I am sure my listeners have as well. I am going to make sure that we put the names correctly in the Episode notes and that and of course, for everyone listening, when we finish the episode and it is published, and you can listen to it, we also produce a transcript from the episode. So, if you wanted to, you could go to the website, [www.whataboutvietnam.com](http://www.whataboutvietnam.com), and you can print off the transcript.

50:14

Where if you see fresh meat, and sometimes that can appear in the markets in the mornings, etc., When you see it, for some people, they find that confronting, that meat is usually sold in a couple of hours, and they might only do one or two kills a day and so the restaurant does get there early and get that meat and that is fresh.

50:22

So you can highlight the dishes that Neal has mentioned, and some of the particular elements of those dishes that may be helpful to yourself when you decide to eventually come to Vietnam and enjoy them, because definitely, Vietnam is about the food, the food is distinctly fresh, and it's well known for that. I just want to finish off on that freshness, because in our urban lifestyles, we don't actually get to physically see a lot of fresh anymore, in particular, things like meat, fish, and things like that, you'll see them in our supermarkets and things like that but as Neal said, they've probably been on a truck for two weeks before they got there.

51:52

So that is the one of the big differences that I try to mention to people, when they are asking about food is that fresh, or freshness that they talk about extends to things like that but also now you are hearing from Neal, that it extends to noodles and we have learned a lot about the baking process to preserve it.

52:08

Neal, I just want to say thank you so much for your time today. It has been a really entertaining episode. I have really loved it and I think for everyone they have really learned a lot about noodles, and we hope to come and enjoy them at [STREETS International](#) when the doors are open.

**Neal Bermas:** 52:34

Great, thank you.

52:36

Thank you for listening. Check out the episode's notes for more information.

52:41

What about Vietnam, do not forget to subscribe rate and review and stay tuned for more fun adventures in Vietnam.

53:01

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Transcribed by:  
**Diya Jaffery**  
**[fiverr.com/diyajaffery](https://www.fiverr.com/diyajaffery)**