

Cooking class Hanoi



VISUAL FEAST: (Clockwise from above) Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi; chef Nguyen Thanh Van and some of the ingredients used in the classes.

Wish you
were here

Getting there

Jetstar flies regularly between Melbourne and Ho Chi Minh City via Darwin, with Jetsaver Light fares available from \$339 one way.

Jetstar Pacific has multiple daily flights between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

More information:

www.jetstar.com or
phone 131 538.

Staying there

Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi, 15 Ngo Quyen St, Hanoi. Rooms in the neo-classical Opera Wing start from \$A210. Standard rooms in the historic Metropole wing start from \$A268, with Club Floor rooms from \$A290.

www.sofitel.com

Cooking there

Half-day cooking classes include a market visit and lunch or dinner at Spices Garden restaurant. Participants receive a goodie bag of recipes, dried ingredients, traditional utensils and apron. \$US100.

Herbs, spice and all things nice

Briar Jensen discovers a food lover's haven inside an iconic, century-old Hanoi hotel

"VIETNAMESE is the cuisine of herbs," says Nguyen Thanh Van, from Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi.

But she stresses the herbs and spices must not overpower the meat or fish; they must complement the dish and "create harmony".

I'm attending the hotel's cooking class, run by assistant executive chef Van. It usually starts with a walk through the local fresh food market to learn about Vietnamese ingredients, but it's bucketing rain outside, so Van is giving me a lesson on Vietnamese herbs in the kitchen.

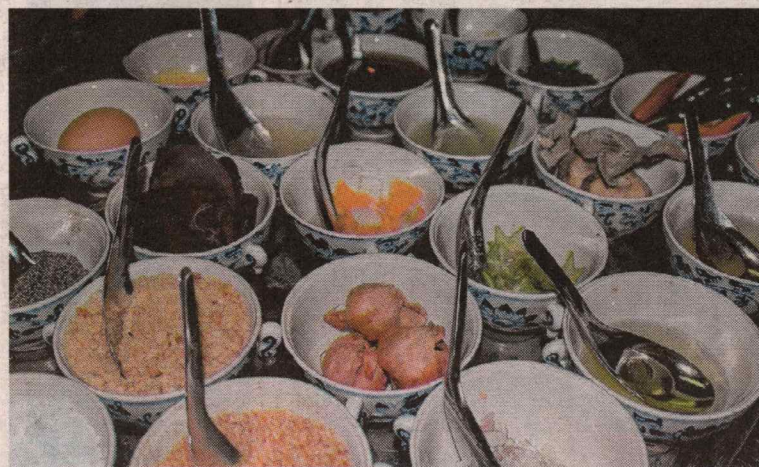
The Metropole is a food lover's haven, with enough restaurants and bars to keep me occupied for a week (I wish), from the sidewalk cafe La Terrasse to the fine dining Le Beaulieu, whose extravagant Sunday buffet looks as if it could feed all of Hanoi.

Spices Garden restaurant specialises in Vietnamese cuisine while contemporary, moody Angelina dishes up Italian. High tea and a chocolate buffet complement meals in Le Club restaurant, which transforms into a sultry late-night jazz venue, while the open-sided Bamboo Bar offers a

relaxed, casual ambience by the pool. If I feel peckish between meals (highly unlikely), I could stop by the in-house French delicatessen, L'Epicierie du Metropole, or, thanks to the privilege of my room, pop into the club lounge for complimentary French champagne and canapés.

Built in 1901, near Hoan Kiem Lake, the hotel is part of Sofitel's Legend group – iconic century-old hotels rich in history and culture. From its opening, the hotel attracted colonial society's elite, including Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham. Charlie Chaplin and his wife Paulette Goddard spent their honeymoon here, and you can book their suite with its original timber floors and telephone. Recently renovated, the hotel exudes heritage and sophistication – from ceramic-adorned antique furniture in the reception area to historic Louis Vuitton travelling trunks (which I secretly covet) displayed in the foyer.

My room in the new Opera Wing comes with butler service. I forgo the offer to unpack, but indulge in having my "bath drawn". The suite fills with heady jasmine fragrance as the



bathwater is whipped into a froth of enveloping bubbles.

This attention to detail extends to the kitchen, where Van and her assistant, Lien, combine ingredients with skill and care.

As well as herbs, of which there are traditionally at least two or three in each dish, fish sauce is universal. But not just any fish sauce – there is Phu Quoc, a mild version from the south, and Cat Hai, its saltier, fishier northern cousin, with numerous variations in between.

Our first dish is nom hoa chuoi – banana flower salad. I've never seen a

banana flower before, and it looks like a purple corn cob until Van peels away the leaves to reveal the delicate banana buds within.

The thinly sliced leaves are soaked in lemon-infused water before being rinsed and combined with julienned pork and chicken, bean sprouts, herbs, chilli, nuts and fish sauce. The result is deliciously light and refreshing.

Next I tackle nem ran Ha Noi or Hanoi spring rolls, which include green papaya and jicama, a cross between a pear and turnip with a crunchy texture. After I fold delicate rice paper around the minced pork



mixture, Lien deep fries them while I move on to marinated pork in bamboo, steamed snakehead fish with beer and herbs, and sauteed pumpkin branches with garlic.

Van understands the difficulty of sourcing some ingredients in Australia and helpfully suggests alternatives, ensuring I can attempt to re-create these dishes at home. Pity the ingredients won't come in delicate china bowls, already measured, diced, chopped and ground, as in her class. **The writer travelled courtesy of Jetstar and was a guest of Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi.**

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