

# DIRT-CHEAP DINING

Get past the grubby surrounds of Hanoi's street canteens, you won't regret it, says **Chris Canty**



**D**uring certain times of the day, Vietnam's exquisite capital seems like one big roadside restaurant. Every conceivable space and corner, whether under the canopy of a railway bridge, down a deep alleyway or in the middle of an intersection, is converted into an open-air eatery. It's just part of the locals' daily ritual to sit on tiny red kindergarten chairs and hunch over their bowls with incomprehensible flexibility.

After mealtimes, however, Hanoi becomes a culinary ghost town, where the furniture is whisked away, napkins stored and all that remains are various scavenging rodents and pets.

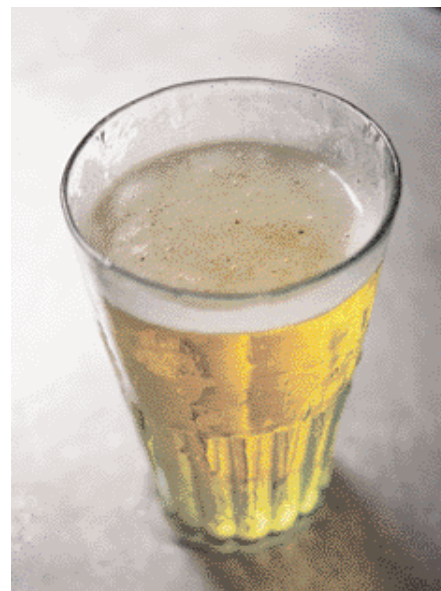
Technically, the term "street kitchen" cannot directly apply to these informal tables because the matriarch is often found cooking indoors, while her children deliver the orders to diners scattered all over the street, sidewalk, driveway and along the gutter.

With hardly any English spoken and no menu to speak of, the "point at what you want" method is, by far for us, the least time consuming and the cause of most amusement for other patrons.

You would be right to wonder why most of the eateries in this following food guide don't have names – that's because most shops serve only one dish or a variation of it. So, it's not uncommon to go to separate places for one's entrée, main course and dessert.

Hygiene is not the most important factor for the Vietnamese.

In fact, most eateries look incredibly dirty, but rest assured, the food is prepared properly (it is the seller's livelihood after all). But if you're still leery of conditions, do then as the residents do and pair your meal with generous swigs of beer, which should take care of any unwanted germs. So squat down, bend over and enjoy the theatrics of Hanoi's tantalising roadside options.



**PHO BO**

**113 Nguyen Troung To Street,  
open 0600-0900, 1100- 1300  
and 1600-2000 daily**

When Didier Corlou, executive chef of the Sofitel Metropole Hotel, recommends a street kitchen, you listen up. Author of numerous books on Vietnamese cuisine, he is most well-known for his guide to *pho* stalls around the capital, simply titled *Pho*.

Pho is soup, more precisely the “best soup in the world”, he says, and is an institution for millions of early morning risers. While the booklet lists 80 recommended outlets, when asked to choose his favourite, he insists that the shop at 113 Nguyen Troung To, known for its piping *pho bo* (beef soup) was the best.

The broth might look simple, but it's often the magical end result of blending over 24 ingredients, such as lime, chilli, onion in a sea of flat rice noodles. The place itself is a no-frills establishment, where people going to work or coming from, slurp quickly and don't bother to be social. But the pho itself is excellent. Typically cheap at 50 cents, it's one of the prime examples of Hanoi's most popular dishes.

**XOI VAN ANH**

**35 Nguyen Huu Huan Street,  
open 0600-2000**

One of the most ordered quick meals in Hanoi is *xoi xeo*, meaning sticky rice, made by steaming white rice dry and then soaking it to yield a chewy texture. Xoi Van Anh may be a tiny eatery, with no more than 12 chairs arranged on the sidewalk, but yet boasts a thriving takeaway business where motorbike riders shout out order from the one-way street. Vietnam's answer to a drive-thru.

Xoi Van Anh's delicacy is accompanied by green beans, onions and a choice of soybean cake, sweet sausage dried shredded pork, all costing no more than VND5,000 (31 cents) per serving.

**PHO CUON**

**26 Ngu Xa St, Truc Bac Street,  
open 1700-2100 daily**

Truc Bach village, situated 500m northwest of the old quarter, is a series of picturesque tree-lined lanes, deserted in the day, yet is packed with Hanoi's motorbike riding youth at night. The main reason they come is to patronise the perennially busy food stalls, more precisely, the house of Pho Cuon at 26 Ngu Xa Street.

Known as the best in the area, it serves up some lip-smacking *pho cuon*, which are fresh spring rolls, filled with beef, mint and coriander. Although anything but bland, dipping them into a bowl of fish sauce, chilli, green papaya and carrot, completes the perfect dish. At only VND1,500 each (9 cents), don't feel guilty if you order 10 at one go, because it's crazy value for money. If you wonder where everyone goes after 9 pm, head for the nearby Truc Bac Lake and spy on the couples as they share a coconut with two straws.





**CHA CA LA VONG**

14 Cha Ca Street, tel 84 4 823 9875,  
open 1000-1400 and 1700-2100 daily

The streets of Hanoi's old quarter were named hundreds of years ago based on what was sold on them. For example, Hang Gai means silk street and Hang Be means raft street. So, it comes no surprise that the best *cha ca* (roasted fish) is to be found at number 14 Cha Ca Street.

Operating since 1871, the Cha Ca La Vong has been in the Doan family for five generations now and built a reputation for serving only one dish, which is all it needs as it's never without an appreciative crowd. Historically one of Hanoi's most celebrated dishes, the *cha ca* here is still prepared in the traditional way – noodles, herbs and chopped fish cooked in a boiling pot on your table (similar to a Chinese steamboat) over a charcoal grill. A step up from the *hoi poloi* eateries (seating is indoor and the chairs are slightly bigger), this place is a must for those keen to have a taste of Hanoi's culinary past.

**BIA HOI CNR**

Corner of Ta Hien and Luong Ngoc  
Quyên Streets, open 1700-late daily

You haven't really experienced Hanoi, unless you sit around the gutter and drink freshly brewed Hanoi beer. *Bia hoi* (meaning "draft beer"), said to have been learnt from Czech brewers early last century, is sold by vendors from a solitary keg, and is ridiculously cheap at VND1,500 per glass (9 cents).

The barrels are delivered every morning and remain "fresh" only for a couple of days. So odds are it's the freshest beer you will ever taste.

One of the best places to pull up has been nicknamed by expat residents as "bia hoi cnr", a hotspot of activity from five pm every night, where kegs are placed on all four corners of the road. It's also one of the only places in the country where you can find locals, resident foreigners and travellers mingling together and with food passing by you every five minutes on the backs of mobile food hawkers (25 cents for roasted dried fish, 30 cents for pork kebabs in rolls, 13 cents for doughnuts). ■

**WHAT TO BRING**

**AN EMPTY BLADDER.** Toilets can be best described as a pungent experience, so it's best to hold on.

**LOOSE CHANGE.** Due to the extremely low prices, bring lots of small money.

**A LEASH.** With the omnipresent bevy of dogs and cats acting as automatic rubbish bins, expect any food scraps to vanish instantaneously as these hit the ground. Napkins and anything else disposable are thrown into the gutter for the night female garbage attendant to collect.

**A SMILE.** All tables are communal, so don't be embarrassed to sit amongst a family of eight enjoying their meal.



PHOTOS: JONATHAN NASH