



Chris Shepherd photos / For the Chronicle



A woman sells three types of rice porridge on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

By Chris Shepherd

Editor's note: James Beard Award-winning chef Chris Shepherd, whose menu at Underbelly restaurant is inspired by Houston's melting pot of cuisines, recently traveled to Vietnam. The Chronicle asked him to write about his trip.

When I opened Underbelly three years ago, my goal was to showcase Houston through its food and many flavors. As a chef, I find menu inspiration every time I go out to eat — whether it's for Chinese dim sum, Mediterranean-style shawarma, Korean bulgogi or pho, the omnipresent Vietnamese noodle soup. However, though I am moved by all of the above, it's the cuisine of Vietnam that most often wins my affections.

So when it came time to book a vacation, Vietnam seemed like a no-brainer. The goal of the trip was fairly simple: to experience first-hand the food and culture of the country that helps make Houston one of the most diverse cities in the U.S., with one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the nation. Over the course of two weeks, my girlfriend, Lindsey Brown, and I made — and ate — our

way from the south to the north and back again. We dined in restaurants; sat on tiny stools with vendors on street corners; prowled markets; went squid fishing at night; met many passionate people (and helpful guides); and even encountered a little bit of Houston in Vietnam along the way.

Ho Chi Minh City

Vietnam's largest city, formerly known as Saigon, can be overwhelming with its sights, sounds and buzzing motorbikes — especially for culinary-curious, first-time visitors from Texas. Which is why we decided to spend our first two days in the country with Calvin Godfrey.

Calvin, an American who has lived in Ho Chi Minh City for five years, is a journalist by trade; he also creates custom food tours. The *Local continues on L5*

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Above: Halong Bay, Vietnam. Inset, top to bottom: snails at Oc Co Truoc, spicy soup with tapioca noodles and pig's foot at Banh Canh Mong Heo, traditional wonton soup and pork chops with broken rice, all in Ho Chi Minh City.

WEEKEND GETAWAY

BIG BEND IN BLOOM



Spring is the perfect time for a West Texas road trip. **Page L6**

Laid-back, Caribbean vibe works for couple's Kingwood home

By Alyson Ward

Caribbean music is playing lightly from an iPad in the kitchen. A sea splash leaps out from a canvas on one wall in the living room, and a framed island sunrise brightens the dining area nearby.

Wendy and Trevor Montoute, both natives of Trinidad, have made their new patio home in Kingwood a welcoming space that reminds them of their roots.

For more than 20 years, the couple lived — and raised four children — in a five-bedroom, two-story home in Sugar Land. But once the kids were out of the house, the Montoutes started looking ahead to retirement and thinking about where they'd like to spend the next phase of their lives.

"We were interested in downsizing but not downgrading," Wendy says. So in 2013, they bought a lot in Kingwood and built a

2,800 square foot home — a smaller place that didn't have stairs or extra rooms they wouldn't use.

When the couple moved in last year, they handed down most of the old furniture to their son because they wanted to start over fresh with a new look. Enter Cecilia Pacheco, a local interior designer who has, over the past several months, helped the Montoutes inject their living spaces *Caribbean continues on L4*



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Big windows light an open dining area, where chartreuse chairs surround a wooden table. Wendy and Trevor Montoute wanted bold colors to give their home a Caribbean vibe.

ESCAPES

Local chef inspired by Vietnam trip

Local from page L1

guy really knows where to eat, and speaks Vietnamese, so we didn't have to worry about finding all the best under-the-radar spots on our own.

We must've hit two dozen restaurants, cafes and food stalls with him. First there were snails — tiny ones cooked in coconut milk, large ones cooked in chiles and garlic — at Oc Co Truoc, a makeshift restaurant in a small alleyway set up with a few charcoal grills and little chairs. Then, in quick succession, we met a captivating woman selling three different types of rice porridge on a street corner and encountered another woman, outside Ho Chi Minh's April 30 Park, who was making a toasted rice paper filled with ground pork, ground shrimp, herbs and quail egg. This quesadilla-like dish was so good that I've asked about it at several restaurants in Houston's Asiatown since we returned from Vietnam. Unfortunately, I haven't found it yet.

Somewhere along the way — between grilled pork cheeks wrapped in mustard-green leaves and a visit to Kim Salon for a \$7 hair/face wash — Calvin got a serious look on his face and said, "It's open now. We need to go."

"It" turned out to be a small stand, open only 3-4 p.m., where four sisters put out a very special soup: Banh Canh Mong Heo. When they run out, they run out. The dish involves a slightly spicy broth with tapioca noodles and braised pig's foot. Calvin made sure we got the special bowls, the ones with the toes.

I wasn't sure we could top that, but we managed just fine. There was a trip to Quoc Ky near the chaotic Ben Thanh Market, where I had a bowl of pho that was perfect in every way — imagine your favorite bowl of pho, then add a roasted peanut element to it. We also hit a traditional wonton soup spot for Hu Tiu Mi Hoanh Thanh, a \$1.50 dish consisting of two bowls: one full of delicious stock with plump pork dumplings, the other with lightly cooked noodles that, after poaching, were bathed in rendered pork fat. The addition of sliced pork, herbs and chiles blew my mind.

There were other highlights in Ho Chi Minh City, including a 24-hour street-side spot selling sweet-chile-marinated, grilled-to-a-charry-crunch chicken feet, but the most mind-blowing was the unassuming Quan Cau Ba. We got a table outside and ordered a beef salad dressed in a fruit vinaigrette with pineapple, raw Thai eggplant and mint. It was great. But then I looked inside and saw something very familiar: all the seasonings for a crawfish boil. My heart started to race, and I asked the owner what she uses the seasonings for.

She told me that she lived in Houston for six years and fell in love with the Vietnamese/Cajun-style crawfish places, and wanted to bring the style back to Vietnam. Sadly, crawfish weren't in season on our visit, but she put an order together using shrimp, corn, potatoes, sausage — the whole nine yards. I couldn't believe it. It was Vietnam influencing Houston and then Houston influencing Vietnam. I hope her ideas catch on.

Phu Quoc Island

A short flight from Ho Chi Minh City, Phu Quoc is a small island on the southwest coast of Vietnam, with beautiful white-sand beaches and a growing number of resorts.

We — by "we" I mostly mean me, but Lindsey is a good sport — were in Phu Quoc primarily to see the production of fish sauce, a staple in Vietnamese food and also the key ingredi-



Lindsey Brown

Underbelly chef Chris Shepherd poses with a street food vendor in Hanoi, Vietnam.

ent in the crispy-vegetables dish that's always on the menu at Underbelly. Specifically, I wanted to visit Red Boat, a small-batch fish-sauce company that uses high-quality anchovies caught right off the coast. So we met with Red Boat owner Cuong Pham, who left Vietnam in 1979 to come to the U.S. After working in the tech industry for years, he decided to make a change and come home.

Over a lunch of grilled squid and roll-your-own raw sardine spring rolls at Song Xanh restaurant, he told us why. He said he wanted to preserve the traditional method of fish-sauce production in Phu Quoc. Cuong makes fish sauce the hard way, the right way, with no additives. It is a passionate process to witness.

After lunch, we boarded a red boat to watch the unloading of salted anchovies. (The anchovies are salted right after they're caught to stop them from spoiling.) For the transfer to land, we met the fishing vessel, employees put a wooden plank in between the two boats, then slid massive buckets filled with little black anchovies across. Back at the dock, those buckets were unloaded by hand, brought to the Red Boat factory and left to ferment for about a year in wooden vats. They are eventually drained, and what's left is a deep, golden liquid — pure, unadulterated deliciousness.



That evening, we strolled through the night market. This is a must-do on Phu Quoc. You'll find tanks full of live seafood that are grilled or prepared right in front of you. Small fish, crabs, spiny lobster, sea urchin, every kind of clam, mussel and snail. Meats galore. I even passed beautiful frogs and snakes.

The next day we ventured to the tip of the island, where we ate at Bien Hai Quan. A seafood hot pot was ordered, with lots of shellfish, clams and fish roe simmering in a pungent, sour broth. As we watched the sun sink slowly into the ocean, Cambodia was visible on the horizon.

Hanoi

A tourist should mentally prepare for the 45-minute taxi ride into Hanoi from the airport. Our driver sped in and out of cars and motorbikes like he was driving in a NASCAR race.

After dropping our bags at the Hotel Metropole, we headed to the Hanoi Cooking Centre to meet Link Hoang, our guide for the afternoon. We started with a light but flavor-packed bowl of pho at Pho Huyen, then hit Cho Chau Long market to scope out local produce, fish, frogs and meats. We dropped by a small food stall on Ngo Dong Xuan Street to have bun cha (grilled pork and vermicelli with nuoc mam) and banh xeo, a turmeric crepe with pork, shrimp and bean sprouts.

Link also took us to Cafe Duy Tri, one of the oldest cafes in Hanoi, where he showed us a coffee that's famous in the region: coffee beans that are eaten by a weasel, then excreted by the weasel and harvested. Apparently, the weasel only eats the best beans, and then the acid in its stomach breaks down the outer coating of the bean, releasing a natural chocolate flavor. I didn't try it, but at \$3,000 a kilogram, it better be pretty magical stuff.

Another day, we set out on our own to eat the one dish everyone told us to try in Hanoi: Cha Ca, or fish pieces marinated in turmeric and sautéed

at your table with green onions, dill and cilantro, then wrapped in rice paper with more herbs and peanuts. Several people had told us the place to have it is Cha Ca La Vong, so that's where we went.

Dinner service at Cha Ca La Vong begins at 5 p.m. sharp. If you arrive even a few minutes before then, they will shoo you away like a large fly. Once you do get in, the service doesn't improve much. An employee slaps down a piece of paper that says, "only one dish in our restaurant, grilled fish." You nod, and they proceed to bring it out. The fish pieces are cooked in a good amount of oil at the table, then they top it with all the herbs. Was it good? Yes. Was it great? No. But it did become inspiration for the Cha Ca-style snapper dish I have added to the menu at Underbelly — and it has become a customer favorite.

Halong Bay

Overnight, two-day junk-boat cruises around Halong Bay are popular excursions for tourists in Hanoi, so we decided to give it a go.

Of the dozens of companies offering tours, we selected Paradise Cruises' most intimate ship, the Privilege. There was only one other couple on board and a crew of eight. Pretty amazing. Cruising on the bay, we were surrounded by gorgeous green water and giant limestone islands, and enjoyed checking out a pearl farm and exploring a cave filled with stalactites and stalagmites.

The food on board completely exceeded expectations. Lunch was beef and papaya salad, clams with lemongrass and other tasty items. Before dinner, there was a mini cooking class where employees showed us how to make crispy spring rolls, which we ate later along with Goi Ga (chicken and cabbage salad), shrimp with coconut curry, and a beef and enoki mushroom soup. Afterwards, we went squid fishing off the back of the boat.

The next morning we took a dinghy through a cave to a lagoon where a James Bond

movie apparently was filmed, though no one was sure which one. We also spotted some monkeys hanging out, just before we headed back to the harbor for a four-hour car ride back to Hanoi.

Hoi An

We landed at Da Nang airport — the closest to Hoi An, a 30-minute drive away — in the afternoon, where a car from our hotel picked us up. A friend of ours owns a villa at Nam Hai resort, near Hoi An, and she was kind enough to let us stay there. Very kind, it turns out.

Our car pulled in, and a team of no less than six people was waiting for us. We were then introduced to our "butler," which felt kind of weird for us to say so we decided to just refer to him as our "guy." Our guy, Thao, was awesome. Our beach villa, which was more like a compound and had a private pool, was breathtaking.

We did manage to pry ourselves away from Nam Hai to visit central Hoi An. We went to a restaurant called Miss Ly's to try three Hoi An classics: the White Rose (a small shrimp dumpling that's boiled and topped with fish sauce and chiles); a crispy wonton topped with tomato braised chicken; and Cau Lau, the city's most iconic dish. It is only made here, since the noodles can only be made using water from a specific well in Hoi An. The noodle, similar to a chewy udon noodle, is steamed three times before it comes to the table. The flavorful pork broth bristled with crunchy wontons, roasted pork, sweet chile purée, and lots of fresh herbs and lettuce. The best version of it we had was at a place called Thanh Cao Lau, a shop that only serves Cao Lau.

Hoi An also is home to the wonderful Banh Mi Phuong, a little eatery that offers several different types of banh mi: roasted pork, chicken, bacon, cold cut and omelet, and additional combos. We tried all of them. What makes Banh Mi Phuong so special is its bread. A local bakery next door brings over bread right out of the oven for the stunning sandwiches.

Nam Hai was so beautiful that we spent a lot of time there; we had a spa day, and ate several meals at the resort's ocean-view Vietnamese restaurant, which served a dish specific to the Da Nang region: Mi Quang, turmeric-scented rice noodles with pork, shrimp, herbs, shaved banana flower and chilies in a fish sauce-scented pork broth. What makes this dish is the addition of crushed roasted peanuts and a sesame-seed-studded crispy rice cracker. Shaved banana flower is one of my new favorite ingredients; it gives great texture to noodle dishes and salads.

We also got to meet Nam Hai's chef, who took us on a tour of the resort's garden. Now, when most people say they have a garden, they mean a small garden. This was a small farm with seven people working on it full time. They grow everything from herbs and tomatoes to mangoes and bananas, and deliver the goods to on-site restaurants throughout the day. I was a little jealous.

Heading home

We had just enough time to get one more meal in before we left, and it was a special one. Our old pal and first-day guide Calvin picked us up at the Ho Chi Minh City airport and took us to his girlfriend's house, where we got to eat a meal cooked by his girlfriend and her mother. They had prepared a passion fruit juice to welcome us, and followed up with a series of dishes: Panko-dusted fish wrapped with lettuce and herbs, braised pork with coconut sticky rice, mango salad, green papaya salad and lots of fresh fruit for dessert. It was a wonderful way to end the vacation.

Did I find what I was looking for in Vietnam? Yes, and more. I saw where the food that fills Houston comes from, and met the people who make it. It opened my eyes to new foods and processes that I already have implemented into my everyday philosophy of cooking at Underbelly.

Chris Shepherd is the chef at Underbelly restaurant in Houston. twitter.com/cspherhd13.

If you go

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines is currently offering reduced fares to Vietnam, starting at less than \$1,000 round-trip; singaporeair.com. Within the country, Shepherd flew Vietnam Airlines; vietnamairlines.com.

WHERE TO STAY

The Majestic: A longtime favorite of foreign dignitaries, historic hotel in Ho Chi Minh City with a 24-hour cafe. Rates from \$130 per night; majesticsaigon.com.vn.

Eden Resort: Property with large villas, private outdoor bathrooms and a beautiful view of the ocean on Phu Quoc Island. Rates from about \$100 per night; edenresort.com.vn.

Hotel Metropole: Well-located luxury hotel with a great pool-side bar in Hanoi. Rates from \$240 per night; sofitel-legend.com/hanoi/en/

Nam Hai: Five-star, private-villa resort near Hoi An. Rates from \$480 per night; ghmhotels.com/en/nam-hai.

WHAT TO DO

Red Boat Fish Sauce: redboatfishsauce.com

Savor Saigon: Customized food tours of Ho Chi Minh City lead by American expat Calvin Godfrey. \$100 per day, plus food and tax; savorsaigon.com.

Hanoi Cooking Centre: Offers cooking classes and the Street Eats & Market Tour, which is about \$59 per person; hanoicookingcentre.com.

Paradise Cruises: Company offering overnight junk-boat tours of Halong Bay. Price per person, including private-car transfers from Hanoi, is about \$500; paradisecruises.vn/en/index.html.