Building on Layers of Tradition

By JULIA MOSKIN APRIL 7, 2009

FRED HUA'S banh mi pho does not look like a cultural revolution. But in its juicy, messy way, it is. Served at Nha Toi in Brooklyn, where he is the chef and owner, banh mi pho is stuffed with the ingredients for pho, the sacred soup of Vietnam: beef scented with star anise and cinnamon, fresh basil and crunchy bean sprouts.

"I could never get away with this in San Jose," said Mr. Hua, referring to the city with a large Vietnamese-American community in Northern California, where he grew up. "New York has a history of being open to creative ideas."

At 31, Mr. Hua is part of a rising generation of American cooks of Vietnamese descent who are tinkering with a once-rigid culinary tradition.

They start by reinventing the banh mi — the classic street-vendor Vietnamese-French sandwich. They are taking it back to its roots with house-cured meats that blend French, Vietnamese and Chinese influences, but also nudging it forward with cross-cultural fillings (Polish sausage), local breads (crisp rolls from Parisi Bakery in Little Italy), and American influences like the sloppy Joe.

"My mother worked so hard to recreate the flavors of Vietnam in America," said Vinh Nguyen, the 29-year-old owner of Silent H, a few blocks away from Nha Toi. "We are doing it our way, but with respect."

If you haven't tried a classic banh mi, imagine all the cool, salty, crunchy, moist and hot contrasts of a really great bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich. Then add a funky undertone of pork liver and fermented anchovy, a gust of fresh coriander and screaming top notes of spice, sweetness and tang.

'THE GREENPOINT' Vinh Nguyen with his Polish kielbasa banh mi at Silent H in Brooklyn.
Evan Sung for The New York Times

Introduced to Vietnam by the French in the early 20th century, the first banh mi (pronounced BUN-mee) were just bread, butter and ham or pâté — the traditional, minimal Parisian sandwich. "Then, the Saigonese made things interesting," said Andrea Nguyen, a writer and food historian, referring to the riot of garnishes that lifts the sandwich from good to genius. The banh mi popular in America are in the style of Saigon — now Ho Chi Minh City, though most Vietnamese-American families, driven from the country in the 1960s and '70s, during the war, stick to the old name. Stacked with variations on cured and cooked pork, green herbs, sweet pickled vegetables, sliced chili peppers and at least a swipe of mayonnaise, banh mi are enfolded in a crisp, slim baguette. They are so rich in history, complex in flavor and full of contradictions that they make other sandwiches look dumb.

"In Vietnam, eating banh mi is all about the meats, which the vendors make themselves — and the bread," said Cathy Danh, who grew up in San Diego and writes about living and eating in Vietnam on her blog, gastronomyblog.com. "When banh mi came to America, they became supersized, with lots of fillings."

Young Vietnamese-Americans have long experience adapting the banh mi to local conditions. "When I was in college in New Orleans, the Vietnamese kids would buy a po' boy baguette, pull out the inside, put on liverwurst and Creole sausage and Miracle Whip," said Julie Luong, a Houston native. "We all had pickles that our mothers sent us, and that was our banh mi."

In New York, chefs are obsessing about precisely how to slice the cucumber, whether the carrot-daikon pickle should be crinkle-cut or julienned, and how to make the sandwich ever better, richer, spicier and bigger. "I think we're the only ones using both butter and mayonnaise," said Ratha Chau, the chef and a co-owner of Num Pang, a new sandwich shop in Greenwich Village. "And of course it's a chili mayonnaise and garlic butter, and we toast the bread with the garlic butter first so that the outside is crisp and the inside moist." At An Choi, which just opened on the Lower East Side, Tuan Bui, the 34-year-old co-owner, adds caramelized onions to the traditional filling of shredded roast chicken. He may be the first on the East Coast to serve the upscale delicacy banh mi thit heo quay — stuffed with banquet-style roast pork belly and slivers of crunchy pork skin.

New York has a relatively small Vietnamese population compared with hubs like Houston, Washington and the San Gabriel Valley in California, and it took a long time for even basic banh mi to arrive in the city in earnest. Now they can be found in all of New York's Chinatowns, in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. One of the best places in Manhattan, Banh Mi Saigon Bakery, is tucked into the back of a jewelry shop and another, Sau Voi Corp., does much of its business in cigarettes, lottery tickets and music CDs. In Sunset Park in Brooklyn, where more Vietnamese families live, bright shops like Thanh Da and Ba Xuyen are dedicated to banh mi and have the freshest bread.

Elsewhere in Brooklyn, where authenticity is not as strictly enforced, Vinh Nguyen has created a succulent banh mi at Silent H called the Greenpoint: a tribute to the area's many traditional Polish butcher shops. Instead of cha lua, smooth pork terrine, he lays on Krakowska kielbasa, a smoked sausage. "That smokiness and pepperiness makes perfect sense on a banh mi," he said. "I would be a fool to ignore these great traditional products being made in my neighborhood."

FOR A NEW AUDIENCE Among the sandwiches Thao Nguyen makes with her husband, Michael Huynh, at Baoguette is a spicy Sloppy Bao.
Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

Ratha Chau, a Cambodian-born chef, began curing bacon at his restaurant, Kampuchea, in 2007 in order to stuff a small menu of num pang — the Cambodian take on banh mi. They became so popular that, last month, Mr. Chau opened Num Pang, his all-sandwich shop. But slow down, bacon lovers: the bacon num pang is not available there, due to insufficient hanging space. Instead, he makes a pulled-pork version, using pork from Duroc hogs: the meat is braised with orange juice, apple cider vinegar, garlic and dried chilies, and glazed with honey.

Another is filled with skirt steak and cracked peppercorns, a kind of steak-au-poivre banh mi. "There is a lot more cooking involved here than you would imagine for a sandwich," he said. "I want to move forward with our cuisine, but I don't represent any country. I represent myself."

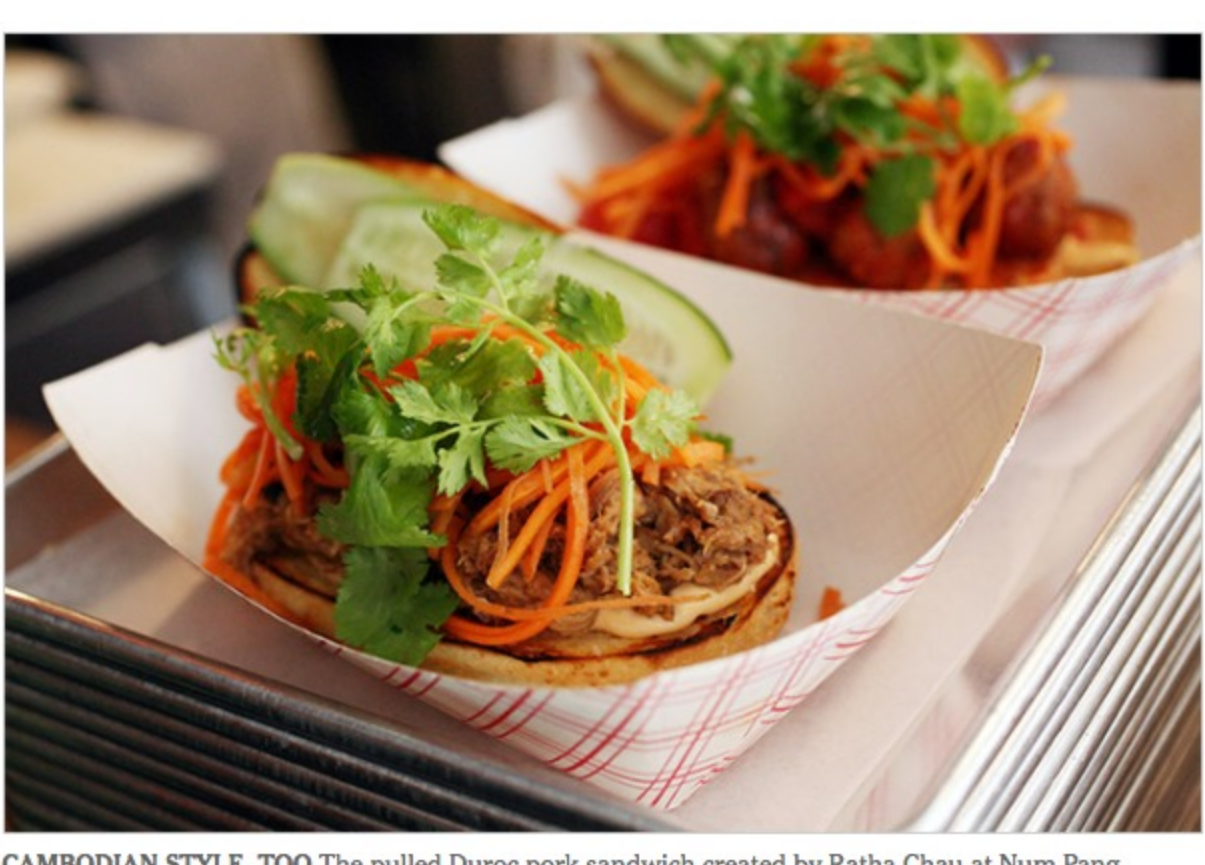
One reason for the sudden flowering of banh mi culture, chefs say, is that running a sandwich shop sounds easy compared with running a restaurant.

But to run a banh mi shop is to race against death.

"Bread dies after three hours," said Michael Huynh, a Vietnamese-American chef who has recently opened two new-style banh mi shops, both called Baoguette, in Manhattan.

The Vietnamese dedication to excellent, fresh baguettes is total. Using stale bread is the gravest offense a maker of banh mi can commit. In Vietnam, and in high-tech local bakeries (like Paris Bakery, in Manhattan's Chinatown), baguettes for banh mi are baked all day long; one chain in California claims fresh baguettes every 20 minutes.

In some shops that get bread only once a day, banh mi are notably more delicious before noon. Later, the bread is often reheated, which turns it tough if the sandwich isn't wolfed down quickly.



CAMBODIAN STYLE, TOO The pulled Duroc pork sandwich created by Ratha Chau at Num Pang.
Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

Even fresh baguettes can be unsatisfactory in various ways, according to Vietnamese cooks.

"The bread should be the frame for the sandwich, not the focus," Andrea Nguyen said. Her preference is a thin-crust white-flour supermarket-type baguette, rather than the chewy, artisanal kind that is generally considered "better" bread. Many of New York's banh mi artists have resorted to Italian bakeries, for bread with the right balance of crackle and chew and a lightly caramelized crust, and a shelf life of more than two hours.

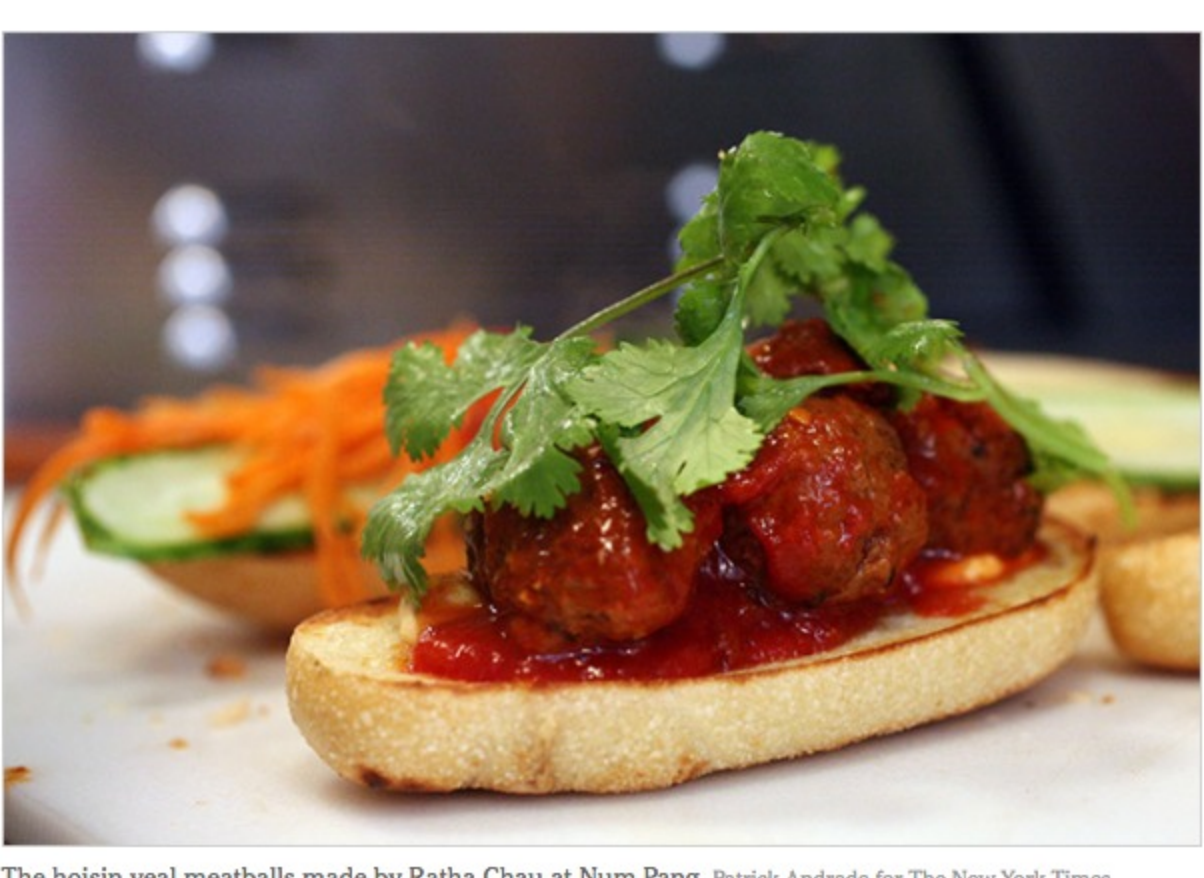
"This is America," Mr. Huynh said, gesturing around the tiny Baoguette shop in Gramercy Park, which holds an oven (for baking baguettes), bottles of fish sauce, tubs of Thai red curry paste, homemade chili-garlic sauce, and a gallon of French's mustard for the spicy catfish banh mi. "We can get the best quality of everything."

Mr. Huynh's wife, Thao Nguyen, grew up cooking in her family's restaurant in Da Nang, and moved to New York five years ago. She developed Baoguette's instant-hit playlist of banh mi, including the Sloppy Bao, soaked with a super-hot ground-pork curry that has already become legendary among the city's fire-eaters.

Like the other entrepreneurs, Ms. Nguyen took pains to develop a strictly classic banh mi dac biet, with pâté and a careful selection of cold meats, a gesture of respect toward the cooks who came before her. (It's as if every restaurant that serves New American cuisine felt responsible for keeping Alice Waters's green salad with warm goat cheese on the menu, forever.) But her other sandwiches are her own.

"If you eat it, and it reminds you of home, that is enough," she said. "It doesn't have to stay exactly the same."

Sometimes, the evolution of traditional foods can breathe new life into them, suggested Julie Tran. Ms. Tran is an owner of C. L. Saigon, a small-scale, family-run pork processor in Philadelphia that supplies many of the banh mi shops on the East Coast with their traditional cold cuts.



The hoisin veal meatballs made by Ratha Chau at Num Pang. Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

"These young Vietnamese entrepreneurs opening hoagie shops, it gives me hope that these recipes will survive beyond one generation," she said. ("Hoagie," of course, being the Philadelphian's term of art for sandwiches on long rolls.) "I thought it would all be gone."

Following are some establishments in New York City that serve banh mi.

AN CHOI 85 Orchard Street (Broome Street); (212) 226-3700.

BANH MI SAIGON BAKERY 138 Mott Street (Grand Street); (212) 941-1541.

BAOGUETTE 61 Lexington Avenue (25th Street); (212) 518-4089.

BAOGUETTE CAFE 37 St. Marks Place (Second Avenue); (347) 892-2614.

BA XUYEN 4222 Eighth Avenue (42nd Street), Sunset Park, Brooklyn; (718) 633-6601.

NHA TOI 160 Havemeyer Street (South Second Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 599-1820.

NUM PANG 21 East 12th Street (University Place); (212) 255-3271.

PARIS SANDWICH BAKERY CAFE 113 Mott Street (Hester Street); (212) 226-7221.

SAU VOI CORP. 101 Lafayette Street (Walker Street); (212) 226-8184.

SILENT H 79 Berry Street (North Ninth Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 218-7063.

THANH DA I 6008 Seventh Avenue (60th Street), Sunset Park, Brooklyn; (718) 492-3253.

THANH DA II 5624B Eighth Avenue (56th Street), Sunset Park, Brooklyn; (718) 492-3760.

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