

Chicken Phở, Two Ways

A steaming bowlful of Vietnam's famous rice noodle soup with chicken means a different thing in the north than it does in the south. Take your pick—or make them both.

BY LAN LAM



A Different Taste in Every Spoonful

Part of the pleasure of digging into a bowl of phở gà is how customizable it is. For starters, you can choose which broth to make—the more savory northern style on the opposite page or the sweeter, more warmly spiced southern iteration on page 6. Then you decide which and what quantity of garnishes particular to each version to place in your bowl. That's not all: You can engineer each bite to be exactly the same or mix it up by favoring a different element with every taste. Either way, as you slurp down the soup, pay attention to how heat from the piping-hot broth mellows the sharpness of the onion and scallions and triggers an outpouring of aromatic compounds from the herbs. Dip the chicken into the sauces, or stir the sauces into the broth (but do try a sip before tinkering—a customary courtesy in phở shops).

weekly treks to the Vietnamese grocery store. But I've always wanted to learn the process for myself, and I recently decided to do just that. I pored over recipes and consulted experts, all the while keeping an eye out for places to streamline. I wanted a rendition that would do justice to this famous noodle soup but also be simple enough to feed my frequent cravings.

A Perfect Broth

Everything about phở gà hinges on the quality of the broth. Many Vietnamese cooks like to load up the pot with a whole bird (if it's still got the collagen-rich feet attached, all the better) along with extra wings to give the broth a lip-sticking viscosity. But I found that a 4-pound chicken alone provided plenty of fat and collagen for a rich taste and nice body, and I also made sure to include the giblets for a hint of minerality, as some Vietnamese cooks do. I broke down my chicken into parts that fit more snugly in a Dutch oven and added just enough water to cover them, which minimized the time I needed to reduce the broth to concentrate it. With parts,

Cilantro and green chile are most traditional in northern-style phở; we also offer slivered makrut lime leaves and a gingery dipping sauce for dunking bites of chicken.

You'd never know it, but phở gà started out playing second fiddle. It wasn't until the Vietnamese government restricted beef slaughter in the 1930s that Hanoi cooks turned to chicken to make their brothy noodle soup. Of course, the poultry version was soon a triumph in its own right: clear; silky with gelatin; fragrant with spices and sweet-savory charred aromatics; and, above all, deeply, supremely chicken-y. Over time, street vendors and phở shops throughout Vietnam dedicated themselves to its craft, seasoning the broth with fish sauce and submerging nests of slippery rice strands (bánh phở) in each bowl along with pulled chicken and shaved onion. Diners mounded herbs over the top, a veritable crown of freshness and vibrancy.

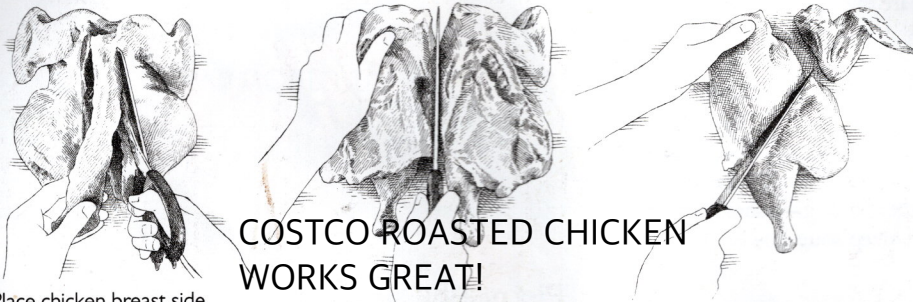
Like the beef-based original, phở gà became a quintessential breakfast for slurping down on the street but also a comfort food for savoring anytime, day or night. It saw the country through foreign occupation, civil war, separation, and reunification. Then, when the dish traveled to the United States during the waves of immigration in the '70s and '80s, more cooks made it at home.

"You would show up after church, and the smell of chicken fat and star anise and cinnamon was so in the air," said Soleil Ho, restaurant critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, recalling how her grandmother would wake early on Sunday mornings to start simmering the broth.

I don't have memories of my family cooking phở from scratch; it was more of an occasional treat on our

HOW TO BREAK DOWN THE CHICKEN

Breaking down the chicken allows it to fit more snugly in the pot, so we can use less water and have less liquid to reduce for a concentrated broth. Plus, we can take out the white meat early so that it won't overcook.



COSTCO ROASTED CHICKEN WORKS GREAT!

1. Place chicken breast side down on cutting board. Using kitchen shears, cut through bones on either side of backbone.
2. Using sharp chef's knife, cut straight down through breastbone to make 2 halves.
3. Working with 1 half at a time, separate leg quarter and wing from each breast.

I could also pull out the white meat early to keep it tender and moist.

A crystal-clear broth is critical. Many cooks achieve this by first blanching the chicken in boiling water to wash away proteins that can cloud the liquid. I found it easier to skim the scum as it rose to the surface and then hold the liquid at a gentle simmer. As long as I avoided aggressive boiling, the clumps I didn't manage to capture stayed intact and were easily removed when I strained the broth through cheesecloth.

Traditionally the ginger and onions that give backbone to the broth are roasted over a brazier and the blackened skins discarded, leaving their outermost layers with a subtle sweetness. But charring, cooling, and peeling an onion and stub of ginger took 30 minutes—and while the nuance these roasted vegetables contributed was pleasant, I liked the broth just as well when I added raw aromatics to the pot.

Northern versus Southern Style

There are two main approaches to seasoning the broth and then accessorizing it with garnishes at the table. In the north, where phở was born, cooks like to keep the broth simple and purely savory. In the south, where northerners fleeing the Communists in the 1950s helped popularize the soup, it has a different character. In this agriculturally rich and historically more prosperous region, cooks took to sweetening the broth with sugar and warming it with additional spices. Over time, more embellishments also made it into the bowl, including bean sprouts, hoisin, chile sauce, and lime juice.

Among Vietnamese diners, passions still run high over which style is better. Though my family is from the south, I couldn't pledge myself solely to that version—I love them both. And luckily, it couldn't be more straightforward to switch their flavor profiles: Twenty minutes into the cooking, after I took the white meat out, I added one or the other seasoning to the broth. For a northern soup, I opted for coriander and cloves. For a southern phở, I augmented these two spices with cinnamon,

star anise, and a teaspoon of sugar. I let the broth simmer for another hour and then strained it.

Whichever way I seasoned it, it was a lovely broth—golden and limpid when I strained it and even more savory-tasting once I stirred in ¼ cup of fish sauce. I kept it warm on the stove as I pulled the cooled chicken into bite-size shreds.

Noodling Around

The broth is the essence of phở, but the rice noodles provide the ballast, and their plain taste and sleek texture are ultrasoothing in their own right. Many noodle stalls serve fresh bánh phở, but the dried kind is almost as good and widely available. The trick is to treat them just right: First I soaked them in tap water, which removed their surface starches so that the cooked strands wouldn't fuse together. This also gave them a head start on hydrating. Then I dunked them in boiling water so that they were just cooked through. I drained them and mounded them in serving bowls along with some pulled chicken and sliced onion and scallions and poured the piping-hot broth over the top.

When serving the northern soup, I provided the standard greenery for that style—cilantro and green chiles—along with slivers of aromatic lime leaves (I used makrut) that Vietnamese cooking authority Andrea Nguyen, James Beard Award-winning author of *The Pho Cookbook* (2017), told me adorn more elaborate bowls in the north. Though it's not traditional, I also stirred together the gingery dipping sauce called nước mắm gừng—an idea I got from chatting with An Nguyen Xuan, who served the sauce with phở at his recently closed chicken-focused restaurant, Bép Gà, in New York's Chinatown. For the southern phở, I again put out cilantro and green chiles, along with heaps of bean sprouts and Thai basil, as well as hoisin and sriracha.

Choose one style of soup, or do as I do and enjoy them both. After all, it's the diner who is ultimately in charge of how phở gà tastes. "There's a phở bowl for everyone," said Nguyen. "It's part of Vietnam's welcoming table."

PHỞ GÀ MIỀN BẮC (NORTHERN VIETNAMESE-STYLE CHICKEN PHỞ)

SERVES 6 TOTAL TIME: 2½ HOURS

Prepare the garnishes while the broth simmers. If you prefer a milder sauce, omit the Thai chile. Look for rice noodles labeled as bánh phở; if they're unavailable, substitute ¼-inch-wide flat rice noodles or rice vermicelli. The broth will taste overseasoned on its own but will be balanced by the unsalted noodles and garnishes. Serve in large, deep soup bowls. The dipping sauce, nước mắm gừng, is not traditional, but some Vietnamese cooks like to include it.

Broth

- 1 (4-pound) whole chicken, neck and giblets reserved, liver discarded
- 1 onion, halved
- 1 (3-inch) piece ginger, peeled and halved lengthwise
- 2 teaspoons table salt [salt 1 mg]
- 1 tablespoon coriander seeds
- 2 whole cloves, 1 star anise, 1 TBSP Coriander Pods
- ¼ cup fish sauce
- 1 tsp Rock sugar

Sauce

- ⅓ cup fish sauce
- ¼ cup lime juice (2 limes)
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 Thai chile, stemmed and minced (optional)

Phở

- 12 ounces dried rice noodles
- ½ small onion, sliced thin — Chives + onion
- 2 scallions, sliced thin
- 6 makrut lime leaves, middle vein removed and leaves sliced thin
- Fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- Thinly sliced serrano chiles | jalapeno
- basil

1. FOR THE BROTH: Place chicken breast side down on cutting board. Using kitchen shears, cut through bones on either side of backbone. Reserve backbone. Using sharp chef's knife, cut straight down through breastbone to make 2 halves. Working with 1 half at a time, separate leg quarter and wing from each breast.

2. Transfer chicken parts, backbone, neck, and giblets to Dutch oven. Add 12 cups water, onion, ginger, and salt and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to maintain gentle simmer. Cook, skimming off any scum that rises to surface, until breasts register 160 to 165 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes. Transfer breasts to plate. Add coriander seeds and cloves to broth, cover, and continue to simmer 1 hour longer (check broth occasionally and adjust heat as necessary to maintain gentle simmer).

3. FOR THE SAUCE: While broth simmers, stir ⅓ cup hot water, fish sauce, lime juice, sugar, ginger, garlic, and Thai chile in bowl until sugar dissolves.

PHỞ GÀ MIỀN NAM (SOUTHERN VIETNAMESE-STYLE CHICKEN PHỞ)

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 2½ HOURS

Prepare the garnishes while the broth simmers. Look for rice noodles labeled as *bánh phở*; if they're unavailable, substitute ¼-inch-wide flat rice noodles or rice vermicelli. The broth will taste overseasoned on its own but will be balanced by the unsalted noodles and garnishes. Serve in large, deep soup bowls.

Broth

- 1 (4-pound) whole chicken, neck and giblets reserved, liver discarded
- 1 onion, halved
- 1 (3-inch) piece ginger, peeled and halved lengthwise
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon coriander seeds
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 star anise pod
- 2 whole cloves
- ¼ cup fish sauce

Phở

- 12 ounces dried rice noodles
- ½ small onion, sliced thin
- 2 scallions, sliced thin
- Bean sprouts
- Fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- Fresh Thai basil leaves
- Lime wedges
- Thinly sliced serrano chiles
- Hoisin sauce
- Sriracha

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3. Transfer leg quarters to plate with breasts. Discard wings, backbone, neck, giblets, and onion. Strain broth through fine-mesh strainer lined with

Diners can embellish this southern version with Thai basil, bean sprouts, cilantro, green chile, and lime wedges, along with sriracha (not shown) and hoisin sauce.

double layer of cheesecloth. Rinse pot well and return broth to pot. (You should have about 12 cups broth; add water if necessary.) Stir in fish sauce, cover, and keep warm over low heat.

4. **FOR THE PHỞ:** Place noodles in large bowl and cover with water. Let sit until noodles are pliable, about 20 minutes. While noodles soak, shred chicken, discarding skin and bones. Bring 2 quarts water to boil in large pot. Drain noodles. Return broth to boil.

5. Add noodles to boiling water and cook, stirring frequently, until almost tender, 30 to 60 seconds. Drain immediately and divide among serving bowls. Place ⅓ cup chicken in each bowl (save remaining chicken for another use). Divide onion and scallions among bowls. Add broth until chicken and noodles are covered by ½ inch, about 2 cups per bowl (save remaining broth for another use). Serve immediately, passing bean sprouts, cilantro, Thai basil, lime wedges, serranos, hoisin, and sriracha separately.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Prepare recipe through step 3 and refrigerate chicken and broth for up to 3 days. To serve, let chicken come to room temperature while reheating broth and cooking noodles.



SCAN FOR VIDEO

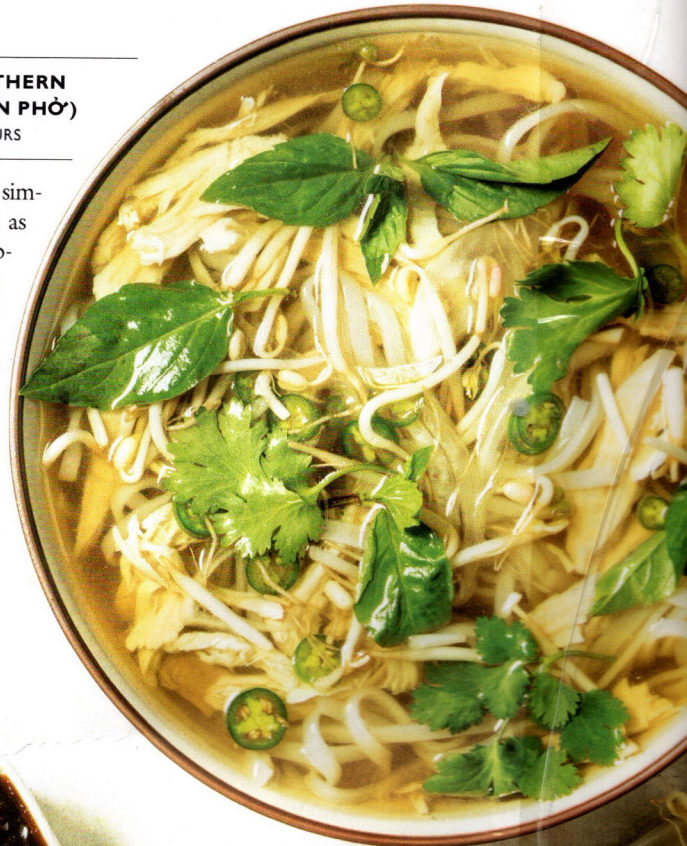


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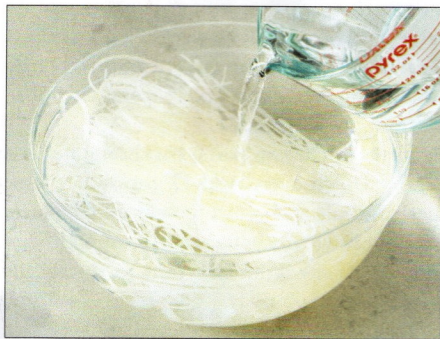
6. Add noodles to boiling water and cook, stirring frequently, until almost tender, 30 to 60 seconds. Drain immediately and divide among serving bowls. Place ⅓ cup chicken in each bowl (save remaining chicken for another use). Divide onion, scallions, and lime leaves among bowls. Add broth until chicken and noodles are covered by ½ inch, about 2 cups per bowl (save remaining broth for another use). Provide each diner with small bowl of dipping sauce and serve phở immediately, passing cilantro and serranos separately.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Prepare recipe through step 4 and refrigerate chicken and broth for up to 3 days. To serve, let chicken come to room temperature while reheating broth and cooking noodles.



Noodles That Don't Stick

Phở's namesake ingredient should be slippery and separate so that it's easy to grab a few strands with your chopsticks. For the most flavorful bites, you also want droplets of the hot, chicken-y broth to cling to each noodle's every surface—which can't happen if they clump together.



To avoid a sticky tangle, simply soak the *bánh phở* in tap water first, which removes the surface starches that fuse the cooked noodles together. Then give them a quick dunk in boiling water just to cook them through.

CHANTABOON
RICE STICK

BÁNH PHỞ



ROSE BRAND

玫瑰商標

尖竹汶標條

NET WEIGHT : 13.2 oz (375 g)

CHANTABOON
RICE STICK

BÁNH PHỞ



ROSE BRAND

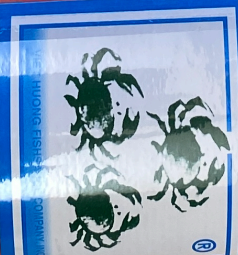
玫瑰商標

尖竹汶標條

NET WEIGHT : 13.2 oz (375 g)



Viet Huoi
NUOC MAM NHI



THREE CRAB BRAND
FISH SAUCE

Ingredients: Anchovy, Egg, Salt, Water, Potassium & Hydroxide
Thành phần: Nước Mắm, Mắm, Nước, Nước Đông Lạnh
순 멸치액젓 삼계탕
CÁI NANG Net 24 FL. Oz (1.19 L) 24 FL. Oz
淨容量: 2.4安士 (1.19公升)

VIET HUOI FISH SAUCE COMPANY, INC.
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