

Genealogy of Bún Bò Huế: Vietnamese Beef Noodle Soup

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Introduction

Almost every other week, I take the light rail down from my apartment in the U-District and head down to South Seattle to have lunch with my dad at Hoang Lan Restaurant. Hoang Lan is a popular locally owned Vietnamese restaurant that specializes in bún bò Huế, a delicious Vietnamese beef noodle soup originally coming from the city of Huế in central Vietnam. Alongside being my favorite dish, bún bò Huế has become an opportunity for me to regularly connect with my dad and bond over food. I chose this dish for my meal genealogy because I wanted to learn more about the impact I'm having on the world through this dish that I consume so often.



A bowl of bún bò Huế from Hoang Lan served with its signature respective dish of garnishes (sliced banana flowers, bean sprouts, lettuce, lime) and hot tea.

Ingredients and Nutrition

Bún bò Huế is a hearty dish that centers around the quality of its broth, noodles, and several toppings. To get an idea of Bún bò Huế, it is like the spicy and less popular cousin to another Vietnamese beef noodle soup: Phở. In a typical bowl of Bún bò Huế, you would see a brown/red broth with noodles, pork hock, slices of beef shank, slices of onions, cubes of congealed pork blood, and some form of pork sausage or meatball. On the side, there'd be recommended garnishes such as slices of banana flowers, bean sprouts, lettuce, onions, thai basil, and lime.

Bún bò Huế is a calorically dense meal, with a single bowl containing anywhere from 600 to 900 calories (*Bun Bo Hue Nutrition Facts* | *MyFitnessPal*, n.d.; Einstein, 2018). It is also known to be a great hangover dish. The broth in Bún bò Huế contains a lot of sodium which helps replenish electrolytes in your body and rehydrate it which was lost during a hangover. The beef and pork in a bowl gives your body much needed protein and amino acids. The rice noodles in the dish are a good source of carbohydrates, giving your body a lot of energy. The broth is also tasty and warm, which fills up your heart with joy! A single bowl has everything your body needs to get itself back up again!

The toppings served alongside a bowl of bún bò Huế also provide a lot of supplementary health benefits and additional flavor. Sliced banana flowers are a topping unique to Southeast Asian dishes that supports menstrual wellness, reduces blood sugar levels, regulates mood, and promotes kidney function (Binu, 2020). Bean sprouts are an efficient source of nutrients, with low calorie count but packed with protein, magnesium, and vitamins C and K (Petre, 2018). They have also proven to regulate blood sugar, even in those with diabetes (Petre, 2018). Thai basil provides antioxidative benefits and also reduces blood sugar levels (Olsen, 2019).

Origins of Ingredients

Bún bò Huế has a lot of ingredients so I will be focusing on the few ingredients that I believe are core to the dish. I will be researching the origins of banana flowers, which are unique to Vietnamese cuisine and this particular dish, the beef and pork in the dish, which make up the heartiness of the dish, and the tap water that is used to make up the broth. The sources of these ingredients will be based on speculation based on various assumptions of where a small family-owned restaurant in South Seattle like Hoang Lan Restaurant would be obtaining these ingredients.

Bún bò Huế contains many Southeast Asian herbs and vegetables such as banana flowers, Thai basil, lemongrass, shallot, and bean sprouts. Banana flowers are the flowers on banana trees that would eventually blossom into the bananas that are regularly eaten. Upon research on which countries are exporters of banana flowers, it wasn't clear. However, I found that the number one exporter of bananas into the United States is Guatemala, alongside Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Honduras (Evans & Ballen, 2018). Hoang Lan Restaurant most likely obtains their ingredients from local Asian supermarkets, which often import from small family farms in Central American countries like Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras (Gautam, 2005; Kadet, 2016).

Tap water in the Seattle area is sourced from two regional watersheds: the Cedar River Watershed and the Tolt River Watershed. The Cedar River Watershed is located southeast of Seattle 35 miles away and provides 70% of Seattle's water, obtaining it from rain and melted snow. The Tolt River Watershed is located east of Seattle in the foothills of the Cascade mountains and provides 30% of Seattle's water, obtaining it from rain and melted snow.

The origins of the beef and pork that Hoang Lan Restaurant uses is hard to discern. They most likely get cuts of beef and pork cheap from local Asian supermarkets, but these Asian supermarkets could source their meat from a wide variety of places, ranging from either local in Washington or any other state in the United States (Darnton & McGuire, 2014; Gorelova, 2018). Based on the information I've gathered about how Asian grocery stores source their produce, I believe that these stores most likely barter to get meat at affordable prices from local farmers in Washington or nearby states like Oregon or Idaho.

Diving deep into the origins of these ingredients helped me learn a lot and went against a lot of assumptions I've had. Initially I had assumed that 'Asian vegetables' like banana flowers traveled long distances, and was imported from Asian countries, but instead I learned that they primarily came from places in monoculture farms in Central America. Another important fact I learned as someone who has lived in Seattle my whole life was where my water actually comes from; it's surprising to know that water for an entire city only comes from two sources. Lastly, attempting to investigate the origins of beef and pork was near impossible; apparently it can be hard for even grocery stores to know where their meat comes from!

Environmental Impacts

Cultural dishes like Bún bò Huế and ethnic restaurants like Hoang Lan fill a major niche in a local community. In South Seattle, these dishes serve as a reminder for home for displaced Vietnamese people. However, even though these dishes play an important social role, it doesn't mean that we can overlook the issues that come with it. Similar to how fast foods undergo scrutiny for their impact on the environment, it's worth considering what environmental issues that can come from the production of bún bò Huế.

A major environmental issue in the production of bún bò Huế comes from banana flowers that are exported from other countries. Banana farms that produce bananas for exportation are often large-scale monocrop plantations which come with several environmentally damaging practices (Clay, 2004). The creation of land for banana farms often comes with habitat degradation through the removal of forests (Clay, 2004). Banana plantations use pesticides that contaminate surrounding water systems, and these pesticides also degrade soil, kills aerating organisms which leads to compacted soil, and eventually leads to soil erosion (Clay, 2004). Bananas, like other export crops that rely on monocrop plantations, aren't healthy for the environment. Therefore, it might be worth considering alternatives to banana flowers, which have cultural significance, but arguably don't contribute much flavor to a bowl of bún bò Huế. A visual and taste alternative to sliced banana flowers in bún bò Huế could be sliced red cabbage; although it just doesn't taste the same to me, it could possibly be better for the environment.

Another concerning environmental issue is the meat in bún bò Huế. Production of livestock has costly environmental impacts which also contributes to global warming. Although I wasn't able to track down the source of the meat used, I considered looking at it from an optimistic perspective and tried researching the environmental impacts of local, organic meat production. It's widely known that mass cattle farms and the global exportation of meat is bad for the environment, but I also learned that organic meat production actually has the same environmental impact as 'conventional' meat production (Carrington, 2020). In conventional meat production, the environmental emissions primarily come from manure, burping methane, deforestation, and the growing of the grain that livestock are fed (Carrington, 2020). The issue with organic meat production is that livestock grow slower and produce less meat, which means they still have roughly the same amount of emissions compared to conventional meat production.

(Carrington, 2020). A redeeming factor for bún bò Huế is that a lot of the meat that goes into the broth are parts of cows and pigs that aren't typically consumed in an American diet, and that would otherwise go to waste. Ultimately, a major way to reduce the environmental impact from this would be to consume less meat and consider vegan bún bò Huế which can be equally as tasty; I have a friend who loves it!

Bún bò Huế is a complex dish containing lots of meat and sausages, exported vegetables, and rice noodles. When considering the impact that consuming this dish can have on the environment, a factor to consider would be the carbon footprint of producing, processing, and transporting these ingredients into a single restaurant to be prepared for customers. As an extremely rough and low estimate, I calculated the carbon footprint of a single serving's worth of beef, pork, and rice that goes into a bowl of bún bò Huế; respectively, producing these ingredients emitted 7.7kg, 2kg, and 0.3kg of CO₂, coming up to a total of 10kg of CO₂ (Styliano et al., 2019). To put this in perspective, 10kg of CO₂ is approximately equal to the amount of CO₂ emitted driving a car for 24 miles (assuming 411g CO₂/mi) (*Greenhouse Gas Emissions from a Typical Passenger Vehicle*, 2014).

The environmental impacts of producing bún bò Huế should not be overlooked. Although I only investigated carbon footprints and the environmental impacts of banana flowers and meat, I discovered very disheartening facts. I learned how damaging a single food, bananas and banana flowers, could be. Producing any fruit or vegetable for mass exportation incentivizes monoculture plantations that hurt the environment in large scale ways. Monoculture banana plantations degrade and erode soil, permanently damage habitats, and hurt humans and other organisms too. The carbon emissions that come from growing cattle for consumption is immense and can't be mitigated much by 'healthier' organic farming practices. These problems all stem

from our societies' need to consume meat all the time, and to have readily available produce at all times throughout the year. As someone who's never taken a deeper look into the environmental impact that my food consumption habits have, this was an eye-opening experience that makes me want to look at how the environmental impact of this dish compares to the impact that other dishes I regularly eat have.

Social Impacts

Similar to how the production of food can have environmental impacts, it is also important to think about the effects that food can have on people too. Many processes that affect the environment also have an effect on the people that live or have lived there too; it can be easy to forget that we as people are also part of the environment.

The tap water that is used to make the broth comes from the City of Seattle and their use of watersheds in protected areas. The City of Seattle is proud of their clean water that they largely attribute to their maintenance of 'protected wildernesses' which is a problematic concept. On the City of Seattle's 'History of Water Stewardship' webpage, the City of Seattle touts the cleanliness of their water:

Our visionary leaders made the following decisions so we could have some of the best water in the country today. . . [They] chose water that comes from a protected wilderness, which means it has fewer contaminants and we can treat our water with fewer chemicals. Our region benefits from these decisions made a century ago, with clean, abundant water. Seattle Public Utilities is committed to continuing this legacy. (*History of Water Stewardship - Utilities* | *Seattle.Gov*, n.d.)

The issue is that the City of Seattle is benefitting from ‘protected wildernesses’, which is actually land that was stolen from Native Americans, specifically the Duwamish, Muckleshoot, and Coast Salish peoples. There’s an implicit assumption that the City is making when stating that a protected wilderness is healthier, when in actuality, these wildernesses could have served to benefit from humans stewarding the land; the original stewards of the land, the indigenous people in these areas, could have served to benefit and enrich the land with their practices of following the ‘original instructions’. Instead, the City of Seattle has forcibly removed the original stewards, and calls themselves the stewards of this land and water. Although this is not an issue that is unique to this dish, as all foods in the Seattle area take advantage of this water, it is important for us to recognize and appreciate where this water comes from.

When discussing the social impacts of this Vietnamese dish, I would be remiss to not talk about the social benefits that it can have on the local community. Hoang Lan Restaurant is located in King Plaza, a bustling shopping center full of Vietnamese businesses such as laundromats, bakeries, supermarkets, driving schools, computer repair shops, newspaper publishers, dessert shops, driving schools, clothing and accessory stores, restaurants, and much more. The neighborhood has been an ethnic enclave to Vietnamese immigrants and families ever since the fall of Saigon in 1975. Restaurants like Hoang Lan that are able to provide authentic and homemade food play a central role in re-establishing a sense of place to Vietnamese immigrants in America (Mazumdar et al., 2000; Vu, 2012). It is a liberating experience as a Vietnamese person living in America, surrounded by English-speaking coworkers, government organizations, and neighbors, to be able to enter a business and finally feel centered and at home; there is shared cultural understandings, an ability to speak freely in your native language, and a sense of belonging. With this understanding, bún bò Huế becomes more than a simple dish, but it

becomes a catalyst for authentic conversations, building community, and reestablishing a sense of place in a foreign country.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the unique role that Vietnamese refugees and immigrants play in America's settler colonial system. In attempting to reclaim a sense of place in a land that is not theirs, it must be noted that Vietnamese people are residing on indigenous land. Additionally, it is important to understand that the Vietnamese people are present in the U.S. today because of U.S. imperial actions in Asia. Dr. Jodi Byrd discusses this unique dynamic by offering a triad of settler-Native-arrivant, where Vietnamese people would fit most closely as an arrivant which are those forcibly displaced or relocated (Byrd, 2011). Dr. Quynh Nhu Le expands on the work Jodi Byrd and Iyko Day on this dynamic triad by offering alternative terminology to Byrd's 'arrivant' and Day's 'alien', which is 'settler racial' (Le, 2019). Vietnamese people and the culture they bring can play both a settler role, and a role as a racialized group in the U.S.

Conclusion

Diving deep into the origins of bún bò Huế and the physical, social, and environmental impacts that it can have on our body, local communities, and global communities was a fruitful experience. This dish is something that I've grown close to over the past few years as a way to bond with my dad. It's become a way to reconnect and grow in our father-son relationship. By diving deep into the environmental, social, and nutritional aspects of this dish, I've grown to appreciate just how complex of an impact a simple dish can have on the world. Throughout this process, I now value the energy and work that goes into preparing food, and it makes me think more consciously about my own actions. I am looking forward to exploring further into other Vietnamese dishes, experimenting with alternative options, and reconnecting with my own culture by learning how to make these dishes myself.

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