



Asia in the Apple

Looking for gourmet Vietnamese sandwiches? Try New York. The city is brimming with delicious banh mis, a fast food that has roots in Asia and a dash of Vietnam's French culinary heritage. / By Kaya Laterman / Photography by Joshua Paul

NEW YORK CITY IS FAMOUS FOR A LOT OF things, including a cheap slice of pizza to gulp down on the go. But the infamous slice is getting some serious competition these days from the *banh mi*, otherwise known as the Vietnamese sandwich.

The sandwich is a culinary delight of East meets West, born of the colonial past of Vietnam. Despite the turmoil during and after the French occupation of Vietnam, many observers are quick to tell you that French cuisine is a welcome legacy there. The *banh mi* is essentially a sandwich made from a French baguette (made with half rice flour), filled with meat and/or pâté, pickled carrots and daikon (Japanese radish), cucumbers, mayo, and fresh herbs. It's eaten for breakfast or lunch—a favorite cheap bite that's sold from food carts around Vietnam.

The first time I tasted a *banh mi*, I was actually in neighboring Laos. Famished after riding a rickety bus all day, I saw a guy selling sandwiches from a cart at a bus depot. Even though I didn't know exactly what the contents of my sandwich were, I remember swallowing it in seconds. It had such a curious taste: The bread was light and crispy, rivaling any baguette you would find on the streets of Paris, but the inside was filled with the flavors of Asia, this one with pâté and meat, which I later figured out was bologna and headcheese.

After my travels, I was back in New York City, my home for nearly a decade, when a friend suggested we

grab a sandwich in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, a Vietnamese-immigrant neighborhood. We walked into Ba Xuyen (4222 Eighth Avenue; Tel: 718-633-6601), a nondescript shop that sold *banh mi* and other Vietnamese takeout dishes. I bit into the huge meatball *banh mi* with delight, the small morsels of pork drenched in a light tomato sauce. Local foodies claim the sandwiches at Ba Xuyen are authentic, but what also keeps the customers returning is the price. At an average of \$3 per sandwich, it's one of the cheapest meals you can find in the city.

Until recently, *banh mi* fans had to hike to Sunset Park to satiate their cravings. However, plenty of places in Manhattan now serve up these scrumptious sandwiches. According to the latest census figures, the Big Apple has seen a 55 percent increase in Vietnamese

The grilled shrimp *banh mi* at Bao Noodles on Second Avenue is loaded with plump shrimp and served with a sweeter mayonnaise.

Simple *Banh Mi*

1/8 C. julienned carrots
1/8 C. julienned daikon
2 tsp. each of water, white vinegar, sugar, and salt

A few slices of your favorite meat

Mayonnaise

Half a cucumber, cut lengthwise

Cilantro sprigs

For the slaw, combine all liquid ingredients in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Set aside to cool. Mix in carrots and daikon. Add salt to taste. Warm baguette in toaster. Spread mayonnaise; add meat, slaw, and cucumbers. Add soy sauce and/or hot sauce if desired.

Americans between 1990 and 2000. This jump partly explains why there are so many new *banh mi* joints in the city. Keep in mind that authentic *banh mi* shops offer ▶

hot peppers or hot sauce to accompany the sandwich, and most places are so tiny that you'll likely need to eat in the park.

Viet Nam Banh Mi So 1 / If you're looking for authenticity and variety, this is your place. Not much more than a storefront that can hold five hungry customers at a time, Viet Nam Banh Mi So 1 is one of the oldest Manhattan banh mi shops and has a loyal following. There are 18 different sandwiches to choose from, each explained in English, making ordering a breeze. The classic house special consists of grilled-pork pieces, Vietnamese salami, sliced pork roll, carrots, daikon, cucumber, and cilantro. For those a bit squeamish about ordering something that looks like mystery meat, opting for the chicken or the beef with lemongrass may be more appealing. Vegetarians also have several options here, including the vegetarian house special with tofu, mushrooms, clear noodles, carrots and sweet radishes. You also can get fresh-squeezed juice and the super-sweet but delicious Vietnamese coffee.

369 Broome Street. Open 8 a.m.–8 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, noon–8 p.m. Monday. Tel: 212-219-8341

Banh Mi Saigon Bakery and Saigon Banh Mi / There's always a lively debate on local food chat rooms about which banh mi place is the best, and the Saigon Bakery is rated a favorite among New Yorkers. It's housed in the back of the Jing Jing Gem jewelry store, and it's easy to feel bad for the clerk selling the baubles—all the customers seem to head straight to the bakery to get a pork, chicken, or sardine banh mi. The chicken banh mi is superb, with big hunks of barbecue chicken. The place also serves a generous shrimp and papaya salad, which is a great side dish to split with a friend. The bakery is the new outpost of Saigon Banh Mi, located underneath the Manhattan Bridge. The older location is harder to get to and sells only pork banh mi. Lines are long there, and once they're out of sandwiches, you're out of luck.

Banh Mi Saigon Bakery: 138-01 Mott Street. Open 10 a.m.–7:30 p.m. Tuesday

cybersidebar



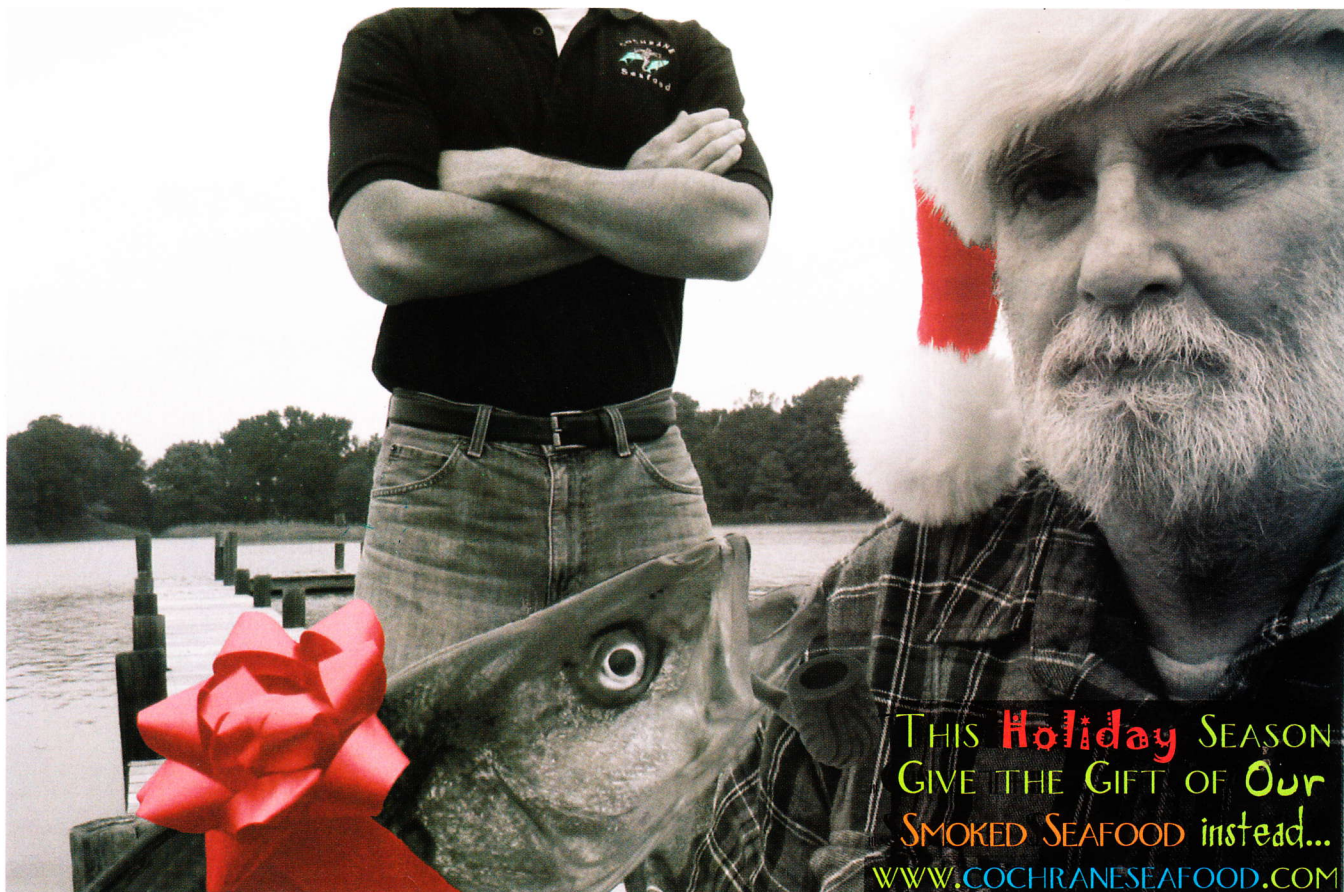
For another tasty sandwich recipe, the pâté and Vietnamese cold-cut banh mi from Bao Noodles, visit hemispheresmagazine.com and click Cyber Sidebar.

through Sunday. Tel: 212-941-1541
Saigon Banh Mi: 88 East Broadway Mall, Unit 108 (on Forsyth Street). Open 11 a.m.–7 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

Nicky's Vietnamese Sandwiches

There's always someone opening up a "cheap eats" joint in the East Village, but Nicky's is a standout compared with the others serving the usual grilled cheeses and hot dogs.

Nicky's banh mis have a great way of filling you up without putting you in a food coma. The small store has two tables inside where you can relax and read the paper while you chow down on a chicken, pork-chop, sardine, or classic banh mi. The owners learned their chops



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