

Hanoi on a plate

Heather Tyler, AAP March 11, 2011, 11:16 am

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The broiled chicken with a slightly surprised expression on its face has a long-stemmed red rose artfully arranged between its neatly-trussed wings.

It's perched on top of other broiled chickens, also tidily arranged, trussed and looking surprised.

Down the road there are bowls of bloated, tangled coils. I can't decide if they are pig intestines or sausages.

An elderly woman invites me to buy and smiles, her mouth and teeth a bright red slash. Has she been eating her lipstick? No, that's from chewing betel nut.

Welcome to Hom Market, the food and produce centre of Vietnam's northern city of Hanoi. The city's population: six million. Number of motor scooters: five million.

Hom Market is 95 per cent fascinating and only five per cent alarming.

Those chickens aren't even for eating. They're an alter offering for departed ancestors in this land of Buddhists.

Our guide to the food of Hanoi is Daniel Hoyer, an American living in Vietnam.

Hoyer is passionate about Vietnamese food, and northern Vietnamese food in particular.

The markets are a kaleidoscope of colours, textures, aromas and taste - mountains of noodles, neat rows of herbs and vegetables, baskets of bright pink dragonfruit, stacks of freshly-slaughtered meat and oceans of crabs on ice.

There are no flies, even around the butcher stalls.

"There are no flies, summer or winter," says Hoyer.

"The market is very clean and they know what they're doing. The merchants will drop their food prices just to sell it all by the end of the day."

The focus on freshness, and food cooked quickly and served just as fast, makes Vietnamese street food low risk for Western palates.

"Street food is pretty damn safe," Hoyer says as we sit in a no-frills eatery with locals and slurp soup and chow down rice noodles and braised beef.

"Freshness is a hallmark of Vietnamese food. People shop daily. Vietnam is one of the safest street eating places in the world because it's all made so fresh."

The food in the north has its own style - it's salty, sour and bitter. Food is sweeter and spicier in the south.

Spicy condiments are on the table to add as desired. In the south they are incorporated into the dish.

Our entire late breakfast costs 50,000 dong or about \$4.50 for four of us.

Vietnamese often eat out because it's as cheap as chopsticks and in true Vietnamese style they eat on the street.

Whole families sit down to eat a meal comprising about 10 different dishes, perched on squat plastic stools around a low plastic table on the footpath.

Hoyer takes us to a coffee house. Cafe Tho at 117 Trien Viet Vung has been a cafe for 29 years and was a former French colonial home. It's dilapidated now, but the coffee is first class.

Vietnam is the second largest exporter of coffee in the world, but the Vietnamese didn't drink much of it until recently. It was the preferred drink of the French colonials.

Italians like Vietnamese coffee because it foams more easily, says Hoyer, and has chocolate undertones.

We are served black coffee with condensed milk to stir in, for 12,000 dong (50c) a cup. It is velvety smooth and there's no bitter aftertaste.

On the way to lunch, we stroll past the Hanoi Hilton where US Senator John McCain was imprisoned for six years during the Vietnam War.

Now McCain is considered to be a folk hero, as is former president Bill Clinton because he signed a free trade agreement with the communist nation, says Hoyer.

The weather is grey, dank and cold but we squat on kindergarten furniture on a busy street, drink crisply chilled Bia Ha Noi (Hanoi beer) and at a long communal table we tuck into roasted clams, greens steamed with garlic, the ubiquitous steamed rice, rice noodle puffs filled with bok choy and mushrooms, corn kernels coated in a light batter and flash fried, and rice rolls with greens and braised beef.

Vietnamese food uses little oil - just a few drops.

"They can eat all day and stay lean," says Hoyer, who is quite trim himself.

I don't feel trim at all. I need a really long walk or might volunteer to ride a cyclo (rickshaw powered by a bicycle) and ferry tourists around for the rest of the afternoon.

IF YOU GO:

Hanoi is only a 90-minute flight from Bangkok on Thai Airways.

Remember you are changing hemispheres. We went from sticky hot (Bangkok) to bone-chilling 10 degrees Celsius (Hanoi). It pays to check the weather before you go, and pack accordingly.

The centre of Hanoi is about 30-40 minutes from the airport. Expect to pay about 350,000 dong (\$A18). There are lots of cab companies and Hanoi taxis are notorious for bad service. Negotiate the fare before you put a foot in the door. Hanoi Taxis is one of the the most reliable.

French is widely spoken, if English fails.

For foodie tours, contact Daniel Hoyer, Hoang Minh Travel Company: 5 Hang Bac, Tel (84) 73066996 www.welleatenpath.com.

His book Culinary Vietnam is available at www.amazon.com.

For tours of Hanoi, call Exotissimo World Travel, 24 Tran Nhat Duat Street, tel (84) 3828 2150. Their guides speak excellent English.

- The writer stayed at the Hotel de L'Opera in Hanoi courtesy of Accor Hotels and travelled to Vietnam courtesy of Thai Airways.