

Hoang Lieng

Vietnam: cook, proprietor of V-Nam Café

Object: sticky rice in banana leaf

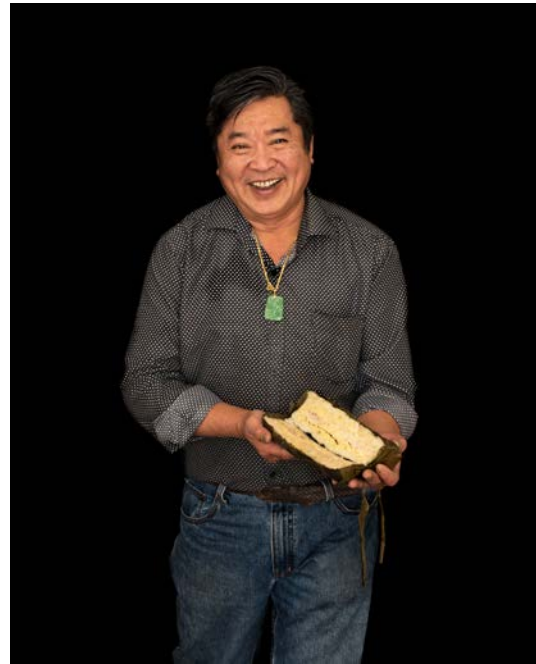
Thứ đồ ăn duy nhất tôi có thể mang theo là bánh tét cuốn trong vỏ chuối vì lá chuối sẽ bảo quản đồ ăn trong vòng một tuần.

(Vietnamese)

[The only thing I could bring with me when I left on the boat was sticky rice wrapped in a banana leaf, because the banana leaf will preserve it for a week.]

I was born in Southwest Vietnam, and my family had a rice-processing factory. We had big boats to ship 250 tons of rice to Saigon every 10 days. When the war ended, the communists took over the factory. In 1977 we knew we had to leave. We went to Vung Tau, about 75 miles from Saigon, and started to build a boat. All together we were 28 people. The captain traded some gold bars for gas, and we set out—by then there were 165 people on the boat. We avoided the police boats and sailed on rough seas, not knowing where we would land. After five days, we ran out of water and food. On the sixth day, I saw five little sails. The captain said, “That’s good for us. We can follow them without letting them see us because Malaysians do not allow refugees to come. But if your boat is broken, then you can stay. If not, they’ll send you back.” When we got closer, we started to let the water come in as we arrived near the beach. Everyone jumped out, but the Malaysian police were coming and they wanted to send us back—but the engine was full of water. So they said, “No problem—we’re going to call the U.N.” They took us to the local school and put us inside there.

When I came to New York, I started to work as a dishwasher in Chinatown. I worked very hard and started to learn to cook. Then I worked for a French restaurant as a dishwasher, but always I finished my job then I would go to the pantry and started to help them. And one day, the pantry guy quit, and the chef asked me to work with him. So I started to climb. In 2010, I opened my own restaurant, V-Nam Cafe.



Bio:

Hoang Lieng was born in South Vietnam to a family of rice merchants. During the Vietnam War, he moved to Saigon, and after the war, when his family lost their business, he joined a group of boat people to flee to Malaysia, surviving on cooked sticky rice preserved in a banana leaf. He later settled in the U.S. and moved to New York City. After many years working in Chinatown restaurants, he learned all aspects of the restaurant business. Before opening his own business in 2010, he served as chef for Ruby Foo’s in Times Square. He now owns and runs the V-Nam Cafe on First Avenue near First Street, which serves traditional Vietnamese cuisine to the East Village. In 1996 and 2010, he returned to Vietnam to offer financial support to men and women who had worked in his father’s factory.