

The Great Dog M

Nowhere is the gulf between the East and the West wider than in the dog meat shop

BY AVIVA WEST IN HA NOI
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

It's the racist stereotype, it's the loyal pet slaughtered and grilled up for dinner and it's the bewildering tradition that just won't die.

Or is it?

In Ha Noi's Tay Ho and Nhat Tan Quarters, dog meat restaurants abound. More than just a culinary peccadillo, the tradition stems back to at least the time of Confucius, with the Chinese Zhou Dynasty penning odes to the three beasts bred for food: the goat, pig and dog. A difficult issue for some foreigners to swallow, eating dog is simply a minor cultural difference that in fact is only practised by a small segment of Vietnamese society.

Exploding the myths

A friend, Quang, 25, doesn't understand why tourists make such a fuss about eating dog. He reminds me that the Vietnamese believe the meat has great medicinal properties and that they don't eat 'house' dogs. I've heard this distinction between 'house' and 'dinner' dogs before so I ask him to clarify.

"We would never eat your dog," he says, pointing to my 9lb. chihuahua. "Not enough meat."

Another friend informs me that when it comes to cooking, blond dogs are preferred, and that most 'dinner' dogs are raised out in the countryside at puppy farms until they're about one. Big dogs are considered best, and restaurant owners take great pains to select the healthiest and meatiest beasts they can find. It's not



rare in Ha Noi to see a bicycle laden with a cage full of crowing puppies on the back, off to market for their meat.

To some visitors, that sight would be grotesque. However, if you can get over the initial gut reaction, says expat Chris MacDonald from the United States, "eating dog meat is no stranger than the West's habit of genetically altering chickens and pumping our cows full of chemicals and antibiotics."

Not alone

Far from the only one, Viet Nam is just one of dozens of nations with a history of dining on dog — a tradition likely born of necessity back in the ages when dogs were used to guard storehouses, and in times of hunger, were used as last-resort sources of

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DIG IN: Thit cho, or dog meat, restaurants abound in areas of Ha Noi.



eat Debate



FOR SALE: Two street vendors sit on the sidewalk with a basket of puppies for sale in Ha Noi. In parts of northern Vietnam, it's not uncommon for dogs to meet their end in the dog meat shop.

APP PHOTO

which dog you want to eat from the clutch of cages out front, and they'll slaughter and serve it up to you in minutes. Drinking while eating might as well be mandatory in these places, and a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue will definitely help beginners loosen up for the adventure. After you select your dining companion from the cages outside you will be asked how you want it. If your Vietnamese isn't strong pointing will do, and the gesture for "I don't know, you chose" is universally understood. A typical menu may include up to 15 different dishes. Boiled, baked, grilled and fried are some of the choices, and livers and intestines are also served. One of the most popular delicacies is dog sausage — deep-fried intestines stuffed with spices and chopped meat. Dog's leg and tail soup is also on order.

A note of caution: in nearly every case the meat is served with a sauce comprising fermented shrimp paste (*mam tom*), fish sauce (*nuoc mam*), lemon juice, chilli and lemongrass. This is a potent force of nature and it's not to be trifled with. It smells so strongly that its key ingredients (*mam tom* and *nuoc mam*) have been banned from most commercial airliners.

Check please

A sure sign that eating dog is here to stay is its continued, and growing, popularity among Viet Nam's middle and upper classes. With one kilogramme of dog meat costing nearly US\$2, it's at least three times pricier than the equivalent in beef or pork. A full serving in a dog meat restaurant may put you back VND90,000 (\$5.60), way more than most people could afford for a single meal.

Nguyen Hung, 45, is a taxi driver who frequents a dog meat restaurant on Tay Ho Street. He estimates that 90 per cent of customers are older gentlemen and businessmen, and adds with a smile that his two daughters are both against his favourite treat.

"They tell me it's wrong to eat dogs when we keep one as a pet. I tell them that eating dog meat helps keep me strong so I can go out and make money for them!"

In a country where traditions are guarded and preserved, the art of dining on dog doesn't look to be going anywhere.

food. In the company of current dog-eaters South Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Switzerland and the Arctic (including Siberia, northern Canada, Alaska and Greenland), Viet Nam's northern regions have a reputation for serving up Fido — grilled, fried, boiled, sautéed and roasted.

Before digging into this complicated issue, a few things must be made clear. Unlike in South Korea and in some parts of China and Taiwan, eating dog is more of a ritualistic practise than anything else. Almost exclusively the domain of men, the Vietnamese believe that eating dog in the last half of the lunar month (and particularly at the end of the lunar year) wipes away bad luck and in-

creases vigour and virility. Because of the potency and richness of the meat, eating it daily is discouraged. You'd be hard-pressed to find a place selling dog meat in the first two weeks of the lunar month as people consider it bad luck to eat it then. However, once the 10th or 11th rolls around, shops will be full of businessmen and workers drinking strong alcohol and chewing the fat while sitting comfortably on straw mats on the floor.

Wanna taste?

If dog meat doesn't sound too bad to you and you're looking for some male-bonding, head on down to one of Ha Noi's dog meat streets. Most are street-side stalls and serve the meat in a variety of fashions. At the bigger restaurants you can choose