

HOI AN'S LEGENDARY NOODLES

IN VIETNAM'S HISTORIC RIVERSIDE TOWN HOI AN, A UBIQUITOUS NOODLE DISH STEEPED IN LEGEND OFFERS UNIQUE FLAVOURS AND TEXTURES THAT ONLY HOURS OF PREPARATION CAN CREATE.

Photography Terence Carter Words Lara Dunston



Cao lau noodles are made by hand in this family-run factory. Clockwise from left: the famous noodle dish; noodles are hand-cut; locals outside a Hoi An painting shop; a vendor serves soup from her curbside stand.

CAO LAU! CAO LAU!

Cooks and noodle vendors call this name continuously from the crowded markets, curbside food stalls and backstreet eateries of Hoi An, an atmospheric riverside and coastal town of incense-filled Chinese temples and Japanese-style timber houses, surrounded by rice paddies, in Central Vietnam.

As it quickly becomes apparent, *cao lau* is the historic town's quintessential must-try dish, partly due to the legend surrounding its making, but also because the deliciously light yet complex noodle dish is the essence of UNESCO World Heritage-listed Hoi An in a bowl. "Cao lau! Try my cao lau!" The constant cries fast become as irritating as that other ubiquitous request from the tailors lining the lantern-filled streets. It will drive you crazy – until you actually try it.

In Hoi An's Central Market, where dozens of stalls sell cao lau among other local dishes, one cook has her sales technique down pat. Remaining silent amid the cacophony of "cao lau!" cries, she'll catch your eye and thrust a spoonful of steaming, aromatic, spice-laden broth in your direction. Succumb to a slurp and you'll be pulling up a stool.

You won't be the first. Few dishes have occupied travellers and obsessed food writers as Hoi An's legendary cao lau. Indeed, the rustic, earthy noodle dish is more deceptive than its innocent, garden-fresh looks suggest – it's the stuff of legend. Guidebooks will tell you the dish can only be made with water from the ancient Ba Le well, one of dozens of centuries-old wells dotting the old town; that only lye made from the ash of a certain type of tree grown on the nearby Cham Islands can be used to flavour the noodles; and that only one family closely guards the secret recipe and are so protective they won't allow outsiders to watch their covert noodle-making. Of course, that's all a load of bull.

The fact that the dish isn't as mysterious as myths would have you believe doesn't reduce its enigma. This is a dish demanding respect and, at its best, reverence. For it's the perfect balance of textures and flavours that makes cao lau special – it's a dish that's the sum of its parts, each bowl carefully crafted as if it's the last bowl ever to be made.

The first ingredient that will have you salivating, is the *char siu* pork – Cantonese-style barbecued or roasted pork, seasoned in a five-spice marinade. At Ty Cao Lau – a laneway stall set up around 4.30pm each evening – Mr Ty has been making cao lau, and only cao lau, for 20 years,



his richly flavoured slices of tender pork are the tastiest in town. After months of daily tastings of cao lau, I determine his only rival to be Mr Hai, who carefully arranges three thinner yet even more succulent slivers of pork across his noodles.

Depending on the cook, an array of fresh, locally grown mixed greens are piled upon or beside the pork – mint, basil, Vietnamese mint, rice paddy herb, crisp lettuce, sometimes coriander. Crunchy deep-fried squares of cao lau pastry are sprinkled on top, while secreted beneath the noodles are crispy bean sprouts.

Your first instruction from the cook, waiter or nearest diner will be to add some of Hoi An's famously fiery chilli jam from the condiment basket. The next will be to combine all the ingredients to ensure the chilli jam and sweet, pungent pork broth drizzled over the noodles is mixed through. After the noodles, it's the broth and pork that truly sets one cao lau apart from the next.

Yet the key ingredient will always be the noodle. Invented by the Chinese but inspired by Japanese wheat-based udon noodles – merchants from both China and Japan began trading in Hoi An in the 17th century – and boasting a similarly coarse dense texture, cao lau noodles differ in their dirty brown colour and subtle, smoky flavour.

Sold fresh or dry at the markets and seen laid out in the sun on large, shallow bamboo baskets on footpaths and roads around town, the noodles are delivered direct to eateries daily from the noodle factories around Hoi An. The finest noodles are produced in two rudimentary family kitchens operating out of the homes of the fifth generation descendants of the original creator who worked at Hoi An's



Cao lau is available at this al fresco riverside eatery in Hoi An. Left: Vietnam's famous pho soup is sold alongside Hoi An's unique cao lau noodles.

first Chinese noodle factory. Their address is no secret and a visit to one of the families is easily arranged by chef Duc, the owner of Mai Fish restaurant, who buys their noodles.

Early one morning we spend a couple of hours with the smiling hardworking family of six, as they near the end of their work 'day' in which they produced 150 kilograms of noodles. We watch one woman kneading by hand the dough they'd begun creating seven hours earlier from broken rice, ground into powder then soaked in buckets of water from a nearby well. To the dough mixture, they'd added lye ash burned from a massive pile of branches stacked in their yard from a variety of fragrant, locally grown trees, such as pine.

We cough as the smoky scent of burning wood, now filling the dimly lit, soot-covered room, steams the layers of dough and the strips of noodles another woman has made using an Italian-style pasta maker. It's the men's role to keep the fire stoked, lay out the dough and the noodles, and cart the racks back and forth between the steamer and the motorbikes that appear to collect the noodles – it's a sweaty job.

After questions on weights, measurements and times, chef Duc figures out the noodle recipe. Still, I ask him to see if the wiry old bloke will share the family secret. With a toothy grin and a glint in his eyes, he says: "We do it all by hand!" rubbing his calloused, wrinkled hands together and heading into the house. Minutes later he reappears, sitting on the step tucking into a bowl of cao lau. 🍜



Ty Cao Lau

This mobile cao lau stand opens daily at 4.30pm, serving bowls for one dollar. **Off Phan Chu Trinh St**

Hai

A simple eatery in the Hai family home that opens at 11am and closes when the cao lau runs out. **6A Truong Minh Luong St, off Phan Boi Chau St**

Ms Ly Cafeteria

This is a good choice if you want air-conditioning and cold beer with your cao lau. **22 Nguyen Hue St, +84 510 386 1603**

Mai Fish

The riverside location of this colonial villa makes chef Duc's restaurant a lovely spot for cao lau after dark. **45 Nguyen Thi, Minh Khai St, +84 510 392 5545**

White Marble

No cao lau at this stylish bar, but there's good wine, great music, and excellent people-watching. **98 Le Loi St, +84 510 391 1862**

Red Bridge Cooking School

Learn to make all kinds of delicious Vietnamese dishes at Hoi An's best cooking school. **Thon 4, Cam Thanh, +84 510 3933 222, visithoian.com/redbridge**

Original Taste of Hoi An Food Tour

Try over 40 local specialties on this popular street food tour run by Australian expat Neville Dean. **+84 905 382 783, tasteofhoian.com**

Anantara Hoi An Resort

This riverside, colonial-inspired hotel is close to the Central Market. **1 Pham Hong Thai St, +84 510 391 4555, hoi-an.anantara.com**