

by Ron James

THE AUTHOR

Do you break out in a cold sweat when trying to decipher the menu in Vietnamese restaurants? Are you afraid that what you order could turn out to be too "adventurous?"

"It's a language thing," food writer and newly published cookbook writer Andrea Nguyen says with a laugh.

ANDREA NGUYEN - Like most chefs and food writers, Andrea Nguyen's love of food came from a family tradition. When her family fled Vietnam, Nguyen's mother made sure she carried her collection of recipes with her. This inspired the young daughter later to share her own recipes with the world in the form of a new cookbook, "Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors." CNS Photo courtesy of Andrea Nguyen. Indeed, but sometimes it's also a cultural thing.

"A food critic recently reviewed a new Vietnamese restaurant in the area," says Nguyen, who makes her home in Santa Cruz, Calif. "She negatively reviewed a dish that had a nondescript name and simply gave its ingredients on the menu. I didn't recognize the name of the dish in the review, but from the ingredients, I immediately knew what the dish was.

"It was really a dish called fake dog stew, but the restaurant didn't want its non-Vietnamese-Americans to think they were cooking man's best friend in the back kitchen. They should have just called it what it was and explained that some folks still like their dog stew even if it was of the fake kind."

Nguyen thinks that having such dishes on the menu helps maintain the heritage of Vietnam. If it's stinky, gross-looking and odd to your palate, so be it - as long it tastes good and is true to the culture.

"Blue cheese is stinky," Nguyen points out. "But most foodies love it. It's just that we have a different frame of reference when it comes to food we are not used to."

Nguyen tells a story to prove her point. "In China, they have a popular side dish called congee. It is white rice boiled many times so that the rice breaks completely down and you have a very silky white porridge.

EGG, SHRIMP AND SCALLION PANCAKES - Andrea Nguyen's egg, shrimp and scallion dish is easy to whip up, and tastes delicious, she says. CNS Photo courtesy of Leigh Beisch. "A group of chefs from Sichuan, China, visited the United States," Nguyen says. "They managed to get booked at the world-famous French Laundry. During their meal, one of their dishes was a perfect, classic Italian risotto, which is always cooked al dente - cooked, but a bit firm in the middle. Well, they tasted the dish, looked at each other and one of them blurted, "This congee is terrible, it's hardly cooked!"

Like most chefs and food writers, Nguyen learned to love food through family tradition. When the family was airlifted out of Vietnam in 1975, Nguyen's mother was forced to leave most of her possessions. What she wouldn't leave was a small, yellow notebook of recipes that would later inspire Nguyen's cookbook, "Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors" (Ten Speed Press, \$35).

THE DISH

As a child, I remember my father's great-tasting egg foo yong - I called it egg foo young. When I saw the photo of Nguyen's egg, shrimp and scallion pancakes in her cookbook, the memory of that textured egg dish flooded my senses. This is the Vietnamese version of that classic dish.

"Long before I knew about Chinese-American egg foo yong," Nguyen writes in her cooking notes. "I was dipping these tasty pancakes in fish sauce and soy sauce and enjoying them with hot rice. When my mother was short of time, she would prepare a couple of plates full of these yellow, pink and green pancakes for dinner.

"They are incredibly easy to whip up and yet taste fancy. The edges get fluffy and crispy from frying in a liberal amount of oil, and each rich bite contains a bit of tasty shrimp. I don't devein the shrimp for these pancakes because I have found that it leaves unattractive lumps. But if you prefer to devein, do so."

THE WINE

Look to Oregon's Willamette Valley for a textured wine match for such a textured dish. Texture in wine makes you think bubbles, and in this case, a yummy 2001 Argyle Brute (\$25) is the perfect choice. The creamy, fruity sparkling wine complements the dish's textures, and fruit flavors contrast with the savory crisp fried edges of the pancake while not suffocating the delicate flavor of the shrimp.

"Sparkling wines made with chardonnay grapes really work with Asian food," says winemaker Rollin Soles. "It would rock with this dish! It's pretty dang fruity." The wine has flavors of apricot and peaches with a vanilla and honey creme overtones.

Argyle Winery was founded by Brian Croser and winemaker Soles in 1987. They pioneered winemaking in the Willamette Valley, producing some of the best pinot noir, chardonnay and sparkling wines in the industry. The winery was named "Oregon's premier winery" by Wine Spectator in 2000.

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This dish can be used as a main dish or part of an Asian meal with other sides.

EGG, SHRIMP AND SCALLION PANCAKES

1 pound medium shrimp, peeled

Salt, as needed

5 eggs, beaten

2 scallions, white and green parts, chopped

Canola or other neutral oil, for frying

Fish sauce or light (regular) soy sauce, for serving

Yields 4 to 6 servings.

Refresh shrimp by putting them in colander and tossing with a liberal amount of salt. Rinse immediately under cold water and press gently to drain well. Put shrimp in bowl, add eggs and scallions, mix well.

Put enough oil into large, nonstick skillet to coat bottom thinly. Place over medium heat and heat until a drop of egg immediately sizzles and bubbles upon contact with oil.

To make each pancake, ladle about 2 tablespoons of the egg mixture into skillet, making sure that a few shrimp are included in each portion, and then quickly nudge the shrimp in each pool of eggs so they don't overlap. Fry only as many pancakes at once as will fit without crowding, about 3 pancakes at a time in a 12-inch skillet. Don't worry about the shape each one takes, as they are meant to be free-form.

When edges of pancake are set and lightly browned, after about 2 minutes, use spatula to turn carefully. (If pancakes have stuck together, use spatula to separate them before flipping.) Fry for 30 seconds to 1 minute, until browned on second side. Transfer finished pancakes to plate and keep warm while you fry the rest.

Arrange pancakes on 2 plates or a platter and serve with fish sauce for dipping.

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Food and Wine: Vietnamese shrimp pancakes sparkle with Oregon bubbly by Ron James