

# Veggin' It Up

While leaf-munchers have to scour the city for a decent salad, Saigon's meat-eaters are spoiled for choice. **Will Peach** finds out what's out there for his fellow vegetarians. Photos by **Khoa Tran**.



HO CHI MINH CITY IS A CARNIVORE'S paradise. Lotteria lures you in on every corner, Colonel Sanders winks at you every half mile and even the dried squid hanging on street vendor carts have a strangely seductive smell. Amid all this barbarism my stomach asks me: is meat really that good?

Wayne McCoy, proprietor of Texas BarBQ and Steaks, is a big fan.

"We are carnivores by nature," he argues. "If we weren't supposed to eat meat, we wouldn't have teeth."

A fair point. After all, my own gnashers do seem to be missing a bit of practice, but not really enough to make me forego my own ideas about avoiding "nature's way."

Being a vegetarian in this town just isn't easy. The myriad of meat options available at your average eatery swamp that of the vegetarian variety. Even the locals themselves look at you with incredulous eyes at the mere mention that "*toi an chay*" (*I'm vegetarian*).

#### • My Ethical Standpoint

I'm a scrawny little boy for a reason and that's because I can't stomach the thought of chowing down on chicken or frog, cow or dog. So why isn't there anything for me out there?

Geoffrey Deetz, the maker of the biggest burger in town, is keen to remedy the situation.

"Vietnam is a really good market for vegetarian food," he says. "Vegetarians are always looked at as side dish people, because 90 percent of customers come in for meat. We have to change that."

And even meat-loving Wayne recognises the benefits of a healthy, balanced diet.

"To eat nothing but meat is to put one's self into a dietary deficiency," he says.

But where are the fully committed vegetarian hangouts? I don't want to see another menu with a hamburger the size of my head on it.

From a restaurateur's perspective, vegetarians certainly are a tough crowd;



## VEGGIE MIGHT

Various tofu-based and bean curd dishes showing how skilled hands can make *faux* meat look like the real thing.

our whiney hippy ways are often even laughable. Some won't eat anything that's touched, been near to or even in the same kitchen as flesh. For restaurant owners this is an understandable hassle. So what can we do, other than shave our heads and don our best orange rags to avoid the marginalisation of the meat world? The answer is: plenty.

In fact Vietnam is not a bad place to be a vegetarian at all. You just have to know where to look. Tim Bennett, a certified nutritionist, agrees.

"Southeast Asia is a great place to be a vegetarian because it is ingrained in the culture, whether through religion or tradition," he explains.

So, if newcomers to the country show a little perseverance they can do well – just don't expect to get built like a wardrobe.

"They can do some amazing things with tofu," continues Tim. "Although, from a nutritionist's perspective it wouldn't be recommended for bodybuilding because it lacks basic amino acids."

#### ◦ A City of Choices

If you're not too much of a penny pincher head to **Viet Chay** (339 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, Q3). Peeking out from around the corner of Vinh Nghiem Pagoda, this eatery grants vegetarians a long-awaited seat at the table of the meat-free, while also allowing guests to zen-out alongside some monks. Specialising in recreating the feel of meat using textured protein pioneered by the Taiwanese, vegetarians can even bring their animal munching

friends, who can order dishes like stir-fried pork chops with orange sauce (VND40,000) and chicken drumsticks (VND40,000). Listen carefully for their cries of, "I can't believe it's not butter (oops, I mean meat)!", because the dishes in this place are excellent replicas of the real thing.

Another swish veggie paradise is **Hoa Dang** (38 Huynh Khuong Ninh, Q1), serving up such nutritious delights that even the most hardened personal trainers would swear by. The seating is sleek and comfortable enough to enjoy some of the best meatless versions of *bun bo* and *pho* in town, all starting at VND30,000. This place also has a quaint little bar from which to sip a variety of non-alcoholic drinks, making it a nice little retreat from the rigours of downtown Saigon.

**Tib Chay** (11 Duong Tran Nhat, Q1) is expensive by Vietnamese standards, but not by westerners'. It is run by the brother of the late Vietnamese singer Trinh Cong Son and, due to its cleanliness and appearance, is another ideal place to host guests. Mock meat crowds the vegan-friendly menu here.

#### ◦ Closer to Town

Luxury is good, but vegetarians aren't too priggish and we can also cope with places that are a bit more rough and ready. So, if you don't want to stray too far away from the watering holes and naughty cyclo men of the backpacker area, there are still options out there. The **Original Bodhi Tree** (175/4 Pham Ngu Lao, Q1) is a cool little hangout

to act all Gandhi. Its spiritual atmosphere draws in the crowds as does the international cuisine it has to offer. The highlight for most is the sweet rice dish wrapped in banana leaf. Vegetable curry, braised tofu claypot and vegetable soups are other popular options. They also cater to vegans with their non-dairy based dishes, fruit smoothies and other delicacies. Prices range around VND30,000 for mains.

**Tiem Com Chay Phap Hoa I** (200 Nguyen Trai, Q1), just across the park from Pham Ngu Lao is another great site to get a good feed. In store here is a buffet of vegetarian dishes waiting to be selected. The largely vegan staff here speak little English but are all friendly enough to help you get by. The buffet counter is constantly restocked from the kitchen in the rear, serving over 40 Vietnamese dishes at one time. Cheap and cheerful to say the least, it also has vegan goods on sale from a counter inside the restaurant.

**Huong Vien** (101 Vuon Chuoi, Q3) is another clean, vegan-friendly place that uses mock meat. It's probably one of the cheapest joints covered as most dishes fail to exceed VND20,000. If you don't mind heading out a bit further, **Au Lac** (60 Tan Vinh, Q4) is another place following the same Vietnamese-style 'Quan Com' buffet format.

So while your meat-eating friends may try and question your vegetarian ways, just remind them that plenty of diners in the city are following suit. We need to use our teeth for eating vegetables too. **W**