

**EXPLORING THE RICE-BASED CULINARY TRADITION OF VIETNAM****Le Thi Minh Hong, Nguyen Thi Huyen****Faculty of Business Administration and Tourism, Thai Nguyen College, Vietnam****ABSTRACT**

Rice is a crucial staple crop in Vietnam, occupying more than 90% of the country's cultivated land. It not only serves as the primary food source for the Vietnamese people but also constitutes the main ingredient in many traditional dishes of the nation. From rice, the Vietnamese people skillfully craft a diverse and rich array of dishes. This paper focuses on introducing and describing the uniqueness of Vietnamese cuisine through traditional dishes prepared with rice. Additionally, the paper emphasizes the creativity in utilizing rice, showcasing how it becomes an endless source of inspiration for chefs and diners alike, enriching the culinary landscape of Vietnam.

**Keywords:**

tradition, cuisine, rice, Vietnam.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

When mentioning Vietnam, one cannot overlook the lush green rice fields, the fragrant white rice grains, and the rich and diverse culinary scene, all crafted from the staple ingredient of rice. Rice is not only the main source of sustenance for the Vietnamese people but also the soul of a unique culinary culture, contributing to the distinctiveness of the nation.

From ancient times, rice has been intertwined with both the spiritual and material aspects of Vietnamese life. The image of Vietnamese countryside with golden ripe rice fields waving in the wind has become a familiar symbol, evoking pride in the nation's long-standing agricultural tradition. Rice is not just a source of sustenance but also an offering to ancestors, expressing filial piety and gratitude.

Derived from the richness of rice as a primary ingredient, Vietnamese cuisine boasts a plethora of unique and enticing dishes. It is hard to enumerate all the dishes made from rice, from simple and rustic ones like plain rice, noodles, pho, and bread to sophisticated and delicate ones like banh chung, banh tet, fried spring rolls, all of which exude the quintessential flavors of the homeland. Each region has its own way of cooking and enjoying rice, adding to the diversity and richness of Vietnam's culinary map.

Rice is not only the main food in the daily meals of the Vietnamese people but also a symbol of the rich and diverse culinary culture of Vietnam. From North to South, each region has its own traditional dishes made from rice, reflecting the cultural identity and way of life of the people there. In the North, rice is used to create flavorful and delicate dishes such as pho, bun cha, and banh cuon. These dishes not only demonstrate the Vietnamese people's reverence for ingredients but also reflect the intricacy and meticulousness in cooking. In the Central region, with its sunny and windy climate, rice is transformed into spicy and flavorful dishes such as Hue-style beef noodle soup, Quang-style noodles, and sizzling pancakes. The combination of the spicy taste of chili and the natural sweetness of rice creates a distinctive flavor that cannot be found anywhere else.

The Southern region, famous for its sweetness and diversity in cuisine, has turned rice into dishes such as broken rice, Hu Tieu, and rice noodle soup. The richness of Southern cuisine reflects the harmony of many cultures and the endless creativity in cooking rice dishes. Not only as the main ingredient, rice also contributes to the culinary art of Vietnam through traditional cakes such as banh chung, banh day, and banh tet, especially during festivals and Tet holiday. These cakes not only carry deep cultural meanings but also demonstrate respect and gratitude for nature and harvest. The culinary scene from rice in Vietnam is not only the inheritance and promotion of traditions but also the evidence of the Vietnamese people's adaptability and creativity in turning small rice grains into unique and colorful culinary works. It is the combination of tradition and modernity, locality and globality, past, and future of Vietnam's culinary scene.

**2. The Importance of Rice in Vietnamese Cuisine**

Rice has long played a central role in the culture and cuisine of Vietnam. As the primary food source nourishing the population for thousands of years, rice also serves as the ingredient that enriches the unique and diverse

culinary landscape of the country. Furthermore, rice carries profound spiritual values, reflecting the close connection between humans and nature, between the past, present, and future.

#### **Rice - Main Food Source of the Vietnamese People**

Vietnam, with its traditional agriculture, has long asserted its position in the world's agricultural market, especially with rice cultivation. The image of vast rice fields, shaded by lush green rice plants stretching from North to South, has become an inseparable cultural symbol of Vietnam. Rice, as the main food source nourishing millions of families throughout thousands of years of history, not only plays a role as a vital starch supplier but also as a diverse nutritional resource. The delicious aroma, soft texture, and high nutritional value of Vietnamese rice are not only cherished by local people but also attract the attention of the world.

#### **Rice - Ingredient for a Rich Culinary Scene**

From the richness of rice as an ingredient, Vietnamese cuisine proudly owns numerous unique and enticing dishes, from simple, rustic ones to sophisticated delicacies. From plain rice, noodles, pho, and bread to banh chung, banh tet, fried spring rolls, each dish is a culinary masterpiece with a rich homeland flavor.

Each region of Vietnam has its own taste, combining rice with other ingredients to create distinctive dishes. The North is famous for its delicate and refined dishes such as Hanoi pho, bun cha, bun thang, and Thanh Tri rolled cake; the Central region brings bold and flavorful tastes with dishes like rice clam, Hue beef noodle soup, Quang noodles, and sizzling pancakes; the South is interesting with the harmonious combination of various culinary cultures, creating unique dishes such as broken rice, Nam Vang noodle soup, crab soup, and bread.

#### **Rice - Cultural and Spiritual Symbol**

Rice is not only a food source and ingredient for cuisine but also carries profound cultural and spiritual values. In Vietnamese culture, rice is considered the "pearl of heaven", symbolizing prosperity, abundance, and good fortune. The Rice Festival in Dong Thap is one of the clearest examples of the importance of rice in the cultural life of the Vietnamese people. The festival, held during the rice harvest season, is an occasion for people to express gratitude to their ancestors and pray for a bountiful harvest.

The image of Vietnamese families enjoying meals filled with fragrant, fluffy white rice and dishes made from rice is not only a symbol of warmth and togetherness but also a symbol of happiness and the appreciation of family values.

### **3. The Development of the Rice Agriculture Industry in Vietnam**

The rice agriculture sector plays an immensely important role in Vietnam's national economy. This sector not only ensures food security for the country but also contributes significantly to exports, generating substantial foreign currency revenue. Despite numerous ups and downs, Vietnam's rice agriculture sector has made remarkable strides, asserting its position in the international market.

#### **Early Development Phase (Before 1986)**

Before 1986, Vietnam's rice agriculture relied primarily on subsistence farming methods. This led to low productivity and a lack of understanding of modern cultivation techniques. Farmers often worked with outdated tools and equipment, without support from modern technology. Additionally, the rice industry faced unique challenges due to war and government subsidy policies. Infrastructure was destroyed, and the resources needed for agricultural development were limited.

Despite these difficulties, the Vietnamese people relentlessly sought ways to improve the situation. These efforts, albeit modest, made a difference. Vietnam began to enter a new phase of economic development, and the rice agriculture sector became a bright spot in agriculture.

#### **Renovation Phase (From 1986 to Present)**

The renovation phase from 1986 onwards marked a significant turning point in the history of Vietnam's rice agriculture development. Against a backdrop of political and economic turmoil, Vietnam decided to implement renovation policies to create a more favorable environment for economic development, including agriculture.

In 1986, the Vietnamese government introduced crucial policies such as the household responsibility system. This policy emphasized the liberation of farmers' productive capacity by allocating land and production resources to them, creating a strong incentive to improve productivity and product quality. The increased land ownership facilitated favorable conditions for rural households to expand cultivation areas and adopt more modern farming methods, thereby increasing output and income for rural residents.

Moreover, opening up to integration was also an important step that helped Vietnam's rice agriculture sector access international markets. Participation in trade agreements and free trade agreements not only opened the door for Vietnamese rice to be exported to international markets but also created competitive pressure, driving the sector to develop vigorously through improving product quality and reducing production costs.

Furthermore, the government has also heavily invested in scientific and technological research in agriculture, including the rice agriculture sector. The application of advanced technology in production not only enhances productivity but also improves product quality and minimizes environmental and human health risks. This implies that Vietnam's rice agriculture sector is continuously advancing and asserting its position in the international market.

#### **4. Traditional Rice-based Dishes**

Vietnamese cuisine has long been renowned for its richness, diversity, and sophistication, crafted from humble ingredients such as vegetables, fruits, meats, fish, and notably rice - the staple food of the Vietnamese people. Rice is not only used to cook plain rice but also processed into countless other dishes, imbuing them with the rich flavors of the homeland. Below are some typical traditional dishes made from rice:

##### **Pho - A traditional dish from Northern Vietnam**

Pho is one of the most distinctive and popular dishes in Vietnam. Originating from the North, pho has become a symbol of Vietnamese cuisine worldwide. Although there are many variations such as beef pho or chicken pho, the essential ingredient in every bowl of pho is the soft and fragrant rice noodles. Rice noodles are soaked in water, then drained and steamed, creating a distinctive flavor and chewy texture. When combined with rich and aromatic broth, meat, fresh herbs, and spices such as onions, pepper, and chili, pho becomes a flavorful, nutritious, and enticing dish, reflecting the depth and sophistication of Vietnamese culinary culture.

##### **Com Tam - A characteristic dish from Southern Vietnam**

Com Tam is a traditional dish from Southern Vietnam, originating from the use of leftover broken rice grains after harvesting. Previously, com tam was made from broken or inferior quality rice grains unsuitable for cooking plain rice. However, with the development of the rice industry, modern com tam is often made from pure rice. Com tam is prepared by cooking rice, then cooling and processing it into small, chewy fibers. Often served with various types of meat such as pork, chicken, or shredded pork skin, com tam is typically accompanied by a range of condiments such as fish sauce, pickled vegetables, fresh herbs, and grilled rice paper, creating a distinctive and appealing flavor of Southern Vietnam.

##### **Banh Chung - A traditional dish for Tet holiday**

Banh Chung is one of the two traditional cakes of the Vietnamese people during Tet Nguyen Dan, alongside Banh Day. Banh Chung originates from the Hung Kings era and symbolizes the resilience and survival of the nation. Banh Chung is made from simple ingredients such as glutinous rice, banana leaves, green beans, and pork or duck meat. Glutinous rice is soaked in water, then ground into powder, combined with green beans and meat to form a filling. The filling is then wrapped inside a layer of glutinous rice, encased in banana leaves, and boiled in water for a long time. Banh Chung is not only a traditional dish for Tet but also a symbol of family affection, unity, and wishes for a peaceful and prosperous new year.

##### **Bun Cha - A famous dish from Hanoi**

Bun Cha is one of the distinctive and famous dishes of Hanoi, often eaten for lunch or dinner. This dish consists of two main components: bun (rice vermicelli) and cha (grilled pork). Rice vermicelli is made from ground glutinous rice flour, spread out into small fibers and blanched in boiling water. The pork is marinated with spices and then grilled until cooked, creating a distinctive aroma and sweet taste of the meat. When eating, people often combine rice vermicelli and grilled pork with a variety of raw vegetables such as lettuce, herbs, and a bowl of sweet and sour dipping sauce. Bun Cha is not only a delicious dish but also a symbol of Hanoi's rich and diverse culinary culture.

#### **5. Creativity in Rice Utilization**

Rice not only serves as the main staple food nourishing the Vietnamese people throughout thousands of years of history but also acts as the ingredient diversifying the unique cuisine of the country. Moreover, rice serves as an endless source of inspiration for Vietnamese chefs to innovate new dishes, showcasing the delicacy, skillfulness, and creativity of the Vietnamese. Vietnamese cuisine has long been famous for its richness, diversity, and sophistication, crafted from humble ingredients such as vegetables, fruits, meats, fish, and notably rice. However, in recent years, Vietnamese cuisine has been undergoing strong development and innovation, with the emergence of many creative dishes made from rice. The innovation in Vietnamese cuisine is demonstrated through several aspects:

- Using new ingredients: Vietnamese chefs are increasingly using new ingredients, combined with rice to create unique and attractive dishes. For example, using seasonal vegetables, imported meats, or combining rice with ingredients from different cultures.
- Applying new cooking techniques: New cooking techniques such as stir-frying, grilling, roasting, and sautéing are applied to prepare rice-based dishes, creating new and enticing flavors.

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- Beautiful food presentation: Vietnamese chefs are paying more attention to the presentation of dishes, creating attractiveness and impressiveness for diners.

The creativity in rice utilization has resulted in many unique and enticing dishes, contributing to enriching the culinary map of Vietnam. Below are some examples of creative dishes made from rice:

- Vietnamese Sushi: The combination of rice and fresh seafood has created a new variation of traditional sushi. Instead of using white rice as in Japan, Vietnamese people often use white rice to make sushi rice, creating a unique and appealing flavor.
- Fried rice cakes: This is a creative dish that Vietnamese people have developed from leftover rice. Rice is fried with spices such as onions, garlic, soy sauce, and pork or shrimp, creating a delicious and enticing dish.
- Crispy rice cakes: A delicious and mouth-watering dessert, crispy rice cakes are made from glutinous rice and sugar, then steamed and cut into small pieces. Crispy rice cakes have a pleasant sweetness and can be enjoyed with coconut milk to create a special flavor.

The creativity in rice utilization is evidence of the richness and diversity of Vietnamese cuisine. With the continuous creativity of Vietnamese chefs, new and unique dishes will continue to be born, further enriching the culinary map of Vietnam and attracting diners both domestically and internationally.

### CONCLUSION

In the journey of exploring the traditional cuisine from rice in Vietnam, we have witnessed the diversity and richness of the country's culinary culture. From traditional dishes like Pho, Com Tam, Ban Chung to new creations like Vietnamese sushi, fried rice cakes, crispy rice cakes, rice has not only been a source of nutrition but also an endless inspiration for culinary creativity. Through these dishes, we not only see the talent and skillfulness of the Vietnamese in creatively using and modifying simple ingredients like rice but also understand more about the cultural values, traditions, and soul of the Vietnamese people. By combining diligence, talent, and enthusiasm, rice cuisine in Vietnam is not only an indispensable part of daily life but also a symbol of unity, family affection, and the creative spirit of the nation. It is necessary to continue to promote and preserve these culinary cultural values so that future generations can appreciate and be proud of Vietnam's rich cultural heritage.

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