

**Hidden Flavors** From left: Nhu Lan's fresh *bun* *thit nuong*; enjoying a bowl of noodles.

VIETNAM



**Beyond Pho.** Travelers to Vietnam in search of the ultimate *pho* often miss out on the country's many other noodle options. Here, five of the best, all available in Saigon. *By* ROBYN ECKHARDT

#### ■ HU TIEU NAM VANG

From China by way of Cambodia and tweaked to the Vietnamese palate, *hu tieu nam vang* (*nam vang* is Vietnamese for Phnom Penh) is a soupy surf-and-turf composed of prawns, thinly sliced beef, ground pork and a few bits of offal with rice vermicelli in a meaty, lightly sweet broth. Grab a table at **Lien Hua** (381 *Vô Văn Tán*, District 3; 84-8/3832-6078; lunch for two VND120,000) and order yours *kho* (dry) to have the broth served on the side. Mix in the garnishes—bean sprouts, sliced lettuce, Chinese celery and cilantro leaves, and sliced browned shallots—and spoon in a bit of broth. Follow the lead of fellow diners and

personalize your bowl with a squeeze of lime, a spoonful of chopped chilies, and a few dips from the jar of chopped garlic in white vinegar on your table. Pork dumplings that are served unbidden aren't worth trying (they've been sitting for a while), but do order a glass of fresh orange juice or strawberry shake from the "juice bar" at the back.

#### ■ BUN RIEU OC

*Bun rieu oc*, rice-noodle soup featuring the meat of golfball-size snails harvested from rice paddies, hails from Vietnam's north. The friendly owner of hard-to-find (phone ahead)

**Bun Oc Thanh Hai** (14/12 *Kỳ Đông St.*, District 3; 84-8/3843-5785; lunch for two VND95,000) moved to Saigon from a village near Hanoi almost thirty years ago. Ever since, she's been doing a bang-up business peddling all dishes mollusc. Her *bun rieu oc* features a sweet-savory broth studded with tomatoes and chunks of snail meat; fluffy dumplings floating atop are made of crab roe. The heap of vegetables served alongside—sliced banana flower, morning-glory stem, basil, mint—is meant to be dunked in the hot broth. *Giam bong*, a slightly alcoholic vinegar made from rice wine lees (available on request), adds a pleasant kick. »



Other northern-style must-eats here include *oc nuoi thit*—snail shells stuffed with chopped pork and snails, with lemongrass and plenty of black pepper—and *nuoc sau*, potato-like green bananas sautéed with snail meat and spicy perilla leaves.

■ **BUN THIT NUONG**

If Saigon's high temperatures have you seeking a break from broths, look no further than *bun thit nuong*, a dish that's more salad than soup. At **Nhu Lan** (64-68 Ham Nghi St., District 1; 84-8/3829-2970; lunch for two VND90,000), an open-air corner shop opposite Bitexco Finance Tower (soon to be Saigon's tallest structure), it takes the form of an oversize bowl holding a mound of cool *bun* (rice-flour vermicelli) hiding carrot and radish pickle, shredded Thai basil, perilla and lettuce, and scallion greens softened in oil; on top of all this sit slices of smoky grilled pork and chopped peanuts. Give the bowl of fish sauce and chilies served alongside a stir, pour it over the noodles, and sit back to enjoy the collision of flavors, textures and temperatures. Soft fresh spring rolls stuffed with pork, prawn and *banh cuon*—rice-flour pasta sheets



rolled around chopped pork and mushrooms—are also major draws at this long-established eatery.

■ **BANH CANH CUA**

For a notable *banh canh cua*—a slightly viscous pork-and-crab soup packed with thick, round tapioca starch noodles that go by the same name—hit the street, literally. You'll know **Sang Banh** (47 Ton That Dam St., District 1; no phone; VND20,000 per bowl), a wheeled cart fronted by rows of stainless-steel tables spilling across a sidewalk on a side street near the Saigon River, by the crab claws piled in its glass display case. This morning-only outfit has been dishing up its savory soup for over 30 years. Each serving features hunks of shelled crustacean and delightfully chewy homemade noodles in a crimson broth garnished with chopped scallion. Gild the lily with a few plump prawns (order *banh canh cua tom*) and add lime, chili and a drizzle of fish sauce at the table.

■ **BUN CA DAC BIET**

In the past year, Saigon has welcomed a clutch of new restaurants serving specialties from the beachy central Vietnamese coastal city of Nha Trang. The best of the bunch is **Nem Nuong Ganh** (58/4 Pham Ngoc Thach St., District 3; 84-8/3829-5243; lunch or dinner for two VND120,000), a cheerful place in a quiet alley that rightfully prides itself on its *bun ca dac biet* ("special" fish noodles), a piscine tour de force of concentrated seafood broth packed with hunks of fantastically fresh tuna, fish-paste slices, tomato and pineapple. Lighten your soup from the mess of beansprouts, shredded lettuce and banana flowers served alongside. Jellyfish fans will want to snag a bowl of *bun sua*, an intriguing blend of shrimp, chewy jellyfish, young starfruit and rice noodles in a lighter broth served with fresh mint and basil. ✦

**Ready to Serve** From top: Tucking in at a Saigon wet market; an order makes its way to a table; *bun rieu oc*, featuring snail meat and plenty of fresh vegetables, at Bun Oc Thanh Hai.

