

VIETNAMESE COOKING CLASSES AT THE WOMEN'S CULTURAL CENTRE

Shortly after her talk at ILV on the topic of getting out and about in HCMC, Camilla herded a number of us to the Women's Cultural Centre in D3 to enrol in a month long course on Vietnamese family cooking. At the time it seemed like a great



idea, but as the start date drew closer we were decidedly nervous at the prospect of being just four expats walking into a room full of local girls and women, especially as only one of us spoke Vietnamese! Still we all turned up, even arriving early, and by the end of that first lesson – with an in-depth knowledge of how to prepare an absolutely delicious red chicken curry - we were absolutely hooked. The month turned into a whirl of two-hour lessons three times a week, many new and exciting ingredients, awe at the intensive preparation involved (mince / hamburger was created by hand with a meat

cleaver from one large piece of beef; coconut flesh was laboriously pressed several times through a piece of muslin to produce coconut milk, not bought in a tin!), a complete inability to write the letters MSG into our recipe books, and a respect and liking for our delightful teacher Miss Oanh (actually Mrs Oanh I suspect) who never hesitated to include us in her class.

Camilla had provided each of us with a basic list of ingredients in Vietnamese and English which was enormously useful, however Miss Oanh did speak very good English and was only too happy to translate and ensure we understood what was going on. Likewise, quite a few of our fellow students (of all ages and including two men) also spoke English and proved keen to correct our Vietnamese pronunciation or spelling. In return we were happy to provide moments of amusement to them such as when a few kilos of skinned headless frogs turned up as an ingredient at the beginning of one particular lesson! Or our continual astonishment at the amount of chilli being added to a dish...



As I write this, having now received the official certificate confirming I've completed the course, we have just returned from a trip to Ben Thanh hosted by Keiko. Keiko knows the market and stall holders inside-out and my pantry is now home to many of the necessities required for the excellent dishes we learned to cook over the month. We had a few laughs (no electricity one day, but hey that's Saigon), tried many new tastes, and all in all would recommend these courses to all of you. It is certainly local, no air con for example, but what better way to immerse yourself into a culture than through the food.

Finally, here's a recipe we learned for a simple but excellent Vietnamese dipping sauce -

Mix together Juice of 4 limes (chan), 4 tbsp sugar (durong), 4 tbsp fish sauce (nuoc mam)

4 tbsp coconut juice - the juice you drink, not coconut milk, Pinch salt (muoi)

**Crushed garlic (toi) Finely chopped red chilli (ot) Finely chopped or grated fresh ginger (gung)*



** use amounts to achieve the taste you prefer*

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