



HYG-5258-95-R10

# Cultural Diversity: Eating in America

## Vietnamese

The Vietnamese come from both remote agricultural and fast-paced urban areas of southeast Asia. Most Vietnamese practice Buddhism, but some practice Confucianism or Taoism.

### Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

The basic food in Vietnam is dry, flaky rice supplemented with vegetables, eggs, and small amounts of meat and fish. Although similar to Chinese cooking, Vietnamese cooking uses little fat or oil for frying. “NuocMam” fish sauce is a principle ingredient in almost every Vietnamese dish. Vietnamese are fond of fruits such as bananas, mangos, papayas, oranges, coconuts, and pineapple. They are accustomed to little milk and cheese, and many cannot produce the enzymes needed to properly digest dairy foods (lactose intolerance). They drink a large amount of hot green tea and coffee without adding sugar, milk, or lemon.

The Vietnamese have three meals a day with some snacking on fruits and soups.

- **Breakfast**—(light) soup “pho,” rice or rice noodles; thin slices of beef, chicken, or pork; bean sprouts; greens; green tea or green coffee; boiled eggs; and crusty bread
- **Lunch and Dinner**—(both similar in food content, with smaller portions for dinner) rice, fish, or meat; vegetable dish with NuocMam or fish sauce; tea or coffee
- **Snacks**—fruits, clear soup

### Eating Practices, Food Preferences, and Food Preparation Techniques

In their home country, Vietnamese either grow food or purchase it daily. There are few refrigerators. Teaching Vietnamese living in the United States proper food storage of perishable foods is important. Encourage home and community gardening as a source of native vegetables. Soybeans, mung beans, and peanuts are used extensively. New, inexpensive legumes should be introduced.

Chopsticks and small bowls are used for eating. Bowls are brought to the mouth to eat.

Vietnamese eat a wide variety of vegetables. Fruit is served as a dessert and snack. Encourage variety in their diet through introducing unfamiliar vegetables and fruits. Discourage low-nutrient foods such as soft drinks, candy, and chips.

### Teaching Implications

Education is extremely important to the Vietnamese. Their learning system emphasizes memorization and repetition, not critical study. Vietnamese show great respect to elders, superiors, and strangers. They clasp both hands against their chests to welcome. Shaking hands is seldom done; a smile and nod would suffice. Beckoning with a finger is a sign of contempt used toward an animal or inferior.

Vietnamese people tend to be excessively polite and delicate. Because frankness and outspokenness are usually considered rude, true feelings are often veiled. Vietnamese people may just smile and nod when they do

not understand you. Keep in mind that this means, “Yes, I hear you,” or, “Yes, I see what you mean even though I don’t truly understand it!”

Vietnamese are typically friendly and giving people. Hospitality and food are related. A Vietnamese person might not ask, “How are you?” but “Have you eaten yet?” They love to give gifts, but it is considered rude to open them in front of people.

### Customs and Family Traditions

The Vietnamese family structure is paternal spanning three generations and is the chief source of social identity. The three generations live together in a single family house, the father upholding traditions and setting moral standards.

Vietnamese names are written in reverse order of American names: family—middle—personal. Nguyen Van Hai would be called Mr. Hai. Some have reversed name order to comply with American customs.

The calendar followed is a lunar one with Tet—or the Lunar New Year, which usually occurs in February—being the most important holiday and feast. Tet is considered everyone’s birthday, and individual birthdays are not celebrated.

Pregnant women do not increase their caloric intake. Milk consumption is low or nonexistent during pregnancy and lactation. Infants are breastfed to about one year. Rice gruel (rice flour and water) is the only food introduced in the first year, sometimes as early as one month.

### Conclusion

Even though Vietnamese immigrants range from farmers to urban dwellers, their move to the United States is one of enormous cultural change. They are a people of tradition yet are open to try new “American” ways. Unfamiliar with most of our grocery items, they not only need to be retaught words and techniques for their own cooking, but need a total introduction to American food culture.

Original author: Deidre Betancourt

### Cultural Diversity: Eating in America

Cultural diversity is a major issue in American eating. To fully understand the impact cultures play in American nutrition, one must study both food and culture. This fact sheet on the Vietnamese culture is one of a series of nine developed to address cultural diversity in American eating.

This fact sheet is designed as an awareness tool for a novice working with a cultural group previously unknown to them. Given the nature of the variations that exist in each cultural group (i.e. socioeconomic status, religion, age, education, social class, location, length of time in the United States, and location of origin) caution needs to be taken not to generalize or imply that these characteristics apply to all individuals of a cultural group. This fact sheet was designed primarily for use in northeastern Ohio, but may stimulate awareness of differences in these cultural groups in other parts of the country. The goal of this fact sheet is to assist a novice educator in reducing any cultural barriers that may inhibit education. The author strongly recommends continued reading and additional research into the cultural groups in which you work.

### References

*The People and Cultures of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.* Language and Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC.  
Individual and group interviews conducted with Vietnamese population at International Institute, Summit County.

### Additional resources addressing cultural diversity in nutrition education:

- *Cross-Cultural Counseling: A Guide for Nutrition and Health Counselors* (FNS 250). U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Kittler, P., and Schuer, K. (1989). *Food and Culture in America*. Van Nostrand & Reinhold, 1989.
- *Nutrition, Food, and Culture*. National Livestock and Meat Board, Chicago, Illinois.

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension’s web site “Ohioline” at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension  
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868