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Dining at the Tet table

'The Little Saigon Cookbook' offers traditional recipes for a delectable Vietnamese new year's celebration.



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**See recipes for five traditional dishes below.*

Tet, the Vietnamese new year, is by far the most celebrated and festive holiday for Vietnamese-Americans, says Vietnamese cuisine cookbook author Ann Le.

"For Vietnamese-Americans all over the country," Le says, "Tet involves a pilgrimage to Little Saigon, because of its many festivities and large concentration of Buddhist temples."

And for that reason, Westminster and Garden Grove see more tourists during the week of Tet (this year, Jan. 29) than at any other time of the year, she says.

Symbols of the celebration abound in shops, stores and homes – colorful cymbidium orchids, twigs of bountiful blossoms and dwarf kumquat trees.

Community events showcase the sights and sounds of dragon dances, fireworks and pageants. Melodious music melds with noisy parades and laughter. Streets are festooned with red ribbons. Sidewalks fill with rivers of revelers.

And, of course, there are feasts that show off irresistible food. Dishes are made in advance or bought at restaurants, bakeries or food courts. Once the celebrations start, there is little time for the kitchen.

The words for celebrating Tet, *an Tet*, translate as "eating Tet."



TRADITIONAL DISH:
Cookbook author Ann Le says Chicken Braised in Ginger and Coconut (Ga Kho Gung) "is delicious served with steamed rice. The meat is moist and very flavorful."

NICK KOON, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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A labor of love

A graduate in economics from UC Berkeley, Ann Le, author of "The Little Saigon Cookbook," says she feels lucky to have grown up in the Little Saigon community. She lives in Los Angeles, where she works at a securities firm and attends graduate classes at UCLA.

The book reflects her desire to

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Le, author of "The Little Saigon Cookbook: Vietnamese Cuisine and Culture in Southern California's Little Saigon" (Globe Pequot Press, \$15.95), says those words are highly appropriate, given that much of the celebration revolves around the consumption of food. Although it's a weeklong celebration, Le says, most often the biggest family feast takes place the night before Tet.

"This night used to always be celebrated in the home of the oldest family member, but now it often takes place in a restaurant," explains Le, 27, who as a child spent lots of time in Little Saigon because both her parents worked there.

Either at home or in a restaurant, she says, the meal needs to be as decadent and abundant as possible.

The traditional Tet dishes vary regionally in Vietnam. In the north, salted carp, boiled chicken and jellied meats are often served, Le says. In central Vietnam, shrimp pies are a major part of the feast. But in the south, where most of Orange County's Vietnamese-American residents have roots, slowly braised dishes, *kho*, are the tradition.

Not only are these braised dishes delicious, they are great candidates for make-ahead preparation because they taste even better reheated the next day. Most often they showcase pork, chicken, catfish or duck, and they contain fish sauce and coconut juice.

"Chicken Braised in Ginger and Coconut (Ga Kho Gung) is delicious served with steamed rice," Le says. "The meat is moist and very flavorful, especially served over rice with the sauce spooned over the top."

She also suggests Salted Short Ribs in a Clay Pot (Suon Kho Man). The ribs are marinated in a mixture of sugar, salt, fish sauce, chilies and pepper, then slow-cooked in either a saucepan or a clay pot along with plenty of garlic, shallots and cloves. Yes, and a little lemon-lime soda.

Mmm, the mixture forms a thick glaze around the fall-off-the-bone meat. It's served with rice and a table salad, a plate filled with fresh herbs (such as mint, cilantro and Thai basil) and red-leaf lettuce that can be used according to each diner's discretion as a garnish.

The celebratory meal might include two *kho* dishes, as well as lobster and/or crab, and maybe a steamed whole fish. Dishes that are family favorites might also be included. She suggested fried spring rolls, but said fresh spring rolls could be served instead.

In addition to dishes served at celebratory meals, specific foods are a Tet gift-giving custom. They can be bright red tins filled with dried fruits and nuts, or candied coconut, crystallized ginger or peanut brittle. Or glutinous rice cakes with pork and mung beans called *banh chung or banh tet*.

The cakes can be square or round, and are wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. Le says they are very time-consuming to prepare and most people nowadays buy them. She equates them with the Western tradition of giving holiday fruitcake.

But along with great food at the feasts and culinary presents, children love Tet because of the prosperity factor. *Li si*, red envelopes stuffed with crisp new bills, are given to children.

"The children take their turn saying a *chuc Tet*, or wish, to each adult, perhaps "*Chuc cau, vui ve, manh khoe cho nam moi*" or "I wish Uncle happiness, health in this New Year," she writes in her book.

"So pleased is Uncle with this greeting that he grants each child a red 'li si' stuffed with greenbacks."

New money for the new year.

record the community's recipes. But the formulas are oral traditions. Almost nothing has been written down. She says measurements were nonexistent and it was a real challenge to calculate exact amounts.

Working with grandmother Phu Dang as well as restaurant chefs and neighborhood cooks, she heard the same suggestion over and over. "Just taste as you go, just taste as you go," was the recurring guideline.

"My grandmother ran her kitchen with a worn-but-sharp cleaver, some wooden chopsticks, rice bowls and a colander," Le says. "Not one measuring cup."

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STEAMED TILAPIA WITH GINGER AND ONIONS (CA HAP GUNG HANH)

Yield: 4 servings

3 tablespoons soy sauce, divided use
 1/4 cup fish sauce, divided use
 1 fresh Thai bird chili, finely chopped; see cook's notes
 1 medium-size piece fresh ginger (about 1 inch long), peeled, cut into the size of matchsticks
 1 1/2 tablespoons ground black pepper, divided use
 1 1/2 tablespoons sugar, divided use
 7 tablespoons olive oil, divided use
 1/2 tablespoon fresh lime juice
 1 pound whole tilapia or other white-fleshed fish such as striped bass, cleaned
 5 green onions, divided use
 1/2 large yellow onion, thinly sliced, divided use

Garnish: Fresh cilantro

For serving: Cooked rice

Optional for garnishing: Salad platter with fresh mint, fresh Thai basil, bean sprouts, sliced cucumber, quartered lime

Cook's notes: Thai chilies are available at Asian markets. Use caution when working with fresh chilies; wash hands and work surface thoroughly upon completion and do NOT touch face or eyes.

Procedure:

1. Prepare 2 mixtures – one to steam in, and one to drizzle over cooked fish. To make steaming mixture, in small bowl, combine 2 tablespoons soy sauce, 3 tablespoons fish sauce, chili, ginger and 1 tablespoon pepper, 1 tablespoon sugar and 1/4 cup oil; stir until sugar dissolves. To make drizzling sauce, in small bowl, combine 1 tablespoon soy sauce, 3 tablespoons olive oil, lime juice, plus remaining fish sauce, pepper and sugar. Stir until sugar dissolves.

2. On each side of fish, make 3 parallel, evenly spaced shallow diagonal slashes (cut only halfway to bone). Cut 3 green onions into 4-inch pieces; place pieces inside cavity of fish. Place half of yellow onion slices inside cavity. Cut remaining green onions into 2-inch pieces and, with remaining sliced onion, create a bed for fish in shallow, heat-resistant pie pan.

3. Place fish in pie pan over bed of onions. Pour "steaming mixture" over fish, making sure some goes in slashes. Cover and refrigerate 25 minutes.

4. Prepare steamer: When water begins to boil, uncover fish and place pie pan with fish in steamer. Steam 5 to 8 minutes. Check for doneness every few minutes by studying slits of fish. Fish should be flaky but firm to touch and flesh should be opaque and whitened. Remove pie pan from steamer and immediately drizzle fish with second mixture. Garnish with cilantro and serve immediately with steamed rice and, if using, salad platter for additional garnish.

Nutritional information (per serving): Calories 540 (47 percent from fat), fat 28.2 g, protein 50.2 g, carbohydrates 19.8 g, fiber 1.1 g, sodium 967 mg, calcium 14 mg

Source: Adapted from "The Little Saigon Cookbook"

CHICKEN BRAISED IN GINGER AND COCONUT (GA KHO GUNG)

Yield: 4 servings

1 1/2 to 2 pounds chicken thighs and legs, skinless
 2 tablespoons sugar
 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
 1/4 cup fish sauce; see cook's notes
 1 teaspoon ground black pepper, plus more to taste
 2 green onions, sliced, include most of dark green stalks
 2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, divided use
 3 tablespoons minced fresh ginger
 1/2 fresh Thai bird chili, sliced into thin rings; see cook's notes
 1 1/2 cups fresh coconut juice (not coconut milk) or coconut soda such as Coco Rico, divided use; see cook's notes

For serving: Cooked rice

Garnish: Fresh cilantro

Cook's notes: Fish sauce is available at many supermarkets with large Asian specialty sections.
 Thai bird chilies are available at Asian markets and some

supermarkets. Use caution when working with fresh chilies; wash hands and work surface thoroughly upon completion and do NOT touch face or eyes.

Coconut juice is the liquid from the interior of the coconut. Coco Rico soda is available at Asian markets.

Procedure:

1. Wash chicken with cold running water and pat dry with paper towels. Place on plate or baking dish in single layer and sprinkle with sugar. Let sit 15 minutes.
2. In small bowl, combine garlic, fish sauce, 1 teaspoon pepper, green onions, 1 tablespoon olive oil, ginger and chili.
3. Heat remaining oil in clay pot or deep skillet over medium heat. When oil is hot, add chicken. Brown nicely on both sides, about 10-15 minutes, turning as needed (sugar coating will turn darkish brown). Pour fish-sauce mixture over chicken. Add 1/2 cup coconut juice. Reduce heat to low and cover. Gently simmer 2 hours, adding additional coconut juice as needed so pan doesn't become dry and burn.
4. After 2 hours, chicken will be thoroughly cooked and meat will be falling off bones. The sauce will have thickened nicely. If you want more syrupy texture, you can continue cooking, but not longer than 30 minutes more.
5. Serve over hot rice. Drizzle sauce over rice and garnish with fresh cilantro and black pepper.

Nutritional information (per serving): Calories 657 (58 percent from fat), fat 42.3 g, protein 51 g, carbohydrates 18.3 g, fiber 1.3 g, sodium 457 mg, calcium 12 mg.

Source: "The Little Saigon Cookbook" by Ann Le (Globe Pequot Press, \$15.95).

SALTED SHORT RIBS IN A CLAY POT (SUON KHO MAN)

Yield: 4 servings

- 1 pound beef short ribs (or pork riblets)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/3 cup fish sauce; see cook's notes
- 1 fresh Thai bird chili, finely chopped; see cook's notes
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil or canola oil
- 2 large shallots, chopped
- 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon whole cloves
- 1/2 cup lemon-lime soda

For serving: Cooked rice

Optional garnish: Fresh herbs such as cilantro, fresh Thai basil or mint

Cook's notes: Fish sauce is available at Asian markets and many supermarkets with large Asian specialty sections.

Thai chilies are available at Asian markets. Use caution when working with fresh chilies; wash hands and work surface thoroughly upon completion and do NOT touch face or eyes.

Procedure:

1. Pat ribs dry with paper towels and place in large bowl or shallow dish. In small bowl, combine sugar, salt, fish sauce, chili and pepper. Stir until sugar and salt dissolve. Pour over ribs, cover and refrigerate overnight.
2. In clay pot or deep skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add shallots, garlic and cloves. Cook until shallots start to soften. Add ribs and marinade; cook about 8 minutes or until brown on all sides, turning as needed. Add soda and reduce heat to low. Cover and simmer until ribs are tender and meat falls off bones, about 1 hour. Liquid should be syrup-like consistency. Serve with rice and, if using, herbs.

Nutritional information(per serving): Calories 712 (69 percent from fat), fat 54.5 g, protein 39.9 g, carbohydrates 17.7 g, fiber 1.1 g, sodium 1,213 mg, calcium 10 mg.

Source: "The Little Saigon Cookbook" by Ann Le

SPRING ROLLS WITH PORK, SHRIMP AND MINT LEAVES (GOI CUON)

Yield: 6 servings

1/2 pound pork loin with fat
 3 tablespoons salt, divided use
 1/2 pound fresh, raw medium shell-on shrimp
 1 large cucumber
 1 head iceberg lettuce, washed
 8 rice-paper rounds (2 extra for practice or if sheet tears); see cook's notes
 3/4 cup fresh bean sprouts, rinsed
 1 cup fresh mint leaves, rinsed
 4 thin green onions or Chinese chives, cut into 5-inch lengths; see cook's notes
 1 1/2 cups cooked rice vermicelli (bun), cut into 3 1/2-inch lengths; see cook's notes
 Peanut Dipping Sauce (recipe included)

Cook's notes: Rice-paper rounds, Chinese chives and rice vermicelli are sold at Asian markets.

Procedure:

1. Pour enough water in large pot to cover entire piece of pork. Add pork and 2 tablespoons salt. Bring to boil on high heat; reduce heat to medium-high and boil until pork is thoroughly cooked, about 15-20 minutes (it should not be pink). Remove pork from water and cool completely.
2. Meanwhile, in another pot, bring enough water to boil to cover shrimp. Add remaining salt and shrimp. Boil until just cooked. Drain. When cool enough to handle, peel and devein. Cut each shrimp in half lengthwise. Cool.
3. Slice cooled pork against the grain into thin pieces, each roughly 2-by-1-inch. Each slice should have lean meat and fat. Place pork on plate or in bowl.
4. Wash and peel cucumber. Remove core and cut into 3-inch-long matchsticks. Cut lettuce into thin shreds. Measure 1 1/2 cups lettuce.
5. To assemble, fill large bowl with lukewarm water. Submerge 1 round of rice paper for about 2 seconds, or enough time to make rice paper pliable. If it's too dry it will easily crack. If too wet, it will be too delicate and will tear. Place rice paper on wooden board on counter.
6. The ideal is to build a tightly wrapped log. Think of dividing ingredients into 6 servings. Place 1/6 of rice vermicelli on rice paper in log shape across bottom third of rice-paper circle. Add 1/6 lettuce, bean sprouts and mint leaves. On top, place 1/6 sliced pork and shrimp. Finally, add 2 pieces green onion stalk or chives. Fold over left and right sides of rice paper. Fold up bottom third, and roll tightly into roll. Diameter of roll should be about 1 to 1 1/2 inches. Set aside and prepare remaining rolls. Serve with dipping sauce (see recipe). If making ahead, place in airtight container. Cover with barely damp paper towel. Seal and refrigerate.

Nutritional information (per roll without dipping sauce): Calories 378 (58 percent from fat), fat 24.5 g, protein 9.2 g, carbohydrates 30.1 g, fiber 1.4 g, sodium 453 mg, calcium 5 mg.

Source: Adapted from "The Little Saigon Cookbook"

PEANUT SAUCE (TUONG DAU PHONG)

Yield: 2 cups

1 tablespoon peanut oil or Asian sesame oil
 3 cloves garlic, minced
 1/2 cup finely ground unsalted dry-roasted peanuts
 1/2 teaspoon chili paste
 3/4 cup chicken broth
 1 1/2 tablespoons thick peanut butter
 1/3 cup hoisin sauce
 1 teaspoon sugar
 1 teaspoon fish sauce
 1/2 teaspoon cornstarch
Garnish: 2 tablespoons finely chopped dry-roasted peanuts

Procedure:

1. Heat oil in small saucepan on medium heat. Add garlic and cook until golden. Drain and discard oil.

2. In small bowl, whisk garlic with ground peanuts, chili paste, chicken broth, peanut butter, hoisin sauce, sugar and fish sauce.

3. When mixture has smooth consistency, pour it into saucepan and bring to boil on medium-high heat. Boil 5 minutes, then reduce heat to low and simmer. Add cornstarch and mix well until smooth. Cool to room temperature. Stir and garnish with finely chopped peanuts.

Nutritional information (per tablespoon): Calories 91 (90 percent from fat), fat 9.1 g, protein 1.1 g, carbohydrates 1.8 g, fiber 0.1 g, sodium 61 mg, calcium 3 mg.

Source: "The Little Saigon Cookbook"

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