

Going Places

FEBRUARY 2024



Old-world charm meets bold new tastes in

Ho Chi Minh City



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Saigon steps up

Fine-dining chefs in Ho Chi Minh City are charting new culinary territory in whimsical and wonderful ways

to the plate





Words **Joshua Zukas** Photography **Aurelien Foucault**

The French may have designed Ho Chi Minh City's historic centre, but the Vietnamese have made it their own.

Previous spread:
Duck herbal soup at
Oryz Saigon; welcome
garden at Nền Light

**This spread (from left
to right):** Central hall of
the Saigon Central Post
Office; river prawn *ban
xèo* taco at Anan Saigon

Vendors hawk iced coffee and tropical fruit juice beside heritage buildings like the Central Post Office. Tangled alleyways fan out from outspread boulevards and verdant parks. Pavements are not for long, languid promenades – like they are in Paris – but the venue for Ho Chi Minh City's famed street food scene.

A decade ago, this culinary cacophony may have drowned out Oryz Saigon, which opened in October. Here, mellifluous chatter flows through the restaurant's tenderly lit dining room. Curious diners gaze at imaginative creations. Aromas waft from the open kitchen, where a skilled team moves with precision. Although it's only been around for a few months, Oryz feels like a well-drilled machine, a reliable dining destination to mark special occasions – anniversaries, perhaps, or personal milestones – and is one of the more recent examples of Ho Chi Minh City's transforming dining scene.

"The Saigon fine-dining scene is flourishing," says Peter Cuong Franklin, the Vietnamese-American founder and head chef at Anan Saigon, which brandishes Ho Chi Minh City's only Michelin star. Since establishing his restaurant in 2017, the former investment banker has seen a revolution in the restaurant scene, and he believes that it's time for overseas impressions to catch up.

"Most travellers' perception of Vietnam is still stuck in the Bourdain era," says chef Peter, referring to Anthony Bourdain, who covered Vietnamese street kitchens for his culinary-adventure TV series in the 2000s, dined on *bun cha* in Hanoi with Barack Obama in 2016, and sadly passed away in 2018. "It's seen as the place for cheap street food – not fine-dining experiences." Quick lunches at everyday eateries cost \$2 (VND50,000), while well-prepared meals at more upmarket establishments charge about \$10. By contrast, tasting menus at fine-dining restaurants hover around the \$100 mark, and cost more if diners are drinking beer or wine.

Defining fine-dining isn't easy, but of the 55 establishments listed in the inaugural Michelin Guide Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which launched last June, more than a third offer an undeniably high-end experience. Like Oryz, most of those high-end restaurants offer some form of tasting menu, a progression of small dishes that reflects the *chef patron's* mission and philosophy. For many, this is a hallmark feature of a fine-dining establishment. Despite international perceptions, Oryz has in fact stepped into a somewhat crowded scene. Chris Fong, the Singaporean head chef, did a lot of soul-searching before committing to Ho Chi Minh City. After working in more than a handful of Asian countries, he considered opening restaurants in Melbourne, Guangzhou and Singapore, but ultimately decided that this was the place to put down roots.





HO CHI MINH CITY

The next challenge for chef Chris and his team was to identify gaps in the market. "We realised that everyone is doing modern Vietnamese, a kind of fusion," he says. "Other than Japanese omakase, East Asian dining is not really represented here." Some dishes, such as their *bun bo hue* – spiced beef tartare, pickled banana blossom and crunchy rice-cake parcels, a recipe that refines the taste of the beef-noodle dish from Central Vietnam – take inspiration from local cuisine. But some menu highlights, including the duck herbal soup – minced duck, pumpkin leaf tempura and charcoal cassava root – clearly draw from further afield. "Diversity is what we really stand for," says Chris.

The chef emphasises that a pan-regional approach will also guide future innovations.

Ideas in the pot include a tasting menu that diverges from French *dégustation* and pioneers a distinct Asian progression; communal *kaiseki*-style multi-course menus suited to multi-generational dining groups; and take-home recipe cards. "We are thinking about how we can transform the experience," says Chris.

Nén Light, which opened in 2022 and appeared on the Michelin list a year later, is also looking to transform the fine-dining experience, though perhaps in a more fanciful way. Tucked down an alleyway and encircled by a garden of bamboo, wax apple and *Muntingia* trees, the restaurant is a calming refuge within a hectic neighbourhood. Guests enjoy a small appetiser and welcome drink in the leafy garden before moving to the minimalist dining room – ideal for quiet couples – and embarking on a journey.

Founder and head chef Summer Le believes that every creative product needs a story, and she has incorporated this idea into her tasting menus, which she calls "Sto:ry Menus". Sto:ry Menu #5, which runs this month, is called "Days of 22", and is inspired by chef Summer's time as a student in Japan from 2006. The playful final main course is a Japanese pilaf with black chicken and Tonkin jasmine. The fun part is the seasoning. Diners can flavour the dish with spice mixtures that are meant to represent the characters from *Doraemon*, a Japanese comic book popular with Vietnamese millennials like Summer. "We do what we like," she laughs, "and what we think makes sense."

Clockwise from right: Upper-floor dining room at Anan Saigon; Nén Light's founder and head chef Summer Le; dining room at Nén Light; venison and wild pepper served with a *pâté chaud* pastry at Nén Light



IMAGE COURTESY OF NÉN LIGHT (SUMMER LE PORTRAIT)



Director y

Anan Saigon
89 Ton That Dam,
District 1
anansaiigon.com

Oryz Saigon
51 D, Tran Nhat Duat,
Phuong Tan Dinh,
District 1
oryzsaigon.com

Nén Light
122/2 Tran Dinh Xu,
District 1
res-taur-antnen.com

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As high-end options in HCMC proliferate, innovate and diverge, some pundits question whether these are still fine-dining establishments”



Coffee dates in the city

In town for Valentine's? Here are three pre-dinner cafés that set the mood for romance

RedDoor

Besides the superb coffee, RedDoor has a comfy couch for long conversation. From here you can peer out of the window at the ornate arched entrance of the Ho Chi Minh City Opera House. [instagram.com/reddoorspace.saigon](https://www.instagram.com/reddoorspace.saigon)

Manki

Manki occupies a repurposed home – and part of the fun is finding the entrance. The passion of the barista is palpable, but the real draw is the dreamy balcony where you can look over the leafy street below. [instagram.com/mankispécialtycoffee](https://www.instagram.com/mankispécialtycoffee)

S'mores Saigon Caffè

With three prime locations across the city, the design theme behind S'mores is repurposed heritage meets industrial chic. All three venues have quiet corners where young couples sip on creative, colourful drinks concoctions. [fb.com/smore.saigoncoffee](https://www.facebook.com/smore.saigoncoffee)



Eccentricities also abound at Peter Cuong Franklin's Anan Saigon, a rowdy restaurant with tight, cloth-less tables that evokes the downtown dining scenes of New York or Hong Kong. "When it's so compact you have a sense of energy in the room," says chef Peter, who was born and raised in Vietnam before being evacuated to the United States as a child refugee in 1975. "You can hear what your neighbours are saying, and that's kind of fun." Though a modern fine-dining restaurant, Anan remains Vietnamese at its core, a kind of extension to the boisterous decades-old market on its doorstep. The tasting menu is speckled with dishes that are inspired by Vietnamese favourites, like Le Petit Banh My, a bite-size take on Vietnam's iconic sandwich, and River Prawn Banh Xeo Taco, a homage to the small rice crêpes of Hue in central Vietnam. Peter Cuong

Left to right: Chef Chris Fong putting the finishing touches on the duck herbal soup at Oryz Saigon; *bun bo hue* at Oryz Saigon

Franklin's formula is working wonders; his informal diner was voted Best Restaurant in Vietnam by the Asia's 50 Best judges this year.

As high-end options in Ho Chi Minh City proliferate, innovate and diverge, some pundits question whether these are still fine-dining establishments. But the chefs helping the restaurants seem unconcerned. As chef Peter puts it: "If we try and meet other people's expectations, we will lose our identity." ■

Suite inspiration

Rooms with a view, both inside and out

M Village Ton That Dam opened in 2023 just a few doors down from Anan Saigon, so it also benefits from the charismatic market outside. Besides the chic, minimalist design, the property also comes with a gym, shared kitchen and rooftop pool, making it ideal for longer stays in the city. mvillaage.vn

Leaning into the old Saigon motif, **Signature by M Village** which opened in 2023, couldn't be better located for history and architecture buffs. It's located just a few steps from the Ho Chi Minh City Opera House, Central Post Office and Notre Dame Cathedral. signature.mvillaage.vn

Though it opened in 2021, **Wink Saigon's** flagship property continues to innovate. Today it feels fresher than ever, with fearlessly hip design and tech-powered services, and a young, dynamic, in-the-know concierge team who go above and beyond. wink-hotels.com



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