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Noodle Soup

I woke up in Chiang Mai hungover, cold, and hungry. I expected Chiang Mai to be warm, because while it is in Northern Thailand, it's still in, y'know, Thailand. But the morning mercury was in the high 50s, and a damp mist quilted the streets.

I walked through the fog looking for something to warm my gut and rehydrate my body. As so often happens in Southeast Asia, I smelled the stall before I saw it: low-slung plastic tables tucked into an anonymous street capillary. A lady stood next to an enormous, steaming vat and motioned me over with a large spoon. I sat. She ladled something into a bowl and said "*Khao soi*," naming one of Chiang Mai's iconic dishes, as integral to that city's cuisine as *mole* to Oaxaca, or pizza to New York.

Thick yellow noodles swimming in an orange-brown broth. Chunks of chicken. A plate of green herbs, plus fried crispy noodles, lentil cakes, raw shallot slices, chili flakes, and wedges of lime. I stroked the top of the soup with the flat bottom of my spoon and stirred with my chopsticks. I ate.

The broth consistency was somewhere between chowder and curry. The flavor was peanuts, citrus, the charred sweet-savory of roasted garlic and shallots, a vein of chili heat that opened your tastebuds but didn't overwhelm them, and underlying everything, the comforting starch of the noodles, which both alleviated the other flavors and soaked them up.

I don't believe any one dish can be flawless, but I think there can be a perfect meal for a time and place, and on that chilly Chiang Mai morning, my bowl of *khao soi* was sublime. Southeast Asia's DIY approach to eating helped; if I needed more acidity, I could add lime juice, or shallots for *umami*, or chilies for heat, or lentil cakes for crunch. Even the color was perfect. I'm no synesthete, but the hybrid hue of fiery sunset and smooth peanut butter seemed like the soup's complex flavor writ in living color.

I sputtered and groaned through my meal. Sighed like a man in little death ecstasy. Indeed, by the time I was done I had a full and satisfied glow that wasn't far from post coitus. I paid for the soup—a dollar or so at most—and vowed to return the next day. But the following morning, my soup stall had vanished into the Chiang Mai mist. I am sure my hangover and cruddy sense of direction were the

real reason I couldn't find it, but I like to imagine that eatery only appears to those truly in need of its sustenance, a sort of culinary Brigadoon for the truly hungry traveler.

Because I am a guidebook author, I constantly get questions like "I'm going to [insert destination here]. Can you recommend some places to visit?" followed by, "We're looking for something *authentic*." The emphasis on authentic is mine, but not really. Authenticity is the holy grail of travel, the adjective everyone wants to append to their vacation memories, which is interesting, as no one seems to agree what authenticity is. My closest approximation is the noodle stall I just described, not just because it was cheap and delicious, but because my memory of the place is so ethereal.

That's ironic, since "authentic" signals "real" or "true," but—not to be too post-modernist—again, what does that really mean? I'm not sure I can provide an answer, but I think I know the motivation of the person who wants authenticity. The sentiment is tied up with the self-righteous sentiment of being a Traveler, not a Tourist. An authentic experience means someone has encountered, or even better, *discovered* something (most travelers I know wouldn't use the word "discovered" because it carries a luggage rack's worth of colonialist implications. But it's only colonialist if you don't credit the locals. If you're discovering something for someone in your peer group, all bets are off). An authentic Thing is true to a place, yet somehow not obvious to everyone else. In an age of social media, when every moment of our lives can be marketed and commodified, to find or be authentic is to reject everyone else's Likes even as you become a magnet for that kind of praise.

Which doesn't really answer that authentic is. I know I am as susceptible to the quest for a True Experience as anyone else—it's why my quest for *khao soi* opens this essay. Like everyone else who grew up with an internet connection, I want experiences that differentiate my life against the rest of the world and its relentless, homogenizing taste in, well, everything. And yet, when it comes to what makes something distinct, I believe we approach the concept like the supreme court and obscenity: we know it when we see it.

Or taste it. Food is a unifying benchmark for authenticity. I think that's because while not everyone trusts their appreciation of, say, art, movies, books, or architecture, we all think we know what tastes good. We've known since we were kids. And we associate certain factors with good food: cooking ability, ingredients, and recipes, which are all marks of geographic and cultural distinction. But this is where food and being authentic can get weird, because who owns a recipe, and how wrong (or inauthentic) is it to replicate a smell or a taste far removed from the kitchen where it was originally

created?

In Camden, Maine, a town that is about 98 percent white, my wife and I popped into Long Grain, touted by *The New York Times* as one of the best Thai restaurants in the country. We popped in, and we popped out: every table was full. The only reservation open was a 5 p.m. dinner service on a weekday.

We booked and came back. The interior was art gallery lean, enlivened with Edison bulbs and abstract art. The waitstaff wore black. The clientele were “summer people”: Northeast urbanites in Maine for fresh air, watercolor classes, and memoir writing workshops.

My wife ordered the ramen. I had the *khao soi*. Different noodle soups from different cultures and vastly different culinary traditions. Would I trust a French restaurant that served *cacio e pepe* or *paella* next to the *boeuf bourguignon*? Or would I assume that restaurant had a lack of gastronomic focus? But I was excited. Despite many attempts, I had never been able to find a soup to replicate my Chiang Mai *khao soi*, and this was the only *khao soi* I had seen in written up in *The New York Times*.

When our bowls arrived, there was no separate plate to add our own garnishes. The soup was more lentil yellow than sunset orange. The taste was, surprise, disappointing. I could detect all of the same ingredients I ate in Chiang Mai—the heat, the shallots, the garlic, and tumeric. A woman at the adjacent table talked about catching a show at the New York City Ballet later that weekend, and I thought: the constituent parts of the soup in Chiang Mai pulled off a *corps de ballet* ensemble performance. These flavors all attempted a simultaneous *pas seul*. It’s not that any one note stood out; they all did, but at different times, with no mutual reinforcement. The texture of the soup wasn’t a thick, luscious gravy; it was grainy. I should stress it wasn’t *bad*. It’s just wasn’t great, and my expectations were written by Dickens.

My wife saw my face. “OK?” she asks.

“Just,” I say.

She passed me her ramen. It was hot, and not much else, the sort of spicy you get when you can’t work in actual depth of flavor and mask the result with burn. I told her so, and she nodded again.

We felt a resentment building inside us. Everyone in the restaurant seemed stupid. The ninja wait staff were cheats. The ballet aficionado was a dupe. We were dupes too, but we knew so, which made everything worse, because what’s the good of being savvy if you’re still getting snowed? We paid for our meal, left, and got ice cream.

Where mom went

There are racial overtones linked to a certain brand of authenticity, an idea that only a certain ethnicity can make a certain thing the right way. These notions make me uneasy. I also, in my own way, buy into them. If I hear a bunch of Vietnamese spoken in a *pho* place, I bet on getting good soup. On the flip side, I approach a white chef at a Mexican food truck with the confidence I reserve for a used car dealer. But in a globalized world, isn't it unrealistic (if not offensive) to cordon off food into ethnic enclaves? Hondurans work sushi counters. Filipinos fire the pans in French restaurants. Russians, Poblanos, and Jamaicans are the backbone of a thousand resort kitchens serving everything from five-star Italian to Hong Kong fusion.

And being from a place doesn't mean you can master its food. Based off the above episodes you'd figure Long Grain was run by Bushwick hipsters, right? Well, it's owned and operated by Ravin Nakjaroen and Paula Palakawong, both Bangkok natives. In interviews, the couple has spoken about creating a real Thai restaurant for a diverse American clientele (and to their credit, despite attracting a wealthy customer base, Long Grain is priced firmly midrange, with no entrees topping \$16). Yet still, something about the place got under my skin.

Of course, my main issue was what I ate. But if I'm being honest, I was immediately put off by Long Grain's minimalist chic and Kombucha clientele. This is, frankly, an unfair reaction. I was a journalist in Bangkok. I know Thai food can be served in hip lounges to wealthy customers. I know Bangkok natives can be Bushwick hipsters. But in the USA I'm suspect to the cliché that "ethnic" food is, first of all, brown or black food, even though Italian or Spanish or German cuisine is never considered as such. And I still hew to the cliché that said brown or black food is best consumed in the immigrant penumbra that rings major American cities, the strip malls where English is rarely spoken as a first language, cheap electronics are on sale, and the clientele are people who think Yelp is a noise a dog makes when you step on its tail.

I feel that way because my mom was a first-generation Burmese immigrant and those were the places she took me. We worked hard to be whiter than White America in so many ways—went to malls and bought big TVs and joined the PTA—but when it was time to eat, we went off the radar of our native-born countrymen. Little immigrant-run restaurants were Our Thing, and by "Our" I mean mom and I, but also every assimilating family that needed a

tase of home. A sort of secret access to the best food was one of the few tokens of cultural capital we possessed, and we guarded it all the more fiercely because, in the 1980s at least, our cuisine was derided by the America we were trying to become a part of.

Growing up, kids sometimes wouldn't come to my house because they thought mom's cooking smelled funny. It smelled delicious to me, but I learned to make a face at it because I was a kid trying to fit in. Now I see the bitter irony of that reaction: the scents from mom's kitchen embedded the knowledge of good noodle soup into my cells, and at least partly gave me the discernment to become a trusted reviewer to the mainly white audience that reads my travel guides. I know for a fact that kids who once bagged on how bad my house smelled now post pictures from neo-Asian food halls on their social media. Honestly, I'm glad their taste (and the nation's) has evolved on this front, but I'd be lying if I didn't feel a little resentment too. A part of me still wants to hoard the cultural capital of good noodle soup all to myself.

This sort of provincialism is ultimately self-defeating, and the reason why can be found in my adopted home of New Orleans and the two places I regularly go for Vietnamese food. Ba Chi Canteen, located near my house, drips with pop culture aesthetic. A lot of the customers are college students who likely either come from money, are coming into it, or both. This used to be an Italian place until it was bought out by the children of the owners of Tan Dinh, a decidedly old school Vietnamese spot on the New Orleans West Bank.

Tan Dinh is one of my favorite restaurants in a city known for good eats, the sort of spot chefs repair to after shift for caramelized quail and spareribs served with lime salt, as good as anything you'd find on a street corner in Da Nang. Sadly, I don't go there that often because I have, like the children of so many immigrants, moved into a pleasant residential neighborhood and don't feel like driving 30 minutes for noodles.

Ba Chi and Tan Dinh are separated by a few miles of physical space, and a universe of culture and income. The latter is located on a strip of nowhere highway in Jefferson Parish next to a telephone post studded with Infowars fliers. Ba Chi occupies a leafy corner of a neighborhood adjacent to Tulane University where the cars sport Bernie Sanders stickers. The two restaurants have similar menus, but Ba Chi eschews more obscure Vietnamese specialties like *gỏi thập cẩm* (jellyfish and calamari salad) for "bacos," fluffy rice cake tacos stuffed with fillings like tamarind shrimp or honey pozu catfish.

The locations are different, and so are the clientele. Tan Dinh is always stuffed with families of all colors – the restaurant may be in the camo-and-F-250 'burbs of a conservative state, but

it's been around long enough to earn that community's gastronomic trust. At Ba Chi the crowd is about 20 years younger and 100 times more likely to be from out of state. But dish for dish, the food is as good in one spot as the other. Tan Dinh has a larger menu, but the vermicelli bowls at Ba Chi, which can be assembled Chipotle-style, are brilliant. Ba Chi's owners have figured out ways to market to younger Americans without diluting the depth of flavor of traditional Vietnamese cuisine. Compare this to Long Grain, which I initially thought I didn't like because it was an immigrant place aimed at white Americans. But Ba Chi is that, too; it's just that the food is a hell of a lot better, as "real" as anything I've had in Hanoi, even if half the customers are named Britney.

In a way, by giving white Americans such (ha) authentically good Vietnamese food, by normalizing the flavors of the Mekong for an American palate, I'd argue Ba Chi erodes this nation's inherent whiteness. Hell, if we really want to live in a more diverse, multicultural society, don't we want the Britneys of the world eating good noodle soup? What about making it? My buddy David used to push a thousand-pound homemade tandoor oven around New Orleans, part of a mobile South Asian kitchen he built from scratch. His goal was to serve good, *authentic* naan, daal, curry and Tandoori-cooked chicken and lamb. His inspiration was food cooked by the mother of his Pakistani-American best friend, a woman who had been a second mother to David in the 'burbs of Northern Virginia.

While David was running his business in New Orleans, a rundown of white-owned restaurants, pop ups and food trucks that served "appropriated" cuisine was published in Portland, Oregon. The list's compilers argued that white restaurateurs have an easier time finding seed capital than people of color, and white clientele tend to prefer bland versions of immigrant food, so why not go to the real source, and spend money at a business owned by people of color?

I'd add to this argument that even if people don't care about the racial dynamics at play, shouldn't everyone spend their limited eating out budget on, y'know, good food? I live in the South, where people will brag about driving an hour out of their way for a good meal, yet I've seen tons of Southerners pack into the forgettable Ajian in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a terrible "Japanese" place opened by former Alabama quarterback AJ McCarron (get the name? I know, I know). The same people who mock Northerners for watered down barbeque and bland catfish happily drop stupid amounts of cash on imitation crab and gluey rice served with a dollop of electric green "wasabi" squirted out of a tube (the difference, of course, is institutional knowledge: a lot of Ajian diners probably grew up with good barbeque).

So yeah, Ajian would deserve a spot on the appropriation list. But I'd argue David, who cooks with love and, importantly, skill, would not. His food is excellent, and David respects the culinary traditions of Pakistan and the Punjab. All the truth about privilege can't stop the fact the world is globalizing and people fall in love with things outside of the culture they were born into. If the love is true—if it's authentic—I'm not going to shame someone for trying to replicate something beautiful.

Pour over coffee

Authenticity is as much about location as ethnicity, with the caveat that there is some natural overlap between those qualities. Like my Southern neighbors, I don't think I've had good barbeque in New England. I hate ordering crab cakes outside of Maryland. And as a resident of Louisiana, I am inherently suspicious of any gumbo, po'boy or étouffée made east of Mississippi, west of Beaumont, and north of I-10.

At the end of the day this all signifies so much nativism, and it's ironic the people who shoot me emails seeking out “realness” and “authenticity” are, more often than not, mobile professionals who made a conscious choice not to be bound by rooted regional identity. Yet they crave that sort of identity when they travel. Maybe it's because the world's cosmopolitan nomads are the prime purveyors and consumers of an aesthetic you can find everywhere from Japan to Joplin, Missouri, a sort of localvore chic. Stripped down floors and walls and bare bulbs meant to evoke whatever industrial heritage has been replaced by a cafe serving the same almond biscotti/quinoa bowls/microbrewed beer/handcrafted burger.

Who would have thought the 21st century hipster, so famous for rejecting the suburbs and gentrifying the city, would be such an ambassador for international homogenization? Chain restaurants use an army of consultants to create an identical dining experience across different locales. There is no one owner of the hundreds of localvore bars and restaurants I've reviewed, yet they all have a basic sameness of aesthetic and design. And look: I go to these places. I get it. When I arrive in a new town, by the next morning I'm usually working on my laptop in a place selling pour over coffee, as comfortable there as Bob and Fran from Topeka are at the Olive Garden.

Still, conventional wisdom holds there are still some American cities dripping with a distinctive sense of place, and none more so, at least in the USA, than my adopted home: New Orleans. This is a town where people throw around the descriptor “authentic” like

Mardi Gras beads (which only tourists throw around outside of actual Carnival. Make of that what you will).

Yat & Y'heard

Liuzza's By The Track, with its stained bar, institutional tile floor, shitty tables, and food cooked by the Gods on high, is, to me, the Platonic archetype of a New Orleans restaurant, the first one I take out-of-town friends to. In turn, this was the first restaurant I ate at in New Orleans. My host then was Randy Fertel, a man whose family history could only have been written in this city. His father, Rodney, was a horse gambler and heir to a dodgy pawnshop who once ran for mayor on the platform of getting a gorilla for the Audubon Zoo. His mother, Ruth, was a thin, tough blonde from the bayous of Plaquemines Parish who graduated with honors from LSU at the age of 19 and went on to found the Ruth's Chris steakhouse chain.

The usual cast of characters in Liuzza's is just as colorful. I've torn the heads off plates of barbeque shrimp next to a snare drummer who trained under, and got his knuckles rapped by, Johnny Vidacovich, a legend of New Orleans percussion. I've eaten garlic oyster po'boys across the table from a woman who swam through dirty Katrina floodwater to birth her child three days after the hurricane made landfall. I've toasted to a happy Passover with a Jewish drag queen before he snuck outside to snort a bump of cocaine off his car keys.

When I came here with Randy we sat by an old railbird who had just left the nearby horse track. He was immaculately put together in a powder blue suit, and clutched betting strips in one hand and a woman in a tight dress and heels in the other. She must have been around 50 years old, at least a head taller than her partner and less than half his weight. She wore bright red lipstick and called me baby. He shook my hand with sausage fingers encased in giant gold rings. They finished their drinks—him, an Abita, her, a gin and tonic—and walked back to the track. I asked Randy who they were. He was a district judge, and she used to be one of the city's most famous strippers.

Where you're from means something in a lot of places, but it means more in New Orleans, and those characters at Liuzza's give you a sense why. Louisiana has the highest number of native-born residents of any state. They take your roots seriously here. When I say New Orleans is my home, I mean it's my *adopted* home. The alien signifying qualifier will always precede the cozy ever-so-humble. Both my kids were born in Orleans parish, but natives tend to get Nolie-

than-thou with me if I call New Orleans ‘home.’

I get where they’re coming from. There’s a case to be made transplants like myself have eroded the characters that make up a restaurant like Liuzza’s, and by extension, a city like New Orleans. In the years since Katrina, housing prices have soared while wages have stagnated. Certain neighborhoods have been irrevocably altered. How much of this change is strictly down to new arrivals is debated, but it’s inarguable New Orleans underwent major changes after 2006. To many locals, transplants like myself are palpable proof that New Orleans is sacrificing her indigenous “real” to be Anywhere, America.

On the flip side, this is a city—like any city—that for all its timelessness has always been in a state of flux. Its demographic ingredients are constantly refreshed by waves of newcomers. My gentrification generation isn’t even the first wave of internal American migration to New Orleans. At the turn of the 19th century, Yankee Anglophones arrived in *Nouvelle Orlean* following the Louisiana Purchase. Those American settlers arrived flush with wealth, ready to seize a stranded French colony and refashion it into a city of their own vision. At first, they were largely loathed by the city’s already deeply rooted French-and-Iberian Catholics, but the Americans’ legacy—neighborhoods like the Garden District and Uptown, or the parading “krewes” integral to modern Mardi Gras—is a big part of what many now deem “authentic” New Orleans.

I’m not saying New Orleans’ post-Katrina transplants will be a net gain for the city’s culture. But if we’re talking about what makes a place authentic, I try to remember even the “realest” places are never composed of a single essence. Even New Orleans’ most well-known natives, the indigenous “Yats,” are a blended product of successive waves of French, Spanish, Canary Island, German, Irish, and Italian migration (“Yat” derives from a local accent that shrinks “What is your current location” to a succinct three letter idiom. My favorite description of Yat-speak is “Brooklyn on Valium”).

On the subject of Yats and geographic belonging, it’s worth noting many Yats seem perpetually at odds with the city that birthed their regional identity. I want to stress I know a lot of hilarious, fierce Yats who are New Orleanian down to the foundations of their shotgun houses. But even these folks would acknowledge many of their fellow Yats are born and raised in the neighboring parishes of Jefferson and St. Bernard, largely because their ancestors white-flighted the hell out of New Orleans after desegregation.

The comments section of any New Orleans media website is filled with vitriol directed against the city by these suburbanites, the same people who tell anyone from outside Louisiana how distinct and real and yes, authentic, New Orleans is while at the same time never

setting foot in town but for Saints games. Then said suburbanites head home to American cookie cutter housing developments, where they log on and complain about New Orleans being run by “thugs” or, if they’re feeling politically correct, “those people.”

If you didn’t know, live here for five minutes and you’ll figure out “those people” is a dog whistle for black New Orleans. And even though ‘those people’ are the majority population of the city, *their* way of speaking, which is separate from Yat-speak, doesn’t get held up as the authentic accent of New Orleans. I’ve never read of New Orleans natives called “Y’heards” (black New Orleans for, “Are you aware of this thing?” or just, “Hello”).

Black New Orleans, in popular imagination and the promotional material of events like Jazz Fest, is if anything held to a higher standard of fabled authenticity than white New Orleans. It was black New Orleans that gave us Louis Armstrong, gumbo, brass bands, Second Line parades, Mardi Gras Indians and in more modern times, twerking, Lil’ Wayne, *Treme*, and Big Freedia. But again, there is no singular essence here. Everything I just listed is the product of centuries of hybridization. The city’s African American population mixes up Catholic descendants of mixed unions and free people of color, Southern black Baptists, Haitian immigrants, and new waves of middle-class black transplants from across the country. With the exception of the last group, these communities have cross-pollinated for centuries, creating a unique culture that bridges the Caribbean, West Africa, and North America, yet is never wholly possessed by any one of those locations. It is true Creole synthesis, and if this city has a genius for anything, it’s incubating this sort of glorious miscegenation.

Cali-style

Thomas leans into being a foodie in a way I can’t. The term alone makes me uneasy. “Foodie” implies someone obsessed with eating to the point of distraction, unable to pick a restaurant without exhaustive smartphone research, unable to tuck in without an Instagram photoshoot.

I am guilty of all the above. I’m just neurotic about it. I’d rather get caught watching porn on an airplane than Instagramming my burger. But Thomas? He embraces “foodie” like every other cliché in his life. He is a silver fox gay realtor who makes gobs of money, spends it like water, and does not give a good goddamn if you see him positioning his phone above his sashimi with all the care of a National Geographic photographer. Thomas is unapologetic about his love for social media, and in a way that makes him more authentic

than the rest of us bemoaning the screens in our lives via status updates on our smartphones.

He is also a good friend visiting from Washington D.C., and while he hits up the usual New Orleans restaurants that grace *Bon Appetit* and James Beard lists, he also wants to eat at somewhere off the beaten path. So I take him out to Gretna, a working class New Orleans 'burb located on the West Bank of the Mississippi River. We're across the street from Tan Dinh, the old school Vietnamese place I mentioned earlier. The Infowars stickers are on the telephone poll.

Inside Big EZ, the floor is red tile and drinks are served out of a fridge. You can get a raspberry Gatorade, or a flask of Mad Dog that's pretty much the same color. The radio is playing a string of bounce tracks, the triggerman beat syncing with a mix of yelled Yat and Y'heard English exchanged between the kitchen, the guys working the counters, and the customers.

To be fair, some of the workers speak Spanish with a Central American accent—Hondurans form the bedrock of the New Orleans Latino community. Some of the speakers are white, some are black, but plenty are brown, including the square-jawed Vietnamese guy at the register who speaks with an accent that lands somewhere between Metairie and the Mekong Delta. He takes my order—two pounds of crawfish, Cali-style—and tells me not to pay until after we've finished eating. "You'll want more, baby," he says, smiling.

"What's 'Cali-style?'" Thomas asks. I can tell he wonders if this meal is going to be as New Orleans as I promised, and I assure him it's at least as Gulf Coast as it gets. I've just ordered Viet-Cajun crawfish, a dish supposedly first served in Houston that represents a synthesis of Louisiana boil recipes—themselves a blend of African and Acadian foodways—and Vietnamese migrant sensibility. We pluck out some beers from the fridge and watch the bottles sweat for a few minutes before a wooden bowl full of shellfish is placed before us.

The crawfish are boiled in a Cajun spice blend any Louisiana resident would recognize. But they are swimming in an impossibly rich, fiery pool of garlic butter that clearly has antecedents in the sauces used on the steamed fish and pan-fried chicken churned out by Vietnamese kitchens like Tan Dinh. We get to eating, and soon Thomas and I are a righteous mess, our faces smeared with the butter, our groans palpable and indecent. Our tongues probe and lathe the shells of the crawfish to soak up the sauce. We do not just suck the brains of the crawfish out of their heads, per normal boil etiquette—we crack the cranial exoskeleton and drink the things as empty as a cicada shell in summer.

I have no idea why this stuff is called “Cali-style”—rumor has it a Vietnamese family member out west perfected the recipe—but even then, the literal and figurative ingredients of this dish are of this place. It’s authentic to New Orleans even if it was invented in Houston or California because *this is the kind of place where the stuff arises naturally*. You could have great Vietnamese crawfish in Nome, Alaska, if it was made by the right cook with the right skill, and that would be authentic, too. But it’s, I dunno, *extra* authentic here, because the crawfish are from here, and the recipe for that silly delicious garlic butter sauce is a culinary tributary of the cultural delta of South Louisiana.

The way everyone is eating and laughing and washing the spice away with booze and generally enjoying the hell out of life—well, you can replicate that, for sure, but it grew naturally out of this mud. When I think back on that meal, I think about how it was made up of so many quintessential Louisiana components, many of which are usually segregated by lines of income, class, and race. When those lines vanished, something special emerged. It may not have been true Cajun, or true Creole, or true Vietnamese, but it was truly derived from all of those things, and it was authentically delicious. That’s its own true, and for me, that’s as real as food, or anything else, needs to be.