

# **Fish Sauce to French Fries: Changing Foodways of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Orange County, California**

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## **Abstract**

Foodways constitute salient symbols of cultural identity and sense of place. This is particularly true in the case of immigrants as they struggle to strike a balance between cultural retention and assimilation. In this study, we investigate changing foods and foodways among Vietnamese Americans residing in and around southern Orange County, California's, Little Saigon, the primary cultural hub of ethnic Vietnamese outside of Vietnam. Vietnamese refugees and immigrants began entering the United States in considerable numbers after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Since arriving, they have experienced myriad socio-cultural changes as they adjust to life in the United States. We employ qualitative and quantitative methods, including questionnaires, participant observation, and formal and informal interviews, to explore food preparation and consumption habits among different waves and ages of immigrants. Results reveal that degree of change in Vietnamese foodways is time and space contingent. Significant changes are associated with generational differences of immigrants as well as distance of residence from Little Saigon. Although age of immigrants was not associated with degree of foodway retention, qualitative data suggest a rescue effect of traditional foodways as Vietnamese Americans associate with peers during their college years.

*Keywords: foodways; Vietnam; Vietnamese Americans; diaspora; cultural geography; culture change*

## **Introduction**

WHAT WE CHOOSE to eat and drink—linguini or larvae, gumbo or goulash, anchovies or ants, beer or blood—constitute fundamental components of our geographical identity. As Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously commented, "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are." Foodways reinforce who we are and, for outsiders,

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who we are not. They play a crucial role in religious ceremonies, traditions, and customs, and serve as a material basis for the rituals through which the passage of life stages are celebrated (Heine 2004). Foods are the center point of religious and secular feasts, symbolizing for participants culture-bound values and meanings (Murphy 1986). The true nature of people, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, could be found in the food they prefer. Indeed, iconic foods in some cases become inseparable for outside observers from the people who eat them. Obvious examples include the Irish being identified as “potato people” by the English, and Sicilians as “macaroni eaters” by northern Italians (Scholliers 2001).

Food is pivotal to our sense of identity and spirituality (Fischler 1988). For example, the Jewish religious year begins on Rosh Hashanah (Head of the Year); on this occasion, Challah, a braided bread, is baked into a round shape to symbolize a year of continuous health and happiness. Apples dipped in honey and other special sweets are served to reflect the prayers that are said for a sweet and pleasant year. In Islam, it is customary to sacrifice a sheep and share its meat with friends and relatives on Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) in commemoration of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son to God (Kittler and Sucher 2001). For Dominican immigrants in New York City, traditional food “is a place to hide and save yourself, to adapt to a new society without going crazy” (Marte 2011, 185). Among Brazil’s African diaspora, foods originating from their homeland—okra, black-eyed peas, sesame, and others—have attained sacred status for the followers of syncretic Afro-Brazilian religions. Some are sold on the streets to passersby as a form of offering to guardian deities (Voeks 2012). Many religions view certain foods as “unclean” and members abstain from eating tabooed animals, such as pork among Muslims and cows among Hindus, beverages containing caffeine among Mormons, and dishes containing blood among Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses (Bell and Valentine 1997, Kittler and Sucher 2001, Heine 2004). So strong are these connections with foods that they are often the only cultural element that is preserved after other ethnic traditions have faded away (Han 2008).

Foods and foodways are often mobile, traveling and settling as they serve to renegotiate a sense of place for migrants, forced and voluntary, in their newfound homes. Because we live in the age of human migration, the significance of foodways as cultural markers and symbols of identity has never been stronger. In 2010, roughly 214 million people migrated to international destinations, more

than at any time in human history. And with over forty-million immigrants, the United States is home to far more migrants than any other country (United Nations 2011); it is truly a landscape of diasporas. Although the term *diaspora* referred originally to scattered Jewish groups that lived among minorities, in recent years it has been generalized to include all voluntary and forced migrants, regardless of race, religion, profession, or economic standing (Dufoix 2008). The concept of diaspora encompasses “the material and imaginative connections between a people and a territorial identity” (Blunt 2007, 689). Importantly, it also involves a sense of being at home in a new place, but still retaining significant connections with a distant locale, often considered a homeland. Nowhere is this attachment with homeland more evident than in the case of diaspora foodways.

The traditional foods of diasporic people represent a connection to the past and assist in reducing the negative effects of acculturation. Immigrant communities that feel more comfortable with the host culture and that identify with the cultural environment around them are more likely to adopt local food habits. And children who are raised in a culture where culinary practices are different from those of their parents quickly alter their food habits because of their ease in identifying with and assimilating to the new culture (Rao 1986). Among Italian immigrants in Canada, for example, the consumption of traditional foods, such as pasta and lamb, coincides with a stronger sense of Italian ethnic identity, whereas the eating of convenience foods or nontraditional Italian dishes has the opposite effect (Laroche, Kim, and Tomiuk 1999). And among Chinese communities in Vietnam celebrating the annual *Phuoc Kien* festival, the menus depict principally aspects of the greater-Chinese domain, but also allow “for the expression of...Vietnamese culinary” elements (Avieli 2005, 290)

## **The Vietnamese American Diaspora**

The objective of this study is to explore the “Americanization” process among the Vietnamese diaspora, based on the degree to which their cuisine has evolved and their food consumptive patterns have changed since their arrival in the United States. We hypothesize that individual migrants experienced a different rate of foodway assimilation based on their age at arrival in the United States, their current age, and where they live in relation to other Vietnamese Americans. Cuisine evolution in this context refers to changes of ingredients in traditional Vietnamese dishes due to the deliberate alteration of

the flavors and colors of dishes to accommodate altered consumer preferences and/or lack of availability of necessary foods or spices. Lack of accessibility can occur because the items are not sold or are difficult to grow in the United States, or because of the distance (drive time) required to obtain them from a market. This concept applies to immigrants who have lost interest in their traditional dishes or who have integrated novel local foods and flavors into their cuisine, in effect Americanizing or “watering down” the “Vietnameseness” of their native dishes. Because contact with American cultures has resulted in exposure to novel types of foods and spices as well as new values associated with foods, understanding which traditional foodways have resisted change will help one understand the process of acculturation among Vietnamese Americans.

From the fall of Saigon on 29 April 1975 until the end of 1977, approximately 132,000 Vietnamese refugees fled South Vietnam (Rutledge 1992). The first wave of immigrants came to the United States via refugee camps in Guam, Thailand, or the Philippines (Houle 2006). Upon entry into the United States, they were placed in one of four military base reception centers in California, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, or Florida. The government was careful not to encourage concentrations of Vietnamese in any area, to avoid “ghettoization” (Do 1999). This ethnic dispersion was also a result of economic considerations as well as anti-Asian sentiments that existed among some Americans (Lindsey 2006). Refugee camps provided English lessons and job training to assist newly arrived Vietnamese in their adjustment to American culture. From the camps, the refugees were dispersed throughout the United States (Houle 2006). Areas of relocation included parts of California, Texas, Washington, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, and the suburbs of Washington D.C. (Do 1999). The 1975 Indochinese Resettlement Assistance Act provided funding for this endeavor. However, the reception centers closed on 20 December of that year, and in 1977 the Resettlement Act expired (Desbarats 2000, Fong 2002).

From late 1978 to the early 1980s, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees entered the United States (Do 1999, Zhou and Bankston 2000, Smith and Tarallo 2006). This group differed in many ways from the first arrivals. Whereas the first wave of refugees was mostly urban and, in addition to receiving government assistance, were generally better educated, relatively more Westernized, and a significant portion already spoke English, the second wave of refugees traced their origin to rural areas in Vietnam. They also did not benefit from

government assistance. The relocation experience was consequently much more of a shock for the second group of refugees (Smith and Tarallo 2006).

A third wave of immigrants began arriving after 1980 and continues to this day (Fong 2002). Like the second generation, this group did not receive government assistance and many lacked a basic knowledge of English. However, their transition into the United States was not as challenging as it had been for the second generation because of the presence of Vietnamese communities that had been established by earlier immigrants and refugees. Newcomers with little or no knowledge of the English language and American customs were able to secure jobs within communities where businesses catered specifically to the Vietnamese population. The third wave also had another advantage—a support system of friends and family that had already established themselves in the United States. These support groups helped recent arrivals with housing and food, and assisted with finding jobs, much like the government had done for the first wave of immigrants (Karnow 2006).

Finally, within the Vietnamese American population, individuals self-identify by their degree of generational-connection with Vietnam. Thus, “first generation” includes those who were Vietnamese adults when they migrated, “1.5 generation” were adolescents or teens in Vietnam when they migrated, and “second generation” are the children of Vietnamese immigrants who were born and raised in the United States.

## **Vietnamese Cuisine**

During its long history, traditional Vietnamese cuisine has been influenced significantly by outsiders. Indeed, the very concept of traditional cuisine is brought into question by the global exchange of crops and fruits and spices following the Columbian landfall (Crosby 1993). Prior to this period, many of the culinary mainstays of the present day were absent from the Vietnamese cuisine. The French later introduced items that are now mainstream Vietnamese fare—*ca phe sua da* (Vietnamese iced coffee), *banh mi thit* (baguette sandwiches), pastries, meat pates, and asparagus. The Chinese introduced the use of chopsticks, stir-fry, and serving rice on the side (instead of mixed in with other ingredients). And curry is now commonly encountered on the Vietnamese table due to Cambodian, Asian Indian, and Malaysian influences (Kittler and Sucher 2001).

Because homes in Vietnam historically lacked refrigeration, fresh fruit, herbs, vegetables, meats, and fish were either quickly consumed or were pickled (Carlson et al. 1982). The latter tradition is evident in Vietnamese cuisine in the United States, as dishes such as *nuoc mam* (fish sauce), *cha gio* (egg rolls), and *goi cuon* (spring rolls) often contain pickled vegetables. Although pickled vegetables are also served as a side dish on numerous other plates, raw vegetables, with the exception of lettuce and sprouts, are not consumed in Vietnamese fare. Vietnamese beef jerky (*kho bo*) specialty shops in Little Saigon offer dozens of varieties of dried beef, reflecting long-held practices in Vietnam. Milk and milk products are not common ingredients in Vietnamese cuisine (Carlson, Kipps, and Thomson 1982), and cheese is not traditionally used in any Vietnamese dish. The principal ingredients found in current Vietnamese cuisine include: rice, chilies, cinnamon, coconut, garlic, lemon grass, lime, mushrooms, noodles, fish sauce, peanuts, scallions, sesame seeds, soy sauce, star anise, and tamarind (Jackson 1999).

## Study Area

We focus on the Vietnamese population in Orange County, which arose out of the refugees arriving from Camp Pendleton. Immediately following their stay at the Marine Corps installation, many first-wave refugees were channeled into predominantly white Orange County after resettlement agencies in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco complained that their cities were already coping with too many other immigrant groups. By the late 1970s, Vietnamese families had already established a handful of Vietnamese restaurants and grocery stores in addition to a Vietnamese newspaper, which publishes to this day. Thus, in spite of the intentions of the government, Vietnamese immigrants were well on the way to establishing a sense of community as well as an inchoate sense of place (Aguilar-San Juan 2005). Chain migration of later immigrants also occurred, as many of the Vietnamese who had originally settled elsewhere journeyed to California to join the existing Vietnamese communities in San Jose, Orange County, or San Diego (Do 1999). Today, Orange County houses roughly 135,000 people of Vietnamese descent, the largest concentration outside of Vietnam (Karnow 2006). According to Aguilar-San Juan (2005), seventy-five percent of the Vietnamese population in southern California resides in and around Little Saigon (Figure 1). As the most culturally Vietnamese point in North America, Little Saigon continues to draw the Vietnamese population as both a destination for migration and for tourism. It is the com-

mercial and emotional center of Vietnamese culture in the United States (Mazumdar et al. 2000), and those who reside there have the best access to Vietnamese goods and services, including restaurants and supermarkets.

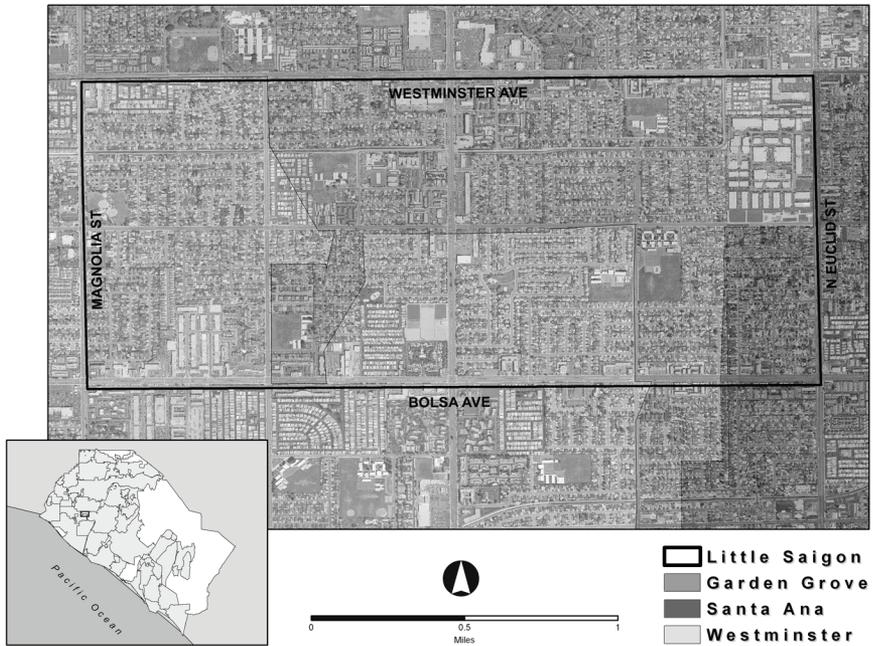


Figure 1.—The boundaries representing the three-square-mile area of Little Saigon, California.

## Methods

Data were collected by means of open-ended questionnaires, participant observation, and interviews. The questionnaire included demographic data, participants' perceived level of "Vietnameseness," food practices, and a seven-day food log. In order to reach multiple age groups, surveys were distributed at community centers that catered to older members of the Vietnamese community as well as at Vietnamese Student Association meetings and student-hosted special events, such as Vietnamese Culture Night (VCN), on various college campuses in Orange County.

This encouraged snowball sampling (Patton 1990), as visits to VCN resulted in meeting university professors who took the questionnaires back to their classrooms. Other professors heard about the project and encouraged their Vietnamese students to complete the

surveys. Other special-event opportunities included the Tet (Vietnamese New Year) Festival, where surveys were dispersed to vendors and guests. This process opened the door for questionnaires to reach families whose members covered a full range of ages.

Questionnaires were also distributed via mail. Approximately 150 addresses for Vietnamese households were obtained using the residential white pages from a recent Orange County Yellow Pages directory. Persons of Vietnamese ancestry were identified by the following surnames: Do, Huynh, Nguyen, Liem, Pham, Tran, and Vuong. After sorting recipients by surname, the city of residence was taken into consideration. Because we wanted the questionnaires to reach Vietnamese Americans in other parts of Orange County, a large percentage of the mailed questionnaires was sent to residents living in cities outside of Little Saigon. Of the 500 total questionnaires distributed, approximately 60 were returned, of which 47 were usable.

Questionnaires contained a day-to-day food log in which participants were asked to list each dish consumed during a period of one week. Each dish was counted for every individual surveyed. Foods were divided into three categories: (1) Vietnamese, (2) non-Vietnamese, and (3) universal or indistinguishable. The items categorized as universal or indistinguishable are found in the cuisine of many different cultures such as fruit, bread, cereal, sandwiches, and noodles. If the participant specifically identified the name of the noodle dish, it then became distinguishable and was placed in one of the other two categories. The same applied to some of the other items in the universal or indistinguishable category.

After tallying the food count for each questionnaire, we eliminated the third category. The percentage of Vietnamese versus non-Vietnamese food was then calculated using the data from the first two categories. Those who had a higher consumption of Vietnamese food were given a positive score, with "1.0" being the highest value. Those who consumed more non-Vietnamese food were given a negative score, "-1.0" being the lowest possible value. Thus, in effect, "1.0" represents 100 percent Vietnamese food consumption, whereas "-1.0" represents 100 percent non-Vietnamese food consumption. Individuals who score between +0.2 and -0.2 represent the population whose variation in food consumption is least significant. In other words, their consumption of Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese food is almost equal. Those who score  $\geq +0.2$  or  $\leq -0.2$  represent those who eat significantly more (60 percent or greater) from one food

category than from the other. The results of these calculations are used to compare the consumption habits of varying categories of Vietnamese Americans. Statistical analyses were then employed to assess the nature and strength of the relationships between relevant variables and food consumption.

Participant observation was undertaken as a key part of collecting information on food habits (Hubert 2004). Homes and other venues were visited during festival events and special occasions such as Tet, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthdays, to observe the fare being served and the foods being eaten by the various age groups. These were also excellent opportunities to identify how foods were prepared and served, as well as whether alteration of traditional fare was taking place. If the preparer of the dishes was present, she/he was asked why the particular meal was served, and how it was prepared. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals of varying ages and belonging to different immigrant generations. Participants were ascertained from those who volunteered via the questionnaire and also from those who had heard about the research by word-of-mouth. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain greater in-depth understanding of consumption habits and the history or background that contributed to past and present foodways.

The project was approved by California State University, Fullerton's, Institutional Review Board (Approval no. HSR#07-0297).

## **Quantitative Results**

The mean values from the food-scoring calculation exhibit a trend in the proportion of Vietnamese versus non-Vietnamese dishes consumed by the first, 1.5, and second generations (Table 1). As noted, a score of +1.0 denotes 100 percent consumption of Vietnamese food; a score of -1.0 denotes 100 percent consumption of non-Vietnamese food; and a score of 0 signifies that there is an equal consumption of Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese food. Mean food scores were analyzed using single-factor ANOVA. The results were highly significant ( $F=11.72765$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the respondents from the first generation exhibited significantly higher average food scores than the respondents from the 1.5 generation, who in turn had higher average food scores than the respondents from the second generation.

Table 1. Mean values for food scores based on generation of respondent. Highly-significant scores ( $p < 0.001$ ) are indicated by an asterisk.

	Count	Mean	Variance
1 <sup>st</sup> generation	32	0.50*	0.20
1.5 generation	10	0.02*	0.20
2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	6	-0.31*	0.03

The age at which respondents arrived in the United States ranged from three to seventy-seven years, and the qualitative data suggest that a person's age at the time she/he arrived in the United States would be a factor in the degree to which she/he assimilated American foodways. However, the regression value for age versus food score ( $P=0.17$ ) suggests at best a non-significant trend between age at arrival and category of food consumed (Figure 2).

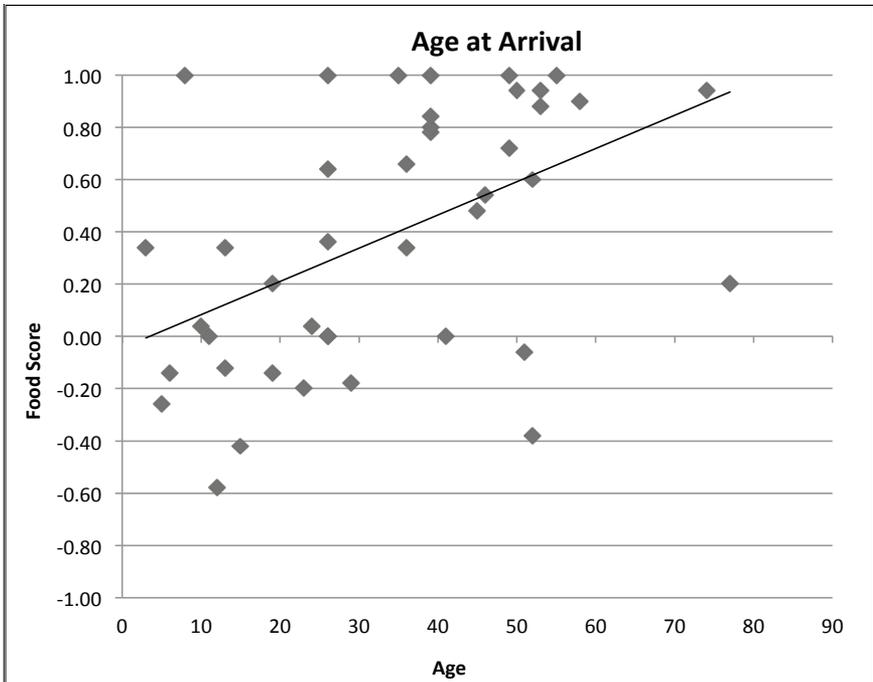


Figure 2.—Relationship between age at arrival of Vietnamese immigrants and food consumption patterns.

Google Maps (GM) was used to calculate the approximate travel times to Little Saigon from zip codes provided in each questionnaire. The exact addresses of respondents were unknown. The starting point in calculating travel time was the Google pinpoint for each ZIP Code. The destination was the address of the Asia Garden Mall in Little Saigon, which is considered the geographic heart of Little Saigon (Mazumdar et al. 2000). GM provided the approximate drive time from each ZIP Code and, in some cases, indicated the approximate drive time, both with and without traffic. When both estimates were given, the average time was recorded. During formal and informal interviews, participants mentioned that the drive time required to obtain Vietnamese foodstuff can be as long as twenty minutes. Based on this information, ZIP Codes were divided into two groups, based on travel time. Participants who could arrive at the Asia Garden Mall within twenty minutes from their ZIP Code were considered to be within reasonable travel distance. Those who needed to spend longer than twenty minutes on the road were deemed to be outside of the accessibility zone.

Mean food scores for respondents inside and outside the twenty-minute accessibility zone were analyzed using a one-tailed t-test (Table 2). The results were significant ( $t=2.0312$ ,  $P=0.027$ ), showing that respondents who lived twenty minutes or less from Little Saigon were less Americanized in terms of food use than respondents who resided more than twenty minutes from Little Saigon. These results should be considered with caution, however, because although the Asia Garden Mall is the focal point for this research, it is not the only area where Vietnamese foodstuffs are available. Because other markets that specialize in Asian fare exist in other parts of Orange County where significant non-Vietnamese Asian populations exist, Vietnamese Americans who live a considerable distance from Little Saigon may well have access to other reasonably-close Asian markets.

Table 2. Mean values for food scores based on distance of respondent from Little Saigon.

Distance	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
20 min or less	35	13.37	0.382	0.2549
More than 20 min	13	0.8	0.061	0.2289

## **Descriptive Results**

Participant observations and informal interviews afforded compelling insights into the process of foodway acceptance and rejection among Vietnamese Americans. For example, several participants commented on early negative experiences regarding exposure to American foods in school. A twenty-three-year-old woman, who arrived in the United States when she was five, recalls her encounter with cafeteria food in the California public school system.

“My sister and I used to go to elementary (school) when we first moved to America, and we used to be afraid of the school lunches because we thought they were trying to poison us because it was so weird looking, like mashed potatoes. They had like Mexican food, but it was really nasty Mexican food, it was like just beans and cheese, and when you ate it you felt really horrible, you felt really full or thick, so we really thought they were...it was a conspiracy or something.”

Thirteen-year old Tamarrah, who belongs to the second generation, provides a similar narrative. Most of her classmates are white, and she considers herself to be American. At home, she enjoys the traditional Vietnamese dishes her mother prepares. She dislikes the cafeteria food at school, so she usually eats the sandwiches her mother packs for her. On occasion her mother will include Vietnamese items in her lunch bag. It is during these times that she feels the conflict between her ethnic background and that of her white friends.

“Whenever I take Vietnamese food to school, everybody thinks it’s weird and gross because they’ve never seen it. And one time in elementary school I brought (Vietnamese) beef jerky, and it looked like beef jerky, it looked fine, but it smelled different and I guess it tasted different, so it seemed kinda odd. ... It makes me not want to bring any more (Vietnamese food) because it makes me feel like an outsider.”

Renewed interest in the culture of their homelands, including foods and foodways, was revealed during interviews with Vietnamese American college students. Several 1.5 and second-generation participants reported that they grew up in environments in which they associated only minimally with other Vietnamese of their own age. Their foodways had become overwhelmingly Americanized, and their only exposure to Vietnamese cuisine was at home. In some cases, they experienced almost no exposure whatsoever to Vietnamese foods. But this situation changed during their college years. Nick,

for example, is a member of the 1.5 generation who arrived in the United States when he was one year old, and rejected Vietnamese foods during his youth, even in his home. In his own words:

“At a young age, I wasn’t as conscious about that [Vietnamese culture]. But I didn’t really have any Vietnamese around to compare myself to. I did obviously understand that I was different, that I had my own culture, that we spoke Vietnamese at home. At least my parents did, I really fought that as much as I could. But I really wasn’t aware of my own culture until kind of late high school I became a lot more conscious about it, and definitely during college when I was surrounded by a lot more Vietnamese speaking people and I began to appreciate my own culture more.”

Annie is a second-generation Vietnamese American. She grew up in Orange County and was exposed to a diverse group of people and foods. In her words, her attitudes changed in college:

“I think in college in undergrad when I went to San Diego I started to associate more with like Vietnamese people and I guess I kind of—that might have been the transition period where I started to feel maybe a little more Vietnamese and feel more welcome and accepted with the Vietnamese community, as opposed to before that time.”

In both examples, maturity, combined with increased exposure to Vietnamese American peers as well as more active involvement in traditional cultural practices, contributed to a resurgence of their degree of Vietnameseness as adults.

The subtleties of foodway resistance and accommodation are often revealed during holiday feasts and special events. In addition to offering up a wide array of culturally meaningful cuisines, these events frequently combine a range of generations among the hosts and the guests. During a family gathering for Thanksgiving, for example, the attendees included the hostess, her six sisters, parents, aunts, and sister’s friends. The hostess is a member of the 1.5 generation, arriving in the United States at the age of six. Being the oldest of the seven, she is one of only two siblings who speak Vietnamese fluently and remember living in Vietnam. The five youngest sisters either were born in the United States or arrived at age two or younger. The foods laid out on her dinner table seemed to be typical of a traditional American Thanksgiving—salad, rolls, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, turkey, and a few other non-

Vietnamese dishes (Figure 3). The only plate that stood out as being traditionally Vietnamese was rice with a distinctly red hue, *xoi gac*, often seen at Vietnamese wedding engagements. This was the only item prepared by the hostess's mother, a first-generation immigrant. The hostess and her younger sister prepared the most-important dish, the turkey, and made one of the vegetable side dishes. At first glance, the turkey and the vegetables seemed typically American. However, closer inspection revealed that the turkey was marinated with *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) and the vegetables were seasoned with soy sauce, also typically found in Vietnamese and other Asian kitchens. The remainder of the food was prepared by the five youngest sisters, who had the least connection with Vietnam, and none exhibited any Vietnamese influences. Thus, generational divisions in this case were distinctly reflected by their food choices. The first-generation mother made the only truly Vietnamese dish, the 1.5-generation sisters used Vietnamese ingredients on traditional Thanksgiving fare, and the second generation sisters did not include any Vietnamese ingredients at all.



Figure 3.—Thanksgiving dinner. Turkey and other traditional American foods prepared with Vietnamese spices.

The fare at a second Thanksgiving dinner differed markedly. One side of the dinner table included Vietnamese spring rolls, fried rice, roasted duck, and egg rolls, while the other had ceviche, deviled eggs, crackers with seafood dip, vegetables with ranch dip, and salad. In the center, dividing the Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese food, was a baked turkey. Unlike the previous holiday feast, these dishes were all store-bought. The mother of the house discussed the

culturally mixed cuisine, noting that her children, who belong to the 1.5 generation, wanted turkey and other American food during Thanksgiving because it was an American holiday. She, on the other hand, preferred to serve Vietnamese food, and thought that every guest, regardless of their age, would enjoy it. After some thought, she reconsidered her statement, noting that she serves American and Vietnamese cuisine because “some like Vietnamese food [and] some like American food.” Her food selections were thus based on the preferences of her extended family members as well as what she believed her guests would enjoy.

Several birthday parties were also attended, including the celebration for a two-year-old girl whose parents were both born in Vietnam and arrived in the United States when they were less than one year old. There was a diverse assortment of dishes being served, including American foods, such as steak, barbeque beef, and lasagna, as well as Vietnamese fare, including spring rolls, fried rice, and Vietnamese noodles. The father of the girl explained that the demographics of their guests played a central part in the dishes they provided. He noted:

“We order the Vietnamese style food. It’s not because we want it, it’s more because we think our guests want it when we have Vietnamese guests. If it was up to us, we would probably not really order Vietnamese food. But we figure a lot of our guests probably want it. So we’re thinking more of our guests, not more of what we want.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The process of human migration and consequent separation from homeland introduces significant ambiguity to people’s sense of place and identity. Exposed to new cultural values and traditions—religion, language, foods, and many others—immigrants will inevitably experience conflicting impulses toward both cultural resistance and assimilation. All are subject to the process of acculturation, whether unidimensional, bidimensional, or some intermediate step. Under unidimensional acculturation, an immigrant’s identification drifts toward that of the host culture, resulting in near disappearance of ethnicity. Under the bi-dimensional model, people adopt some cultural aspects of the host community while maintaining a significant level of original ethnicity (Nguyen et al. 1999, Ryder et al. 2000). Which direction this process navigates toward depends frequently on the immigrant’s age, level of formal education, geographical

location, and social status. The elderly, those with limited formal education, and those with lower social status, for example, often adhere tenaciously to their traditions, whereas those with more education and higher social status, or who reside in regions that are exposed to a variety of ethnic groups, are often more willing to experiment with the cultural attributes of the host culture (Spiro 1955, Verbeke and Lopez 2005).

Traditional foods and foodways represent the cultural beliefs and practices most tenaciously conserved by diaspora peoples (Spindler and Schultz 1996). The children of Jewish immigrants in Minneapolis, for instance, retain the dishes that were prepared in their parents' homes even though they no longer observe kosher food taboos. Likewise, among Japanese immigrants in California the celebration of Japanese New Year is declining, but the special foods and drinks associated with the event are still consumed (Spiro 1955). And the Taiwanese diaspora in Japan have retained numerous foodways from their homelands, including the celebration of *Weiroo*, a family feast that involves the consumption of a communal dinner to celebrate the coming of a new year (Han 2008).

Conservation of foodways in other contexts yields to assimilation, as migrants abandon the traditional cultural uses and meanings associated with foods, and adopt those of their host country (Heine 2004). Bengali-Americans in the United States, for example, report several causes of these food habit changes, including the inability to obtain ingredients used in West Bengal, exposure to new ethnic foods, and the incorporation of American holidays and associated dishes. The generational dimension of these changes is clearly evident at family gatherings, where adult Bengali-Americans are seen to consume Indian foods whereas children opt for macaroni and cheese and pizza (Ray 2004). Similarly in Vietnam, Chinese immigrants have assimilated much of the cuisine of their host country, but they have discovered how to integrate traditional Chinese flavors into these new dishes (Avieli 2005).

The results of the present study on diaspora foodways in Little Saigon support the first hypothesis that degree of resistance vs. assimilation depends especially on circumstances of arrival and ultimate geographical location. Members of the first generation of Vietnamese migrants retained their food culture more than those of subsequent generations. In several instances, members of the first generation prepare separate, non-Vietnamese meals for their

1.5- or second-generation children in addition to the ethnic meals they prepare for themselves. This parallels the findings of Ray (2004) for the Bengali-American diaspora and for Indian and Pakistani parents in Canada, who prepare Canadian dishes for their children and ethnic homeland dishes for themselves (Wakil et al. 1981). The second hypothesis, however, that the age at which respondents arrived in the United States would help determine the degree to which they retained their traditional foodways, was not supported by the data analysis. Those arriving early in life were just as prone to accept or reject the foodways of their host culture as those who arrived later in life.

The third hypothesis, that geographical proximity to other Vietnamese Americans would be related to relative foodway conservation, was supported by the results. We discovered a significant inverse relationship between distance from the center of Little Saigon and the preservation of traditional foodways. The farther from the cultural center participants live, the less likely they are to continue using Vietnamese foods and foodways. Distance decay of cultural retention (cf. Wheeler and Stutz 1971) in this case was based on relative access to Vietnamese goods as well as proximity to Little Saigon's culture center. While some studies have shown similar distance-dependent decay of cultural practices (Timmermans 1981, Lundberg 2007), others note the extremes to which individuals will go to acquire the foods and spices of their homelands, regardless of distance and inconvenience (Marte 2011). Clearly the question of cultural decay of foodways as a general feature of the diaspora experience requires further investigation.

Foodways of the Vietnamese diaspora represent a dynamic and negotiated relationship between immigrants and their culinary choices, one in which individuals experience different rates of assimilation based on how long they have resided in the United States—the immigrant generation—and where they live in relation to other Vietnamese Americans. These broad trends, in turn, are nuanced by day-to-day, family-scale negotiations and renegotiations with relatives and the host culture. Qualitative research during special events, such as holidays and feasts, reveals some of these subtleties, as family cooks weigh the demographics and preferences of guests when crafting the components of the meal. As a result, the dishes served in the homes of the diaspora reflect the various levels of assimilation of individual Vietnamese Americans. Where these negotiations with the host culture will travel in the future is unclear.

The observation that college-age Vietnamese Americans are actively rediscovering and reinventing their foodways suggests that this great cross-cultural experiment is still in process.

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