

Some reading groups like to try recipes related to their readings to serve during discussions. Mai and Shelley cook and eat a variety of dishes in *If You Lived Here*. Here are some recipes to try for your book club event.

### **Bamboo shoots**

*I point my finger at the photo—a line of market women offering their wares—and try to explain. "These ladies," I begin, "they're very rude. Uneducated. When I'm a girl my mom give me money to go buy bamboo shoots. But when I get there, they hold up their vegetable—it's long, skinny, like a man's you-know-what—they say, 'Hey, girl! Get some practice on this guy before you meet your husband.'"*

*Does she have any idea what I'm saying? Apparently so. Shelley grins. "Yeesh. What did you do?"*

*"I ran away. I know my mom get mad that I don't bring home bamboo shoots for dinner, but I'm too afraid to buy it."*

*"By that point, you probably weren't in the mood to eat them anyway," Shelley remarks. She looks back down at the picture. "Was it at this market in Hanoi?"*

*Of course it was, and I'm about to say so, too, but then I remember that I have an old lie to sustain. Most Vietnamese-Americans equate Northerners with Ho Chi Minh, so for over twenty years I've called myself a Southerner. "Saigon," I say. "Wait. I show you." I go back to my refrigerators and fill a bag with whole bamboo shoots, then take them back to Shelley. "Bamboo shoots actually delicious. Forget what I tell you about those ladies."*

*She looks at the pale yellow vegetables, long and limp. "I see what you mean," she says, uncertainly. "They're not like those little strips you get in Chinese food."*

*"Completely different. Slice them longwise, stir fry with lots of garlic, little bit fish sauce. Cook for a long time to make tender. Then add little bit green onion at the last minute, to make pretty and smell good."*

*She holds the bag carefully, like a child clutching pet store goldfish. "I'll cook it tonight," she says firmly, as if she's making a promise.*

--If You Lived Here, Chapter 4

### **Braised Bamboo Shoots**

**[recipe adapted from Nicole Routhier's *The Foods of Vietnam*]**

1 pound whole winter bamboo shoots (Ma Ling brand from China can be found in most Asian markets. Or, try to find the bamboo shoots that are packed in brine and sold out of big tubs.)

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

¼ cup soy sauce

½ cup chicken broth or water

1 tablespoon sugar

1 teaspoon Oriental sesame oil

two green onions, sliced into strips that are ¼ inch wide and 4 inches long

Cut the bamboo shoots lengthwise into pieces ½ inch wide and 2 ½ inches long. In a saucepan, heat the vegetable oil until it smokes. Add the bamboo shoots and stir-fry for one minute. Stir in the soy sauce, chicken broth, and sugar. Bring the mixture to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover the pan and simmer for one hour, or until the shoots are tender but still crunchy. Add the green onions and sautee until they are soft, about one minute. Add the sesame oil and mix well. Serve hot, with the sauce drizzled over rice. Serves four.

## **Bun Thang**

"How about you help me cook sometime, I teach you make Vietnamese food for your kid."

For my kid? No one has ever called him my kid. The adoption agency calls him my "referral." My mother and sister call him "the Vietnamese baby." Martin doesn't call him anything. So, my kid? These words, coming from a woman I hardly know, feel like my first confirmation that I could really be his mother.

"Sure," I say. A wave of happiness rushes through me, as powerful and unreliable as a chemical high. "When?" I want to sustain it.

"Tomorrow too soon? Fridays I make dish called bún thang. Noodle with all kind meat and vegetable. Real lot of work. You free?"

--If You Lived Here, Chapter Five

### **Bun Thang (Rice Vermicelli Soup with Assorted Meats and Eggs)**

*[recipe adapted from Nicole Routhier's The Foods of Vietnam]*

*This recipe calls for dried shrimp, which will give good flavor to the broth. I like to include fresh cooked shrimp, which gives the recipe an added succulence. If you want to use fresh shrimp, add about a 1/3 cup of shrimp to each portion as you arrange the bowls before serving. You could omit the dried shrimp if you like.*

2 oz. Vietnamese pork sausage (available in Asian markets) cut into thin strips  
2 eggs  
8 oz. thin rice vermicelli  
vegetable oil  
4 oz. pork loin or butt  
½ cup dried shrimp  
2 quarts chicken broth  
2 chicken breasts, halved and boned  
3 tablespoons + ¼ teaspoon *nuoc mam* (Vietnamese fish sauce)  
2 cups fresh bean sprouts  
2 scallions, thinly sliced  
1 Tablespoon shredded fresh cilantro  
freshly ground black pepper to taste  
2 fresh red chile peppers, thinly sliced  
shrimp sauce (*mam ruoc*: available in Asian markets) or anchovy paste, to taste  
1 lime, quartered

To prepare the egg pancakes: beat together eggs, ¼ teaspoon fish sauce, pepper to taste, and ½ teaspoon water in a bowl. Brush the bottom a nine-inch nonstick omelette pan with some of the oil. Heat over a moderate burner until hot. Pour in ¼ of the egg mixture and tilt the pan to spread it evenly over the pan. It will be thin, like a crepe. Cook until the egg sets, popping any large bubbles that form, about 30 seconds. Flip the pancake and brown on the other side for about 15 more seconds. Transfer to a plate and let it cool. Repeat with the remainder of the egg mixture. To form the strips, roll an individual pancake into a cylinder, then slice crosswise into ¼ inch strips. Set aside.

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Cut the pork sausage into thin strips. Set aside.

Soak the noodles in warm water for 15 to 20 minutes, until soft. Drain. Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil. Add the noodles. Using chopsticks, lift and separate the noodles to keep them from clumping. Boil for 2 or 3 minutes. Test after two minutes. Make sure not to overcook, because they will cook additionally in the hot broth. They should just be *al dente*. Drain the noodles in a colander and rinse with cold water to cool them and to remove the excess starch. Drain thoroughly and set aside.

Using a skillet, heat 1 ½ teaspoons oil over high heat. Add the pork and brown for 1 minute on each side. Cover and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook for 10 to 15 minutes, until the juices run clear when you pierce the meat with a fork. Set aside to cool, then cut the pork into thin slices. Set aside.

Cover the dried shrimp in warm water and soak for 30 minutes. Drain, but reserve 2/3 cup of the liquid for the broth.

In a large pot, combine chicken broth, chicken breasts, half of the shrimp and the shrimp liquid. Bring to a boil, skimming off any residue that floats to the surface. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for ten minutes.

Remove the chicken breasts from the broth. Set aside to cool. Simmer broth an additional 15 minutes. Remove and discard the shrimp. Stir in the remaining 3 tablespoons of fish sauce and turn off the heat.

Shred the chicken meat by hand. Mince the remaining soaked shrimp.

Divide the cooked noodles and the bean sprouts in four large soup bowls. On top, arrange chopped shrimp (or cooked fresh shrimp if you are using it), roast pork, pork sausage, egg strips, and shredded chicken. The individual ingredient should be distinct from one another in the bowl, like different colored paints on an artist's palette. Just before serving, bring the broth back to a boil. Ladle the broth into the bowls and sprinkle with scallions, cilantro, and black pepper.

Serve the soup with chiles, shrimp sauce, and lime wedges, which individual diners can use as desired.

### ***Deviled Eggs***

Shelley pulls a plastic Tupperware out of the bag. I hear the sucking sound of the top coming off, then she holds some kind of hard-boiled egg between her fingers. "Just try this. For a snack."

"What is it?"

"A devilled egg. Haven't you ever been to a picnic?"

"I been to picnics." Not in the States, though.

"Just try it."

I hold the egg between my fingers and take a bite, keeping my eyes on the road. It's creamier than a hard-boiled egg, and less-bland, too. Somebody had a good idea.

"Well?"

"It's cute."

She watches me chewing. "But do you like it?"

I nod. "Cute."

--*If You Lived Here*, Chapter Eight

## **Deviled Eggs**

6 eggs  
1/4 mayonnaise  
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard  
1/2 teaspoon paprika  
Salt and pepper to taste

Hard cook the eggs and peel. Slice each egg lengthwise in half. Carefully scoop out the yolk and place in a bowl, setting the whites aside. To the yolks, add mayonnaise, mustard, salt and pepper. Mix well. Spoon enough yolk mixture to fill each 1/2 egg white, making sure to distribute evenly. Sprinkle with paprika. Chill before serving.

## *Vietnamese Coffee*

*"You want to hear about first time I ever taste coffee?"*

*Shelley looks at me as if my kindness knows no bounds. I could describe the sound of boiling rice and, if that rice was boiling in Vietnam, she'd listen.*

*Interstate 40 spreads out in front of us, a plain brown ribbon stretched across the dark farmland. In my mind I see Hanoi. "It was the middle of summer, so hot. I had to take my Daddy's bike to be fixed." I remember the morning perfectly, even though I haven't thought of it in years. How old was I then? My mother died that summer, so it was 1977. "I was 17."*

*That morning, the sidewalks were scattered with the blossoms of the flame tree, bright orange and shaped like fans. The toothless old mechanic sat at the corner of Hang Dao and Cau Go Streets, not far from my house. He spent hours working on the bike, pulling off the rusty broken chain, cleaning the gears, submerging the tire tubes in a basin of water to search for holes. He probably could have done the job in less than an hour, but he took his time with it, talking to me, telling stories, scouring the grungy spokes with the bristles of a worn toothbrush. I didn't care how long he took. "My life so different then," I tell Shelley. "Now I got no time. Back then, I got nothing but time. Americans say, 'Time's money.' I'm rich back then."*

*I glance at Shelley and she grins. I don't mention the relief I felt that afternoon, which is probably the reason I remember it at all. My mother had been screaming for weeks, crazed from the pain. She wasn't even strong enough to lift her head from the pillow, and she'd begged us all to kill her. She was headed for the next life anyway, she argued, making beautiful promises to the person brave enough to do it. To me, she promised good marks in school. To Lan, who was pregnant with My Hoa, she promised brilliant children. She promised my father robust health. She didn't care how we did it. Strangle her. Stick a knife through her heart. Just do it, fast. Lan, my father, and I took turns in the hospital, wiping her face with cool rags, trying to soothe her. It was strange to see a woman who'd gone through so much sorrow in her life suddenly refuse to put up with one more minute of it. During those brief intervals when she finally screamed herself to sleep, we'd cluster together whispering, as if we might be able to find a solution. We'd heard of drugs that made people numb, but we didn't know how to get them. It was 1977, just two years beyond the war, and that barren hospital had nothing that would ease her pain. Some days, I was so frantic to make the misery stop that I worried I'd actually take a knife and stab her. But then, as suddenly as the pain had started, it went away. One afternoon, in the middle of a wail, my mother closed her mouth. After that, she lay there silent, staring at the ceiling, faintly smiling. When we took her hand, she squeezed it.*

*The morning after the screaming stopped, sitting by the old bicycle mechanic, I felt a relief that colored everything around me. Even the glint of the sunlight on the asphalt seemed cheerful. Up until my mother's illness, my life had not been particularly sad—no more so, that is, than the life of anyone else in Hanoi at that time. But because I'd never felt deep sadness, I'd never felt such relief from it, either. The knowledge that my mother wasn't suffering gave me a sense of joy that was as powerful an emotion as I had known.*

*We reach the junction of I-95 and head north toward Washington. Outside, the sky has grown perfectly dark, and all I can see is the triangle of pavement in my headlights and the two red dots that represent the car ahead of us. "I wish I could describe that day," I tell Shelley. "It was something beautiful. Seems like everybody smiling. And when the old man finished his work, I try to give him his money, but he won't let me. He say I should buy him a coffee instead."*

*I pause to let a small car speed past in the fast lane, then I continue. "Now, that's funny in Vietnam. Nobody ever hear of a 17-year-old girl buying an old man coffee. But, like I say, I got the time, and I'm happy that day. So we walk my bike down to a cafe by the lake and we drink coffee."*

*"Did you like it?" Shelley asks.*

*I shake my head. "It's real bitter. Like tree bark. Sweet tree bark. But I drink the whole thing."  
If You Lived Here, Chapter Eight*

### *Vietnamese Coffee*

*For this recipe, you need Vietnamese coffee and filters. The Vietnamese coffee producer Trung Nguyen now has its products available online: <http://www.trung-nguyen-online.com/> . You can get a coffee sampler, with filter, for \$10.95*

Ground coffee (one tablespoon for one 8 oz. glass or cup)  
Sweetened condensed milk (up to 2 tablespoons per glass or cup)

This coffee is made by the individual glass, so if you want to serve coffee for several people at once, you'll need more filters. Place coffee into filter chamber, spreading evenly across the bottom. Place the filter on top of cup or glass. Gently cover coffee with filter insert. Pour a quarter cup of boiling water onto the filter insert and wait 20 seconds for the water to drain (you don't have to wait until it drains through completely). Now completely fill the filter with water and wait about five minutes for the water to drip through the filter. Remove the filter, stir, and drink.

Note: you can make iced coffee by including ice in the glass. You can also drink the coffee black.