

What the Pho?

Localization Repair for a Favorite Vietnamese Dish



A bowl of Pho, consisting of beef broth, noodles, and vegetables, slices of raw beef added to and cooked by the hot soup, and a plate of basil leaves, sprouts, hot peppers, and lime slices, used to customize the soup's flavor.

Pho was originally a simple beef and rice noodle soup that first originated in northern Vietnam nearly one hundred years ago. Some speculate that it evolved from the *pot au feu* introduced to Vietnam by French colonists. After the country was partitioned, pho in South Vietnam became a more elaborate dish, often served with many varieties of beef, and a plate of herbs for garnish. Postwar migrations brought pho to America; many large cities have modest pho houses, serving people of all ethnic backgrounds.

Like Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Thai restaurants, Vietnamese pho houses are making a transition from serving the culturally adventurous, to becoming an attractive alternative to other “comfort food.” In this regard, pho is well-suited to appeal to broad American tastes, because its flavors are only a little bit exotic, the ingredients mostly familiar, and bowls of pho are usually modestly priced. But most pho houses I have been to, in four different parts of the country, suffer from a series of incomplete or imperfect localizations which could hamper pho’s appeal to more wide audiences.

Overview of Localization Issues

1. Unfamiliar or out-of-context food terminology
2. Too many choices
3. Many meat choices are culturally “scary” to a mainstream American audience.
4. No explanation of use of garnish plate
5. Hidden chicken variant.
6. Check not brought to table.



Too many options

This modest menu lists ten variations on the basic beef noodle soup—many of them working out the mathematical permutations of meat combinations. Which one is “normal” pho? Which one should a first-timer try?

~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ *When the modest northern-style pho moved south (to non-communist Vietnam) and then to America, the wealth of choices became part of the pho experience.*

~: REMEDY ~ *Provide a “Favorite Pho” option, and then list the others as sub variants—perhaps on a grid.*

Hidden chicken variant

Why is chicken listed under the main heading “Beef Noodle Soup?” This is common on pho menus—and may hinder chicken-lovers from seeing it.

~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ *Pho is traditionally made with beef stock. Chicken pho (pho ga) is a variation created for American tastes, but Vietnamese people see it as a kind of pho, rather than as a different soup entirely.*

~: REMEDY ~ *List chicken pho separately.*

牛肉湯粉		PHỞ - BEEF NOODLE SOUP	
<i>(Served with bean sprout, lemon, peppers and basil leaves)</i>			
Small \$4.95 Large \$5.45 X-Large \$6.25			
15.	特別牛肉粉	Phở Đặc Biệt	BEEF COMBO RARE STEAK, BRISKET, TENDON, TRIPE, MEAT BALLS
16.	生肉粉	Tái	RARE STEAK NOODLE SOUP
17.	生肉熟肉粉	Tái Nạm	RARE STEAK & WELL-DONE BRISKET NOODLE SOUP
18.	生肉牛筋粉	Tái Gân	RARE STEAK & TENDON NOODLE SOUP
19.	生肉牛筋百葉粉	Phở Tái, Gân, Sách	RARE STEAK, TENDON & TRIPE
20.	生肉百葉粉	Tái Sách	RARE STEAK & TRIPE NOODLE SOUP
21.	生肉牛丸粉	Phở Tái, Bò Viên	RARE STEAK & MEAT BALL
22.	熟肉粉	Nạm Vè Dòn	WELL-DONE BRISKET NOODLE SOUP
23.	熟肉牛筋百葉粉	Phở Chín, Gân, Sách	WELL-DONE BRISKET, TENDON & TRIPE
24.	牛丸粉	Phở Bò Viên	BEEF BALL NOODLE SOUP
25.	雞肉粉	Phở Gà	CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP

Add Meat Ball \$1.00 • Side Order: Rare Steak \$2.00 • Noodle Soup Only \$3.75

海鮮湯粉		HỦ TIẾU - RICE NOODLE SOUP	
26.	海鮮粉	Hủ Tiếu Đồ Biển	SEAFOOD NOODLE SOUP \$5.95
27.	鮮蝦蟹豬肉粉(透明粉)	Hủ Tiếu Bà Năm Sa Đéc	\$5.95
CLEAR RICE NOODLE W/ SHRIMPS, CRAB & SLICE OF PORK			
28.	西筍鴨地瓜粉	Miến Măng Vịt	DUCK W/ BAMBOO SHOOTS IN BEAN THREAD NOODLE SOUP \$6.25
29.	西筍鴨米粉	Bún Măng Vịt	DUCK W/ BAMBOO SHOOTS IN VERMICELLI SOUP \$6.25
30.	越式蟹湯米粉	Bún Riêu	CRAB PASTE & TOMATO IN VERMICELLI SOUP \$5.45

A typical pho house menu—though they are often longer, listing every possible permutation of meat combinations. In this menu, vermicelli noodles are listed under a separate heading, but other pho houses list vermicelli as an option under the main pho heading.

No explanation of garnish plate

Perhaps less a deficiency than a missed opportunity, the lack of a clear explanation of the overflowing garnish plate makes it harder for novices to fully enjoy the flexibility they have.

~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ *Like the number of pho variations (opposite), the garnish plate is an early innovation that resulted from the translation of a simple soup into a dish served in more affluent cultures. Customizing food also apparently draws on other aspects of southern vietnamese culture.*

~: REMEDY ~ *Write a brief explanation of how to use the garnish plate, suitable for American newcomers.*



Unfamiliar or out-of-context food terminology

Most casual American diners would be hard pressed to identify a *brisket* or *flank*, or to explain how they differ in taste. “Vermicelli” is an Italian noodle style—why switch cultures? (Note: this menu lists vermicelli under a different heading, but many pho houses I have been to show vermicelli as a pho option.)

~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ Early pho houses in the US adopted reasonable dictionary definitions for their food, which was sufficient given that they were providing ethnic food, rather than a smoothly designed dining experience.

~: REMEDY ~ Provide better explanations of the food. “Flank steak” is one improvement; “Thin rice noodles” is a good replacement for vermicelli.

牛肉湯粉		PHỞ - BEEF NOODLE SOUP	
(Served with bean sprout, lemon, peppers and basil leaves)			
Small \$4.95 Large \$5.45 X-Large \$6.25			
15. 特別牛肉粉	Phở Đặc Biệt	BEEF COMBO RARE STEAK, BRISKET	TENDON, TRIPE, MEAT BALLS
16. 生肉粉	Tái	RARE STEAK NOODLE SOUP	
17. 生肉熟肉粉	Tái Nạm	RARE STEAK & WELL-DONE BRISKET NOODLE SOUP	
18. 生肉牛筋粉	Tái Gân	RARE STEAK & TENDON NOODLE SOUP	
19. 生肉牛筋百葉粉	Phở Tái, Gân, Sách	RARE STEAK, TENDON & TRIPE	
20. 生肉百葉粉	Tái Sách	RARE STEAK & TRIPE NOODLE SOUP	
21. 生肉牛丸粉	Phở Tái, Bò Viên	RARE STEAK & MEAT BALL	
22. 熟肉粉	Nạm Vè Dòn	WELL-DONE BRISKET NOODLE SOUP	
23. 熟肉牛筋百葉粉	Phở Chín, Gân, Sách	WELL-DONE BRISKET, TENDON & TRIPE	
24. 牛丸粉	Phở Bò Viên	BEEF BALL NOODLE SOUP	
25. 雞肉粉	Phở Gà	CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP	
Add Meat Ball \$1.00 • Side Order: Rare Steak \$2.00 • Noodle Soup Only \$3.75			
海鮮湯粉		HỦ TIẾU - RICE NOODLE SOUP	
26. 海鮮粉	Hủ Tiếu Đồ Biển	SEAFOOD NOODLE SOUP	\$5.95
27. 鮮蝦蟹豬肉粉(透明粉)	Hủ Tiếu Bà Năm Sa Đéc	CLEAR RICE NOODLE W/ SHRIMPS, CRAB & SLICE OF PORK	\$5.95
28. 西筍鴨地瓜粉	Miến Măng Vịt	DUCK W/ BAMBOO SHOOTS IN BEAN THREAD NOODLE SOUP	\$6.25
29. 西筍鴨米粉	Bún Măng Vịt	DUCK W/ BAMBOO SHOOTS IN VERMICELLI SOUP	\$6.25
30. 越式蟹湯米粉	Bún Riêu	CRAB PASTE & TOMATO IN VERMICELLI SOUP	\$5.45

“Scary” meats

Americans don’t usually eat tripe or tendon. Some explanation for why these are part of Vietnamese cuisine would encourage someone to take a risk and try them.

~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ Vietnamese cooks take full advantage of all the parts of the animal for both economy and variety—and regular pho eaters have learned to appreciate the nuanced differences in taste and texture.

~: REMEDY ~ More exotic meats could be listed under a “Traditional” heading with some explanation.

Check not brought to table

[Not represented on the menu.] Most pho houses never bring the check to the table at the end of the meal—even those which otherwise have table service. This leads to feelings of confusion and uncertainty

among diners.
~: CULTURAL ORIGIN ~ Vietnamese restaurants typically allow diners to proceed at their own pace, and come to the counter for the bill when they are done. For a waiter to take the bill

to the table would be seen as rudely hurrying them along.
~: REMEDY ~ This is more of a challenge, because Vietnamese restaurants cater to both American and Vietnamese customers, who might view this

practice differently. If it isn’t appropriate to use the American model of bringing the check to the table, there could be an explanation in the menu, or the server could politely mention something to guests.

Pho

Vietnam's Classic Soup of Broth, Rice Noodles, & Vegetables
 Not sure which one to try? Pick a 🍴 house favorite!

House Pho with lean steak 🍴 \$6

Hanoi Pho with steak and beef brisket for varied flavor and texture \$6.50

Saigon Pho with steak, flank steak, and fatty flank for a rich taste \$6.75

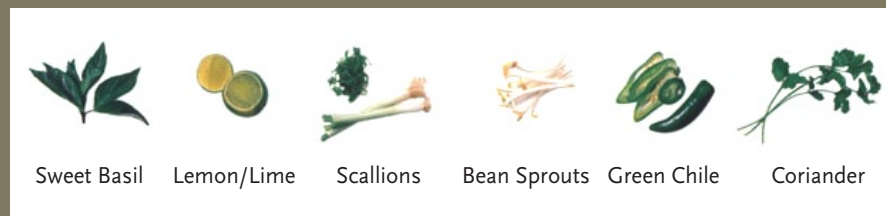
Chicken Pho a vietnamese take on an american classic! chunks of tasty chicken in a light chicken broth. 🍴 \$6.50

Special Combo Pho with steak, beef brisket, tripe, and tendon for the ultimate in traditional Vietnamese flavor! \$7

Make Your Own Pho Choose any of the following ingredients (50¢ each)
 Steak + Beef Brisket + Flank Steak + Fatty Flank + Meatball + Tendon + Tripe

Substitute thin rice noodles in any Pho dish for a lighter flavor.

Pho, Your Way! Each serving of Pho comes with a selection of tasty herbs you can add to adjust the flavor to your liking. Try it yourself!



Take your time enjoying your meal. We will bring the check whenever you're ready.

Add your choice of the following tasty meats to your Pho...



Steak
Tender, flavorful



Beef Brisket
A hearty cut



Flank Steak
"London Broil" style



Meatballs
with Vietnamese flavor



Fatty Flank
Rich—like bacon!



Crunchy Flank
Adds a bit of "bite"



Tendon
Melts in your mouth



Tripe
Thin, chewy strips

The repaired menu design is simpler and provides more information about the options the diner can choose for his or her pho. (I am indebted to the Pho Hoa company for photos of ingredients; they have made some efforts at improving the menu, but still present confusing terminology and an overabundance of choices.)

