



BREWING UP A WAVE

Third-wave coffee is taking over the sidewalks
of Vietnam's capital, with newcomers and veterans
jostling to offer discerning taste buds quality, affordable
fuel made from beans sourced locally and beyond

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Photography **Bao Khanh**

IT'S 8AM ON TUESDAY MORNING AND HANOI'S QUAN THANH STREET THUNDERS WITH MOTORBIKE EXHAUSTS.

As one of the most important arteries in the city's historic center, street life on Quan Thanh is in full swing at rush hour. Elderly ladies in pajamas peddle lottery tickets, while suited office workers tuck into breakfast in makeshift street kitchens. The road bustles with clothing boutiques preparing for a day of trade in front of French mansions in varying states of physical health. Some of these have suffered from clumsy extensions and are unrecognizable reincarnations of their former selves. Others fare better, still flaunting their original features.

Hugging one of the prouder French mansions is Café Yen, a sidewalk coffee shop serving up java on small wooden tables. The scene is quintessentially Hanoi, with nattering patrons on pint-sized chairs huddled over their morning brew. There's a healthy mix of people, including middle-aged ladies with styled hair, young men fresh from the gym, canoodling student couples and scores of white-shirted office workers. Café Yen is open to the elements, but on a sunny day it doesn't need a cover because the yellow-walled mansion provides enough shade from the heat.

However, there's one important difference between this café and other Hanoi sidewalk bistros: Customers aren't knocking back the traditional 100% Robusta rocket fuel that defines Vietnamese coffee. Instead, they're nursing exquisitely crafted Arabica





signature drinks and artisanal lattes and cappuccinos that would look more at home in the hipster cafes of Melbourne than on the rowdy streets of Hanoi. There are no international telltale signs associated with a premium brew, such as blackboard menus written in chalk or tattooed baristas sporting manbuns, but the coffee quality is undeniable.

"We make each cup of coffee through a meticulous and thoughtful process," says Nguyen Duy Minh, who founded the café in August 2017 with his girlfriend, Nguyen Ngan Quynh. Casually dressed in a black T-shirt and navy chinos, Duy Minh is bright-eyed and passionate about his craft. He carefully sources his beans from farms outside of Dalat in Vietnam's central highlands and only works with select roasteries. "We're so fastidious because, to put it simply, we believe that's what the customer deserves," he explains.

Café Yen exemplifies Vietnam's unique experience of the third wave of coffee, a term coined nearly two decades ago in the US to refer to specialty brew made with premium beans sourced from select suppliers or direct from the farms. In the American context, the first wave is associated with mass producers of coffee, such as Folgers, who made instant, cheap coffee widely available from the late 19th century. The second wave is associated with café giants such as Starbucks, who from the 1970s made fresh brew fashionable and educated customers about its origins.

VIETNAM HAD ITS OWN "WAVES" THAT correspond with the US experience, though it was late to the game and the timing is condensed. The Vietnamese grew and drank tea before the colonial period in the 19th century, when the French established coffee farms in central Vietnam. Most of the crop yield was for export and instant coffee for the domestic market wasn't widely available until after colonial efforts ceased in 1954. The war in the 1960s and 1970s,



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The signature Sapa brew from Café Yen uses whipped cream and condensed milk; the sidewalk coffee shop is located on Quan Thanh Street; stylish patrons are a common sight at Café Yen; Hai Bon café near Hoan Kiem Lake faces the iconic Vu Thach Temple

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"We're trying to make high-quality coffee more accessible to everyday people."

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followed by a decade of economic stagnation in the 1980s, thwarted the product's national expansion.

Economic reforms in the 1990s, known as *doi moi*, expedited coffee production. This new economic climate nurtured companies such as Trung Nguyen, which produced cost-friendly instant coffee for home use. At the same time, cheap street cafés popped up across the country, usually starting in people's houses before spilling onto the street for extra space. Because the Vietnamese traditionally brew coffee with small, modest filters, opening a café didn't require any expensive equipment or big investments, and such home-run street businesses quickly multiplied. These humble establishments, most of which started with just a handful of tables, set Hanoi's obsession with cafés in motion. A century after the United States, Vietnam was experiencing its own first wave of coffee.

Vietnam's second wave followed in the 2000s, with coffee chains such as Highlands Coffee – the country's answer to Starbucks – proliferating across the country. Vietnam's third wave only began within the last decade, but it remains restricted to the big cities. Hanoi now has a healthy selection of specialty coffee shops, but with local tastes still developing and prices comparable with Western capitals, businesses like Café Yen are thinking about how they can make their brew both accessible and affordable. "The price barrier of a fancy café can make it hard for people to enjoy a good

cup every day," Duy Minh explains over the whirring of coffee grinders. "We're trying to make high-quality coffee more accessible to everyday people." An espresso-based milk coffee such as a cappuccino is just VND35,000 (US\$1.50), around half the price of a specialty brew from an air-conditioned café and only a fraction more than a Vietnamese version. With sidewalk cafés, overheads such as rent and electricity are significantly reduced, meaning pocket-friendly prices for customers.

But for Duy Minh, serving sidewalk coffee at affordable prices is only half



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Owner Nguyen Duy Minh of Café Yen; customers huddle inside a small alleyway

the battle to bring quality brew to a Vietnamese customer base. "With high levels of acidity, Arabica beans are not as popular as traditional Robusta. A lot of Vietnamese people find the taste too sour." Traditional Vietnamese coffee shops ground Robusta beans and mix it with condensed milk, resulting in the bittersweet drink for which Vietnam is famous. Espresso-based milk coffees that originated in the West, however, blend Arabica beans with unsweetened fresh milk, and the taste is sour and smooth. To make Arabica more palatable to locals, Duy Minh uses dark-roasted beans to bring out the bitterness while devising unique Vietnamese coffee-inspired signatures.

At Café Yen, the Van Van – which translates to "a thousand clouds" – uses cold sweetened milk and is topped with handmade foam. It looks like a frothy cappuccino, but the taste is an East-West fusion: somewhat bitter, slightly sour, a little sweet and very smooth. In the Sapa, another signature drink named after the illustrious mountain destination in the northwest region, Duy Minh uses buttery whipped cream and sugary condensed milk to help offset the acidity. "Both the Van Van and the Sapa are good, easy-to-drink introductions for



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Hai Bon offers an intimate space with cozy seating areas for coffee lovers



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Try the *bac xiu* at Hai Bon café, made of fresh milk, condensed milk and coffee over ice; repurposed furniture fill the industrial interiors of the coffee shop

people who aren't used to Arabica flavors," he opines.

ON BA TRIEU STREET, A FEW STEPS

south of Hanoi's fabled Hoan Kiem Lake, sits Hai Bon, another street café that's shaking things up. Along with a reel of Arabica espresso-based coffees, popular drinks here include Vietnamese favorites like *ca phe nau*, a blend of filter coffee and condensed milk served with or without ice. The shop has also attracted attention for its *bac xiu*, a delectable Ho Chi Minh City specialty that combines fresh milk, condensed milk and a little coffee over ice. But unlike Café Yen, Hai Bon sides with tradition and uses Robusta beans for its default blend of Vietnamese coffee.

"Using 100% Robusta beans for our Vietnamese coffee offers the flavors that our customers are used to," says Ben Khuat, who opened Hai Bon in June 2017.

"What sets us apart from other street coffee shops is that we carefully source our Robusta beans from trusted suppliers, and we roast them ourselves. But most importantly, we never add any flavor enhancers," he adds, referring to the growing concern that unscrupulous street coffee vendors are employing flavorings like roasted corn and fish sauce to cut costs. Khuat, dressed in carrot-colored chinos and a simple polo,



PERK ME UP

Despite these newcomers to the sidewalk-coffee scene, traditional cafes are still going strong. In Hanoi's French Quarter, Café Thai (27 Trieu Viet Vuong, Hai Ba Trung) has been serving up Vietnamese coffees right on the street since 1926. Embedded within the Old Quarter, Café Ta Hien (39 Ta Hien, Hoan Kiem) draws a loyal following of devout locals.



is a serial café entrepreneur, with popular names like Blackbird and Tranquil also under his belt.

Hai Bon is Khuat's only sidewalk café, but he maintains the same quality standards as in his pricier indoor establishments. Internationally, the third-wave coffee movement is dominated by the sourcing of premium Arabica beans, but by carefully selecting suppliers and roasting the beans himself, Khuat is applying those standards to Vietnamese Robusta.

Much like Duy Minh, Khuat cares about bringing quality coffee to Hanoians at affordable prices and setting the business up on the street was a viable way to reduce overheads. But for the businessman, it's also about maintaining the city's sidewalk culture. "Drinking coffee on the street is a Hanoian institution," he explains. "People come to enjoy the atmosphere or the company of their friends and neighbors. It's about sharing the public space."

Regal Ba Trieu Street was a good choice, with its rows of charming French terraced houses and broad boulevard sidewalks. Customers can sit in the shade of lofty trees while enjoying a



view of the atmospheric Vu Thach Temple on the opposite side of the street. With such an iconic location, Hai Bon encapsulates central Hanoi's curious balance between laid-back living and frenetic chaos.

WHILE SIDEWALK CAFÉS LIKE CAFÉ

Yen and Hai Bon continue to advance Hanoi's experience of local brew, Luong Thanh Binh believes that quality is still king – and that means looking beyond Vietnam. "I would say our signature drink is the pour-over," explains Luong, owner of coffee shop Kafeville, which moved to its second location in Yen Ninh Street in

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Seats spill out onto the sidewalk at Kafeville; indoor seats are also available at the café



THE OTHER BREW

If you're worried that coffee will keep you up at night, knock back some of Hanoi's refreshing street beer, known as *bia hoi*, instead. Bia hoi bars tend not to have discernible names, but popular Old Quarter spots include 2 Duong Thanh and 22 Hang Tre. In the French Quarter, check out Hai Xom (48 Tang Bat Ho), which overlooks a small park.



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Luong Thanh Binh,
owner of Kafeville;
the café occupies
an air-conditioned
space on Yen
Ninh Street

January. "We are one of the first coffee shops in Hanoi to serve it – and we're still one of the best."

Kafeville brews inside an air-conditioned space that offers a few chairs and tables, but most patrons prefer to sit right on the street. Though famous for pour-over coffee, the shop has one of the largest selections of drinks served on the street, including both espresso-based coffees and traditional Vietnamese ones.

There's also a tempting selection of alcoholic signatures, such as the Shakerato, which blends coffee, apple cider and syrup. Luong believes in matching the right bean with the right coffee, regardless of whether they're grown in Vietnam or not.

For pour-overs, Kafeville uses imported Arabica beans from South America and Africa. But in a market flooded with domestically produced coffee, sourcing the right supplier wasn't easy. "We were lucky to finally find a



coffee importer that knew what it was doing," explains the café owner, neatly dressed in a buttoned-up shirt with a stubbly beard. "We've yet to find local beans that work." Like Hai Bon, Kafeville takes pride in roasting its own beans.

Resting on unassuming Yen Ninh Street in a residential corner, it offers a calmer but no less authentic side of Hanoi street life. Luong's café demonstrates that international standards of coffee can still be served in a local setting and not feel out of place. "The Hanoi Old Quarter is just too good to miss," he says, laughing. "I mean, where else will you find a neighbor singing loudly on his karaoke machine at 7:30am?"



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