

# BACKGROUNDER

## TAKING INSPIRATION FROM VIETNAMESE CUISINE WITH CÉSAR COMBE, CHEF DE CUISINE AT LA MAISON 1888



*La Maison 1888's Chef César Combe: French dishes inspired by Vietnamese cuisine*

InterContinental Danang Sun Peninsula's Chef de Cuisine César Combe has spent the past seven years discovering Vietnamese cooking techniques and the secrets behind what makes it one of the most delicately flavoured cuisines in the world. He's passionate about using local Vietnamese ingredients in his own cuisine, from different types of pepper and chili to healthy herbs. We sat down with Chef César to learn more about how he incorporates different Vietnamese ingredients into his cooking, and what guests shouldn't miss at the Resort.

*IC: One of the keys to what makes Vietnamese cuisine different from other Asian cuisines is its use of certain fresh herbs. What are your favourite herbs to cook with and why? How do they transform a dish?*

CC: I love working with Vietnamese herbs and consider them to be "magical" because they can completely transform flavours without overpowering them. Take the *kinh gioi*, or Vietnamese lemon mint, for example. It's fresh with a citrusy kick, and it reminds me of lemon verbena from the South of France. It can be infused or mixed in a stuffing, turned into a sorbet, or even made into a dry powder, complementing the other perfumes of the dish.

The Vietnamese believe that herbs have many health benefits. For example, they believe that saw coriander is cooling and detoxifying, fish lettuce makes the skin silky, and wormwood can be used as a cough remedy.

*IC: Another key element of Vietnamese cuisine is the use of spices. How do you use them in your cuisine?*

CC: I believe that the Vietnamese are the masters of spices, never overpowering a dish but maintaining a subtle balance. The spices I tend to use most often include the small red peppers, ginger, lemongrass, black pepper, black cardamom, cinnamon, turmeric, *nuoc mam* fish sauce, rice vinegar, etc. The combinations are endless. For example, I make a French *rouille*, a type of spiced mayonnaise, using a blend of cardamom, star anise and garlic to give it a Vietnamese twist. I also add honey, ginger and *nuoc mam* fish sauce to my vinaigrette, or I make it purely with herbs using rice vinegar, red pepper and lemongrass. I love playing with Vietnamese ingredients to give a twist to typically French dishes.

*IC: There are four types of chili commonly used in Vietnamese cuisine. Can you tell us what makes them different?*

CC: The large red chilis, sometimes called Saigon chili, are not very spicy and are mostly used as garnish for decoration. The small red chilis on the other hand are very hot. We often use them in dipping sauces and recommend them in moderation. Yellow chilis have a sharp flavour. We cut them into thin slices and serve on top of noodle dishes such as *cao lau*. And finally, the green chili is native to Hoi An, a little further down the coast from our resort, and is often served raw to accompany dishes such as *mi quang* noodles or pounded and served alongside barbecued items.

*IC: What can you tell us about the four different types of pepper - black, grey, white, red - commonly used in Vietnam?*

CC: Pepper is grown in several different regions across Vietnam. Black pepper is picked when it's green and is then dried. I like to use it with sautéed vegetables or infused in broths and sauces. Red pepper is a fresh pepper that has sugary notes and is great to use with raw fish. White pepper has the same origin as black pepper but is picked when it ripens. The outer shell is removed for a more delicate flavour. It works very well with *foie gras*. And then we have grey pepper, simply a mixture of black and white pepper with a nuanced flavour that works especially well with meats, creamy sauces and mayonnaise.

*IC: Do you grow any herbs, spices, vegetables, etc. on site? Do you forage for anything that grows wild in the gardens or the surrounding forest?*

CC: We've just started planting an organic garden this past year which will allow us to grow some fresh products. It's a work in progress and we're excited to see what we can grow here. I also forage for some plants and flowers in the Resort's garden and surrounding forest, in particular watercress.

*IC: Can you highlight some dishes that take inspiration from Vietnamese and French culinary traditions?*

CC: Yes, absolutely. Take our mussels, for example. A very typical French dish, here we cook them in the same way we would at home, but with lemongrass, basil and green chili to give a more local flavour. And then there's *bo kho*, a Vietnamese braised beef stew with turmeric, which is very much like our French *pot-au-feu*. During the French colonial era, French bread became a popular snack item, developing into the *banh mi* sandwiches which took over from the more basic ham and butter variety. *Banh mi* can be filled with everything from pork sausage, to pâté, coriander leaf, pickled carrots and daikon, and of course a good spread of chili and mayonnaise.

*IC: How can guests get a true taste of Vietnam at the Resort?*

CC: Our team of Vietnamese chefs ensure that each of the dishes we create here is true to its original flavours. I learn so much from working with our Vietnamese chefs, especially about the importance of maintaining authenticity of flavours and finding the right balance of ingredients. They are the real masters of flavour. For a taste of a truly classic Vietnamese dish, try our traditional *pho* rice noodles, broth and a big handful of fresh herbs, or go for the *banh cuon*, a favourite street food dish that you can try across the whole country. Refreshing and tasty.

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