Vietnamese cuisine is so influenced by our South Asian neighbors, and this Indian-style curry is the perfect example. Tofu is a source of protein, but it’s really a vegetable. This is how we treat it. Meat and tofu can often share a dish for double the umami.

Recipe p. 146
Stir-Fried Water Spinach

We eat this green on a daily basis, stirred into stir-fries, soups, or salads. The cooked leaves have an incredible richness and silkiness that you won’t find with regular spinach. It reminds me of home.

Recipe p. 146

Smoky Eggplant with Scallion Oil

When you cut into an eggplant, it seems dry and spongy, but once roasted in a jacket of its own skin, it becomes soft and rich, almost fatty. I love that unexpected transformation. For me, it’s a total wow.

Recipe p. 148

Butternut and Ginger Congee

This is my comfort food. It’s warm and creamy, even though there’s no cream in it. Vietnamese cuisine leads with freshness—not just one flavor or texture. The crispy ginger slices and fresh herbs add just the right amount of zing to the dish.

Recipe p. 146

“VIETNAMESE CUISINE is based on resourcefulness, not extravagance,” says Andrea Nguyen, instructor and author of six cookbooks, including Into the Vietnamese Kitchen and The Pho Cookbook (February 2017). Meat was sparse, but vegetables were abundant. Dishes evolved as a play among their colors, textures, and flavors—ripe or unripe, slowly charred or cool and crisp—changing again and again in unexpected ways. “By the time you get to the meat, it’s practically a garnish,” she says. Balance and excitement comprises every dish—the first to round out and unite flavors, the second to engage the senses without overwhelming them. For balance, Nguyen adds a touch of fish sauce to give spinach a savory depth and smooths out the tartness in nuoc cham (sweet and sour dipping sauce) with a mild vinegar. She builds excitement with surprising pops of freshness and texture, topping a simple rice porridge with frizzled ginger and adding fragrant toasted coconut to a salad. “Thai food is robust, with lots of peaks and valleys,” she says.

“Vietnamese food is more gently rolling hills.” You won’t find scorching chile heat or dark, salty sauces in Vietnamese cooking, just a constant current of subtle contrasts that keep you coming back for more.

Nguyen knows this cooking style feels intimidating, but it’s not out of reach. “My role is to help people understand the foundation, then give them permission to experiment just as Vietnamese cooks do.”

—HANNAH KLINGER

The story is the sixth in our global vegetable series. Each installment is guided by an expert in the featured country or region’s cuisine.
Sweet Potato and Shrimp Cakes

I remember trying potato pancakes from a Jewish friend in grade school and loving them. This dish is a cross between that and my favorite fritters from home, with shrimp, lettuce leaves, fresh herbs, and nuoc cham.

Recipe p. 148
VIETNAMESE PANTRY ESSENTIALS

1. OYSTER SAUCE
   Adds a bit of savory sweetness with a touch of the sea. Look for brands with real oyster extract, like Lee Kum Kee.

2. FISH SAUCE
   Dilute fish sauce with water and garlic for a touch of umami that won't overwhelm you with briny funkiness.

3. RICE VINEGAR
   I add rice vinegar to refine tart lime juice and round out a dish, like smoothing rough wood with sandpaper.

4. COCONUT MILK
   I buy full-fat coconut milk for more body and flavor and just use less. Open the can upside down, if instructed, and pour off the thin, diluted portion.

5. THAI CHILES
   These pinkie-length chiles deliver a punctuated heat without lots of chopped bits floating in the dish. Buy them in bulk, and freeze.

6. GINGER
   Essential for adding pungency and pop. Fresh ginger will keep in a plastic bag in your crisper for about a month. Look for heavy knobs with tight skins.

7. LEMONGRASS
   The fibrous stalks impart a delicate lemon perfume that fits the more subtle aspects of Vietnamese cooking. Trim to 5-inch pieces, and freeze.
CASHEW, COCONUT, AND CABBAGE SLAW
Active: 12 min. Total: 12 min.
Refreshing the coconut flakes in a bit of coconut oil gives them a lovely sheen and makes the salad incredibly aromatic. The lime juice and zest bring the whole thing together. Find this recipe in The Pho Cookbook, out February 2017 (see page 148).

1 tsp. coconut oil
1/3 cup unsweetened flaked coconut
2 Tbsp. grated lime rind
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
1/2 Tbsp. sugar
1/2 Tbsp. reduced-sodium soy sauce
1 Tbsp. canola or other neutral oil
1 tsp. kosher salt
1/8 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1 small red Fresno chile or jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped
2 1/2 cups shredded red cabbage (about 7 oz.)
1 1/2 cups matchstick-cut peeled jicama (about 5 oz.)
1/4 cup unsalted roasted cashews
3 Tbsp. finely chopped cilantro, mint, and/or Thai basil

1. Heat a small skillet over medium heat. Add coconut oil; swirl until oil melts. Add coconut; cook 5 to 7 minutes or until toasted and fragrant, stirring frequently. Remove pan from heat; cool.
2. Combine lime rind, juice, sugar, soy sauce, canola oil, salt, and black pepper in a small bowl, stirring with a whisk. Stir in chile.
3. Combine cabbage and jicama in a large bowl. Add juice mixture; toss to coat. Let stand 1 minute. Sprinkle with coconut, cashews, and herbs.

SERVES 6 (serving size: about 3/4 cup)
CALORIES 136; FAT 9.1g (sat 4.2g, mono 3.1g, poly 1.2g); PROTEIN 2g; CARB 13g; FIBER 3g; SUGARS 6g (est. added sugars 3g); CHOL 0mg; IRON 1mg; SODIUM 181mg; CALC 22mg
TOFU CURRY WITH LEMONGRASS AND CHILE

Active: 25 min. Total: 25 min.
You don’t need to press the tofu to drain the water for this recipe; a slow pan-fry achieves the same effect and gets the exterior extra crispy. For a vegetarian dish, swap the fish sauce for reduced-sodium soy sauce or the liquid from soaked dried porcini mushrooms.

1 (14-oz.) block extra-firm tofu, drained
2 1/2 Tbsp. canola oil, divided
1 tsp. reduced-sodium soy sauce
1/4 cup water
1/4 cup canned coconut milk
1/3 cup finely chopped shallots
1 to 2 Thai chilies, finely chopped
1 lemongrass stalk, coarsely chopped
1/2 tsp. kosher salt
12 green beans, cut diagonally into 2-in. pieces
1/2 red bell pepper, cut into 1/4-in. strips
2 Tbsp. Madras curry powder
1/2 tsp. sugar
1 1/2 tsp. fish sauce
3 to 4 fresh cilantro sprigs, coarsely chopped

1. Halve tofu lengthwise. Cut each half crosswise into 4 pieces.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high. Add tofu to pan; cook, without stirring, until lightly browned, 4 to 5 minutes. Turn over; cook 2 minutes. Carefully add soy sauce to pan; cook 2 minutes. Remove tofu from pan; cool. Cut each piece diagonally into triangles.

3. Combine 1/4 cup water and coconut milk in a bowl. Heat remaining 1 1/2 teaspoons oil in a large skillet over medium-high. Add shallots, chilies, and lemongrass; cook 1 minute or until fragrant, stirring constantly. Add salt, green beans, and bell pepper; cook 2 minutes or until vegetables have softened slightly. Add curry and sugar; cook 1 minute, stirring constantly. Add tofu, milk mixture, and fish sauce; cook 2 minutes or until thoroughly heated. Arrange tofu mixture on a platter. Sprinkle with cilantro.

SERVES 4 (serving size: 3 oz. tofu and about 1/2 cup vegetables)

CALORIES 246; FAT 16.6g (sat 4.9g, mono 7.1g, poly 5.2g); PROTEIN 14g; CARB 15g; FIBER 3g; SUGARS 4g (est. added sugars 1g); CHOL 0mg; IRON 3mg; SODIUM 461mg; CALC 198mg

STIR-FRIED WATER SPINACH WITH GARLIC

Active: 5 min. Total: 15 min.
Look for water spinach (called rau muong or ong choy) in Asian markets. Regular spinach is a fine substitute, though it won’t have the same silkiness.

1 lb. fresh water spinach, wide parts of stems trimmed
4 tsp. canola or other neutral oil, divided
1 Tbsp. oyster sauce
1 tsp. fish sauce
1/2 tsp. sugar
1 Tbsp. minced fresh garlic, divided
2 tsp. water
1 tsp. cornstarch

1. Cut spinach into 3- to 4-inch pieces. Rinse and drain well. Bring a large Dutch oven filled with water to a boil over high heat. Add spinach; cook 30 seconds or until wilted. Drain; rinse with cold water. Drain well.

2. Combine 1 teaspoon oil, oyster sauce, fish sauce, and sugar in a small bowl; stir with a whisk. Add in 1 teaspoon garlic. Combine 2 teaspoons water and cornstarch, stirring with a whisk.

3. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in a large skillet over medium-high until hot but not smoking. Add remaining 2 teaspoons garlic; cook 15 seconds or until fragrant, stirring constantly. Pour off excess water from spinach; add spinach to pan. Cook 3 minutes or until thoroughly heated, stirring constantly. Stir in oyster sauce mixture. When spinach begins to release juices, add cornstarch mixture. Cook, stirring constantly, 1 minute or until sauce thickens and spinach takes on a silky finish.

SERVES 4 (serving size: about 1/2 cup)

CALORIES 76; FAT 5.1g (sat 0.4g, mono 3g, poly 1.5g); PROTEIN 4g; CARB 6g; FIBER 3g; SUGARS 1g (est. added sugars 1g); CHOL 0mg; IRON 3mg; SODIUM 267mg; CALC 117mg

BUTTERNUT AND GINGER CONGEE

Active: 15 min.
Total: 1 hr. 30 min.
Shredded butternut squash will melt beautifully into the congee; use a box grater or the shredding disc of a food processor.

1/3 cup uncooked long-grain white rice
2 1/2 tsp. canola or other neutral oil, divided
12 oz. butternut squash, peeled and shredded
4 cups unsalted chicken stock (such as Swanson)
1 cup water
1 1/2 tsp. fish sauce
1/4 tsp. kosher salt
1 (1-in.) piece fresh ginger, very thinly sliced
1/2 tsp. sugar
1/4 tsp. ground white pepper
2 Tbsp. coarsely chopped fresh Thai basil
1 to 2 Tbsp. coarsely chopped fresh cilantro

1. Place rice in a bowl; cover with water. Stir vigorously for 10 seconds to release starch; drain well. Place rice in a food processor; pulse until very finely chopped.

2. Heat 1 1/2 teaspoons oil in a medium saucepan over medium. Add rice and squash; cook 1 to 2 minutes. Add stock, 1 cup water, fish sauce, and salt; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, partially cover, and simmer 1 hour and 15 minutes or until congee is creamy, stirring occasionally.

3. Heat remaining 1 teaspoon oil in a skillet over medium. Add ginger; cook 8 minutes or until golden and crisp, stirring frequently. Place ginger on a paper towel–lined plate; cool.

4. Stir sugar and pepper into congee. Divide among 4 bowls; top evenly with basil, cilantro, and ginger.

SERVES 4 (serving size: about 1/4 cups)

CALORIES 149; FAT 3.1g (sat 0.3g, mono 1.9g, poly 0.9g); PROTEIN 7g; CARB 24g; FIBER 2g; SUGARS 4g (est. added sugars 1g); CHOL 0mg; IRON 2mg; SODIUM 397mg; CALC 68mg
**SMOKY EGGPLANT WITH SCALLION OIL**

*Active: 35 min. Total: 50 min.*

Choose eggplants that feel heavy for their size. If you prefer not to grill or char on the burner of your stovetop, you can halve the eggplant lengthwise; place, skin side up, on a foil-lined baking sheet; and bake at 450°F for 30 to 45 minutes or until very tender. You’ll lose some of the char, but the dish will still be delicious.

1. Preheat grill to high.

2. To expose each eggplant fully to the heat, peel off the pointy flaps of the eggplant caps but leave the stems attached. Pierce each eggplant 8 to 10 times with a fork. Coat grill grates with cooking spray. Add eggplants to grill; cook, uncovered, 20 to 25 minutes or until skin is blackened and flesh is very tender, turning occasionally.

You can also cook directly over the gas burner of your stove: Heat burner to high, and place eggplant directly on burner. Cook 12 to 15 minutes, turning occasionally, until skin is sagging and charred. If flesh is not sufficiently soft in the middle, place in a 450°F oven for 5 to 10 minutes. Cool slightly.

3. Thinly slice green parts of green onions (reserve white parts for another use). Place green parts of green onions in a small bowl. Heat oil in a small saucepan over medium until just starting to smoke. Pour hot oil over green onions (they should sizzle and wilt). Cool.

4. Combine 1/2 tablespoons water, soy sauce, rice vinegar, sugar, minced garlic, and chile in a small bowl, stirring with a whisk.

5. When eggplants are cool enough to handle, remove skins. Cut flesh crosswise into 2-inch pieces. Separate pieces into strips; arrange on a platter. Pour off any liquid that accumulates. Spoon green onion mixture over that accumulates. Spoon over green onion mixture.

**SWEET POTATO AND SHRIMP CAKES WITH NUOC CHAM**

*Active: 32 min. Total: 32 min.*

I consider this dish a modern Vietnamese cook’s interpretation of a classic. If you can find white sweet potatoes, use them—they’re drier and less sweet than their orange cousins. Place the dipping sauce in a bowl surrounded by the lettuce and herbs so guests can build their own lettuce wraps as they like.

1. Combine potato and salt in a bowl; gently massage with your hands until potato mixture is moist and limp. Rinse potato mixture; drain. Place potato mixture in paper towels; squeeze to remove excess liquid. Place potato mixture, shallots, and shrimp in a bowl, stirring to combine. Stir in flours, 1/2 teaspoon fish sauce, pepper, and egg. Divide and shape potato mixture into 8 (3-inch) cakes.

2. Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium-high. Add 2 tablespoons oil; swirl to coat. Add 4 cakes to pan; cook 2 minutes on each side or until golden brown and crisp. Remove cakes from pan. Repeat procedure with remaining 4 cakes and remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Keep warm.

3. Combine sugar, 2 tablespoons water, juice, and vinegar in a bowl, stirring with a whisk until sugar dissolves. Stir in remaining 2 teaspoons fish sauce and 1/2 teaspoon fish sauce, divided. Stir in remaining 4 cakes and remaining 4 cakes and 1/2 teaspoon fish sauce.

4. Serve potato cakes with sauce, lettuce leaves, cilantro, and mint.

**THE PHO COOKBOOK**

Nguyen explores the fascinating history and her lifelong love of this popular yet mysterious Vietnamese noodle soup. Recipes include the ultimate all-weekend broth and quick weeknight shortcuts, as well as snacks, salads, and sides. Her patient, joyful instruction is a pleasure to read. (Ten Speed Press, $22, on sale Feb. 7, 2017)