

Rice noodles and fresh herbs form the base of the salad; grilled shrimp, beef, or sautéed tofu goes on top. Other embellishments: bean sprouts, cucumber slivers, limes, peanuts, and Vietnamese dipping sauce. **OPPOSITE** Ann Le with jasmine tea.

Fresh noodle salads

Make one dish or a buffet with bright combinations from Southern California's Little Saigon

BY MARGO TRUE PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA ROMEREIN

AT HER PARENTS' HOUSE in Orange County, Ann Le tears tender leaves of mint, cilantro, and basil and scatters them over bowls of rice vermicelli. She's making the Vietnamese herb-noodle salad called *bún*, a dish much beloved here in Little Saigon—a 3-square-mile chunk of Westminster, California, that's home to the largest group of Vietnamese outside Vietnam. *Bún* is infinitely adaptable, a bed for everything from pork chops to braised eggplant. Today Le, a dimple-checked 29-year-old, has made three toppings: fat

grilled shrimp with black pepper, green onions, and garlic; crisp-edged grilled lemon-grass beef; and cubes of warm tofu glazed with oyster sauce (for the recipes, turn the page). All are versions of favorites from her first book, *The Little Saigon Cookbook: Vietnamese Cuisine and Culture in Southern California's Little Saigon* (The Globe Pequot Press, 2006; \$16), an homage to the neighborhood where she was raised. **INFO** Visit www.sunset.com/littlesaigon for more about Le, her book, and Little Saigon.



Salad strategies

If you want to serve the salad with all the toppings and condiments we've suggested, follow these tips to make it easier.

Prep foods together

Certain ingredients show up in more than one recipe; prepping the total amount will save time.

- Black pepper, freshly ground: 2 tsp. plus 1 tsp.
- Cilantro sprigs: 1 1/4 cups plus 2 tsp.
- Garlic: 1/2 cup minced (14 to 16 large cloves)
- Lemon grass: 5 tbsp. minced (from inner core of 2 or 3 stalks)
- Lime juice, freshly squeezed: 1/4 cup
- Mint: 1 1/2 cups loosely packed leaves

Do some work ahead

The day before, make the fried garlic and the dipping sauce. Prepare some or all of the ingredients: Rinse, peel, and chop, then refrigerate the perishables (store the garlic at room temperature). You can even make the Sautéed Tofu ahead (reheat gently).

When you're ready to make the toppings, start with the beef, since it takes awhile to marinate.

Main recipe

Herb noodle salad (Bún)

Good with everything from beef to tofu.

PREP AND COOK TIME About 45 minutes

MAKES 4 servings

1/2 lb. rice vermicelli or *mai fun*

1 cup each loosely packed fresh mint, basil, and cilantro leaves or sprigs

1 piece (3 in.) cucumber, peeled, halved, seeded, and sliced into 1 1/2-in. matchsticks

1 cup fresh mung bean sprouts, rinsed

1 lime, cut in wedges

Your choice of toppings: Grilled Beef with Lemon

Grass and Garlic, Peppery Grilled Shrimp, and/or Sautéed Tofu (recipes follow)

Garnishes: 2 green onions, thinly sliced; 1/4 cup Fried Sliced Garlic (recipe follows); 3 tbsp. crushed unsalted dry-roasted peanuts

Vietnamese Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)

1. Boil vermicelli according to package instructions. Drain, rinse with cool water, put in a bowl, and cover with a towel.

2. Set out herbs, cucumber, sprouts, and lime wedges on a platter. Set out cooked toppings on platters. Serve garnishes and dipping sauce in small bowls.

3. Before serving, check noodles; if gummy, rinse again and drain. Guests assemble their own salads: first noodles; then herbs (loosely torn), cucumber, and sprouts; then toppings; then garnishes and a drizzle of lime and/or dipping sauce.

PER SERVING WITHOUT TOPPING: 220 CAL., 4% (8 CAL.) FROM FAT; 6.1 G PROTEIN; 1 G FAT (0.3 G SAT.); 48 G CARBO (5.2 G FIBER); 16 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Toppings

Grilled beef with lemon grass and garlic (Bò nướng xả tỏi)

A classic; also works with steamed rice.

PREP AND COOK TIME 30 minutes, plus

2 hours to marinate

MAKES 4 servings

NOTES You can use a grill pan or broiler instead of a grill. (Broil onions first, about 10 in. from heat, and then beef, about 6 in. from heat.)

1 1/2 tsp. sugar

1 tbsp. freshly ground black pepper

2 1/2 tbsp. minced garlic (3 or 4 large cloves)

1 1/2 stalks lemon grass, outer layer peeled off and inner core minced (about 3 tbsp.)

3 tbsp. each fish sauce and olive oil

1 lb. beef tri-tip or round, sliced against the grain into 1/4-in. slices

2 yellow onions, peeled and quartered

2 tbsp. each loosely packed fresh cilantro sprigs and crushed unsalted dry-roasted peanuts

1. In a wide, shallow bowl, whisk together sugar, pepper, garlic, lemon grass, fish sauce, and 2 tbsp. olive oil. Add beef, toss to coat, and refrigerate 2 hours.

2. Rub remaining 1 tbsp. oil over onions. Prepare a gas or charcoal grill for medium-high heat (you can hold your hand 1 to 2 in. above grill level only 3 to 4 seconds). Brush grill with vegetable oil. Thread onions onto two 8-in. metal skewers. Lay onion skewers on grill and cook (close lid on gas grill) until softened, about 15 minutes, turning skewers every 5 minutes or so.

3. When onions are cooked halfway, lay beef slices on grill and cook (close lid on gas grill), turning once, 3 to 5 minutes.

4. Arrange beef and onions on a platter and garnish with cilantro and peanuts.

PER SERVING: 428 CAL., 61% (263 CAL.) FROM FAT; 26 G PROTEIN; 29 G FAT (7.9 G SAT.); 16 G CARBO (2.3 G FIBER); 516 MG SODIUM; 74 MG CHOL.

Peppery grilled shrimp

(Tom nướng tỏi xả ớt)

Smoky grilled shrimp play well against the cooling herbs and noodles of the salad.

PREP AND COOK TIME 25 minutes, plus at least 15 minutes to marinate

MAKES 4 servings

NOTES Soak the skewers in water for at least 1/2 hour before grilling. You can use a grill pan or broiler instead of a grill.

2 tbsp. finely chopped fresh lemon grass

5 tbsp. minced garlic (about 10 large cloves)

1/2 tsp. Asian red chili sauce, such as Sriracha

3 tbsp. fish sauce

2 tsp. sugar

3 tbsp. olive oil

2 tbsp. fresh lime juice

1 tbsp. freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup finely chopped green onions

1 lb. medium shrimp, peeled (leave tails intact) and deveined

6 wooden skewers (6 in. each), soaked in water

1/2 cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves, sliced into thin slivers

1. In a medium bowl, whisk together lemon grass, garlic, chili sauce, fish sauce, sugar, olive oil, lime juice, pepper, and green onions. Add shrimp and toss to coat. Let marinate 15 minutes at room temperature or up to 1 hour in the refrigerator.

2. Prepare a gas or charcoal grill for high heat (you can hold your hand 1 to 2 in. above grill level only 2 to 3 seconds). Brush grill with vegetable oil. Thread shrimp onto skewers and grill until curled, pink, and opaque, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Remove skewers and garnish with mint.

PER SERVING: 258 CAL., 45% (137 CAL.) FROM FAT; 22 G PROTEIN; 13 G FAT (2 G SAT.); 13 G CARBO (1.6 G FIBER); 898 MG SODIUM; 140 MG CHOL.

Sautéed tofu (Đậu hũ xào dầu hào)

To gussy up this recipe, double the sauce and add sliced mushrooms, carrots, or bok choy.

PREP AND COOK TIME 10 minutes

MAKES 4 servings

2 tbsp. oyster sauce

1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

1 tbsp. sugar

2 tbsp. fish sauce

1 tbsp. olive oil

1 package (14 oz.) extra-firm tofu, cubed

1/4 cup loosely packed cilantro sprigs

1. Whisk oyster sauce, pepper, sugar, and fish sauce in a bowl.

2. Heat oil over medium heat in a medium nonstick skillet and add tofu. Cook 1 minute, stir gently, and add oyster sauce mixture. Cook, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes, or until tofu is hot and sauce has reduced a little. Garnish with cilantro.

PER SERVING: 167 CAL., 84% (90 CAL.) FROM FAT; 13 G PROTEIN; 10 G FAT (1.5 G SAT.); 8.4 G CARBO (0.8 G FIBER); 665 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Condiments

Fried sliced garlic (Tỏi chiên)

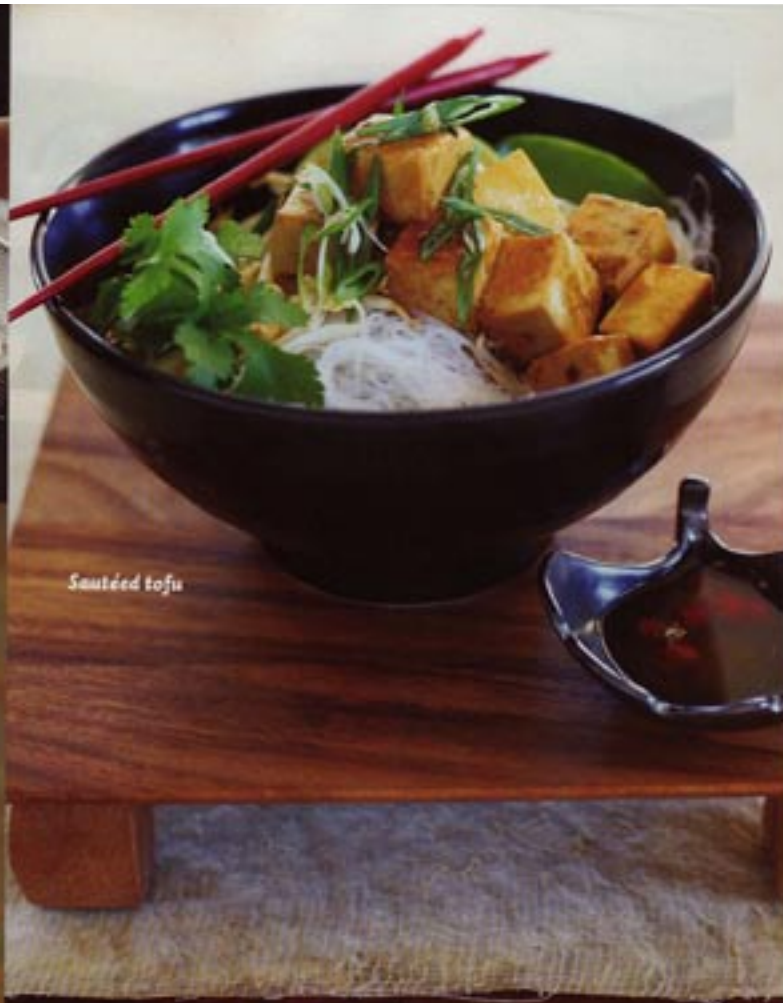
In a medium skillet, heat 1/2 cup olive oil over medium heat. Thinly slice 8 medium garlic cloves lengthwise and fry until just golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Makes about 1/4 cup.

PER Tbsp. 39 CAL., 75% (32 CAL.) FROM FAT; 0.4 G PROTEIN; 3.4 G FAT (0.5 G SAT.); 2 G CARBO (0.3 G FIBER); 1 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Vietnamese dipping sauce (Nước chấm)

This is the national condiment of Vietnam. Slice 1/2 to 1 red or green bird chile or serrano into paper-thin rings and put in a small bowl. Add 1/2 cup warm water, 1/2 tbsp. minced garlic (1 large clove), 2 tbsp. fish sauce, and 1 1/2 to 2 tbsp. fresh lime juice and whisk to combine. Makes 1 cup.

PER Tbsp. 5.7 CAL., 35% (2 CAL.) FROM FAT; 0.3 G PROTEIN; 0.2 G FAT (0 G SAT.); 0.6 G CARBO (0 G FIBER); 75 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL. ■



Sautéed tofu



Grilled beef with lemon grass and garlic



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The salad begins with dried rice vermicelli, which cooks in a couple of minutes and must be drained and rinsed; the noodles topped with sautéed tofu, which may taste complex but is very easy to make; Le chops lemon grass for the beef; Vietnamese dipping sauce and lime wedges add the final burst of flavor; fresh herbs include mint and basil; Le fries garlic into crisp chips; a salad topped with grilled beef.

