

*f***P**

# THE IMMIGRANT ADVANTAGE

What We Can Learn from  
Newcomers to America about  
Health, Happiness, and Hope

CLAUDIA KOLKER

Free Press

*New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi*



Free Press

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2011 by Claudia Kolker

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Free Press Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Certain names and identifying characteristics have been changed.

This Free Press trade paperback edition July 2014

FREE PRESS and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

Manufactured in the United States of America

11 13 15 17 19 20 18 16 14 12

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kolker, Claudia.

The immigrant advantage: what we can learn from newcomers to  
America about health, happiness, and hope /  
Claudia Kolker.

p. cm.

1. Immigrants—United States—Social life and customs—21st century.
2. Immigrants—United States—Social conditions. I. Title.

JV6456.K65 2011

305.9'069120973—dc22      2011004498

ISBN 978-1-4165-8683-8

ISBN 978-1-4165-8711-8 (ebook)

# 7

---

## How to Eat: Vietnamese Monthly Rice

### *The Crash*

After nine hours in a cubicle, lunch spent researching science camp for her kids, and forty ugly minutes on the freeway, Lana Khuong opened her front door and knew the truth.

She did not feel like cooking dinner.

This was a woman who had lived through the Vietnam War. She'd waited years under the Communists for a visa and built a new life as a Houston legal secretary. She did not lack fortitude. But, opening the door to her house where her hungry husband, sons, and two-year-old granddaughter waited, she felt her energy funnel away. She had pitched into the time of day when organizing even a simple meal can seem insurmountable. But the alternative—family members scattered throughout the house with snacks or sandwiches—seemed even worse.

Most parents have heard dire warnings of just what befalls families that don't sit down for evening meals. Their children earn worse grades, get lower test scores, dabble more often with drugs. They're prey to more asthma attacks and eating disorders. They are less resilient, for God's sake, to catastrophes such as 9/11. But those are just

correlations. For first-generation Vietnamese such as Lana, scientifically proving the value of family dinner is pointless. Eating with others, no matter how late in the day, is psychologically, even spiritually, essential.

Not that it's easy. The Vietnamese template for dinner is also considerably more involved than the American one. Always, for instance, the meal must include a clear soup and steamed rice. There should be crisp vegetables, savory protein, tart pickles or salad. And rather than one hunk of protein per diner, meat or fish must be hand-chopped to bite-size chunks. No wonder Lana didn't feel up to the task.

I often felt that way myself, even when I hungered to slide down at a table with food waiting, warm and fragrant. After work I craved the chance to sit down and stitch the day's events together with people I love. But at six thirty or seven I didn't want to be the one cooking. As a result, too often when I finally pulled something together it was seven thirty, when the apex of a three-year-old's social skills is asking if she can leave the table and sleep. The difference, on evenings like this, was that Lana had a solution.

### *Fast Food*

Monthly Rice Delivered Here, the signs promise from the window of Quan Di Tu, one of dozens of Vietnamese restaurants in southwest Houston. Inside the little shop, two hours before dinnertime, thirty-two-year-old Trang Nguyen is stirring a deep pot bubbling with fish broth. Dipping out precise ladlefuls, she decants the soup into plastic cups, each with a scrawled name on the lid. Those names are all that Trang and her business partner, Betty Nguyen, need for their next step. At 5:00 p.m., one of the women will disappear from their pocket-size restaurant, poising a cardboard box laden with Styrofoam containers across her solar plexus. For the next hour, she'll knock on the doors of ranch houses, lean over gates toward coolers, or open

up apartments with her ring of keys to drop off the dinners the two women have just cooked.

This is home-style Vietnamese food. It has less oil, less salt, and more assertively redolent fish sauce than you'd find at a restaurant. It's cooked differently too. Braised and simmered rather than flash-fried, which looks more impressive but dries out faster, it will still be savory later that night, as leftovers for anyone who arrives home late. And it's much cheaper than takeout, because the ingredients are humbler, and because subscribers accept whatever menu Trang has chosen for them that day.

Thus, when Lana arrives home from work at six, the day's freshly cooked dinner is waiting by the front door. There's a nest of vermicelli, flecked with coriander and dried shrimp. The main course is simmered catfish, as comforting to Vietnamese as meatloaf is to Americans. Today's soup, dipped from the stovetop just a half hour before, is a clear broth flecked with shreds of chard and scented with star anise. Lana has even ordered dessert, a jiggly vanilla pudding dotted with green jelly cubes. All Lana has to do is set the table—making dinner happen is still up to Vietnamese women—and her husband, sons, and granddaughter can troop in for a hot family meal.

*Com thang*, or monthly rice, is the American version of a generations-old tradition in Vietnam. There, where women traditionally didn't work outside the home, *com thang* probably evolved with family cooks who prepared meals in their own homes and delivered. The custom branched out into a cottage industry, feeding scholars and soldiers who were far from home but still determined to eat as they would with their families. As more Vietnamese women entered the workplace, the custom not only changed but thrived. When Vietnamese refugees came to this country beginning in the mid-1970s, they brought it with them.

"Com thang comes down to taste and economics," Tran Van Hien, a University of Houston-Clear Lake computer instructor, told me. He

has used the service himself, and his sisters, all doctors and all working mothers, use it now. “There’s no point,” he added, “after a long day of school or work and fighting traffic, to going home and cooking.” Com thang is the Vietnamese answer to the six o’clock crash. In its traditional version, monthly rice is just-cooked, homemade food delivered to your house each day at dinnertime. It is dinner made from scratch, from ingredients bought that day in the market. And it’s cheaper than a meal at McDonald’s.

### *The Rules*

In both the United States and Vietnam, com thang hinges on two core Vietnamese values: the importance of tremblingly fresh ingredients and the need to eat with other people. To serve these demands, com thang cooks in Vietnam have devised a varied repertoire of services. Most common is daily home delivery, like Lana gets in Houston. Clients decide whether to renew month by month. Alternatively, they may also stop by the cook’s house or restaurant each afternoon and pick dinner up. A young man in the military, or a university student, might place a standing order for a full year.

Imported to the United States, com thang diversified further. In Orange County, California, stunning real estate prices have spawned an old-fashioned boardinghouse boom among Vietnamese American young adults. Their rental rooms often come without kitchens. Craving the food of their childhood, they sign up with the area’s on- or off-the-books com thang cooks. The luckiest ones get meal deliveries from their own mothers. Three decades after the first refugees landed in Orange County, their children have enrolled by the thousands in area colleges. Mothers commonly cook a week’s worth of comfort food—soups, catfish, pickled vegetables—and dispatch it in coolers on \$5 buses.

Vietnamese Americans living farther from home have revived

another version of monthly rice. When The Pham, a photography editor now in his thirties, went to graduate school in Missouri, he couldn't find a Vietnamese restaurant. Armed with a name from his parents, Pham located one of St. Louis' handful of Vietnamese homemakers and hired her to cook his dinners—which he ate at her family table.

“I was paying as much for the family setting as for the fresh meals,” Pham said. Back in Vietnam, shrewd homemakers carefully screen the applicants for such meals, picking the ones whose work ethic and intelligence look most promising. Such a fellow adds ambience, naturally. But he might also marry one of the household's daughters. What better way for everyone in the family to vet him first? The suitor is nicely positioned too, able to assess his potential wife's personality, her parents' temperaments, and, it goes without saying, her cooking.

“That happens here in Orange County all the time,” Anh Do, the vice president of *Nguoi Viet* newspaper, told me, laughing. Do's paper features an entire classified column of com thang providers and also hires them to deliver subsidized lunches to its staff.

Still, the whole idea of Vietnamese subscription meals—finding a contact, tracking down someone's home business—seemed, when I first heard of it, out of reach. If I'd thought carefully, I might have had doubts about the food too. My first sip of *pho*, Vietnam's fabled long-simmered noodle soup, was one of the experiences that made me want to stay in Houston when I moved here in 1996. But the pho joints I visited were tiny specialty businesses, and the only other Vietnamese dishes I knew were, well, restauranty. Tasty enough. But heart-seizingly salty, bright with cooking oil, and, especially when they were nothing more than a stir-fried handful of greens, way too marked up to buy with regularity.

So I didn't think much about com thang until almost a decade after a friend mentioned it. A lot had changed. Mike and I now had a

couple of three-year-olds, I commuted to an office, and every night I faced the wilting challenge of trying to sit down to family dinner as I had loved doing as I grew up.

Settled now in Houston, I also had lots of Vietnamese friends. One, luckily, was Lana, a working mother who herself was on the hunt for monthly rice.

### *The Quest*

“In fact, I’m looking for someone new,” Lana told me the next time I saw her. It was always good to have Lana at work on your case. Compact, a faithful gym devotee, Lana is deliciously blunt and always, as I knew from watching her raise her sons, finds a solution.

Lana’s com thang provider had retired a few months earlier at the age of thirty. Not, mind you, because she’d made her fortune. Com thang is not that kind of business, with its small clientele and vermicelli-slim profits. The cook, or rather her family, had succumbed to burnout, a common ending in this line of work.

Maybe, Lana and I agreed, an ad on Radio Saigon would net a good selection. “Searching for excellent com thang provider, individual working from home, southwest area,” Lana wrote in Vietnamese. “Delivery preferred,” she added at my request. A few days later she called me, chagrined. “I’ve been getting calls all day,” she said, “but Vietnamese don’t listen carefully! Every single caller has been *looking* for a com thang deliverer.”

Had com thang somehow disappeared? No: it was alive and thriving. Only its logistics have changed, explained Ann Le, author of *The Little Saigon Cookbook*. Com thang had gone legit. “In the past few years in Los Angeles, there’s been such a crackdown on health codes,” she said. “You’re not supposed to be cooking from home, of course. The result is that fewer cooks dare to run com thang operations from their kitchens.” Houston, she theorized, might be feeling the reverberations.

But there was a second, more cheerful reason for the radio silence. Fewer com thang cooks have to deliver. In the past, ambitious newcomers barely factored their own countless hours of labor as a business expense. What choice did they have? In Vietnam, com thang providers were often former servants or widows scrambling to support their families. During their first years in the United States, most Vietnamese worked with the same desperation. By now, though, many have advanced spectacularly. Some are rich, even famous. The children of those refugee “nail technicians” and clerks are now buying the convenience store chains and nail salons where their mothers used to toil. They’re doctors and lawyers and chemical engineers. They’re also branching out into more creative endeavors: luxury shoes, like designer Taryn Rose, and even space travel, like astronaut Eugene Trinh. Fewer of them, in other words, need to labor in hot kitchens, sautéing, steaming, and schlepping for fifty other families. And their kids and husbands no longer have to deliver for \$1 to keep in business.

You can even find a variation of com thang in the deli case at big Vietnamese markets. The price is the same, \$2 or \$3 a dish. But some, Lana for one, wrinkle noses at this variation. The food may not be fresh, and is certainly prepared by more than one person. Real com thang is cooked by someone you see week after week, someone you can look in the eye to tell her you like her grandmother’s soup. For that, you need to hunt down the minuscule com thang joints in storefronts and strip malls, the ones with three tables and a Magic Marker sign that says, in the world’s least accurate translation, Fast Food.

### *Auntie Four’s*

How different, really, is com thang from takeout? Like many Houstonians, I am a Vietnamese food fan, every few weeks slurping a \$5

bowl of pork-flavored pho. I sprinkle it, as I've been taught, with basil, cilantro, sprouts, and jalapeños. But according to my friend Dai Huynh, a *Houston Chronicle* food writer and trained cook, Vietnamese home-style cuisine differs from this entirely, in preparation, ingredients, and seasoning. To show me, she picked me up one day at lunchtime and drove me to a new *com thang* place she'd found. This wasn't a conventional restaurant, Dai cautioned. It was more of a way station for people to pick up their monthly rice. But it had three bite-size tables where we could eat while Dai schooled me on *com thang* essentials.

Auntie Four's Food to Go didn't bother with details like waiters or table settings. The little shop was designed for customers to grab and go. Right now, around 1:00 p.m., it was quiet. Most office workers had already come by on their lunch breaks or would start filing in around 5:00 p.m. Peering through the glass shield at the steam table, Dai whispered, "This is the real thing. You can't get what they have here in a restaurant. It's not showy or expensive enough. But we"—she meant anyone who'd grown up in a Vietnamese home—"can't live without these flavors."

She pondered our order. At the back of the steam table stood five white platters, each heaped with just-fried or just-roasted whole fish. There were mackerel, sardines, tilapia, and others I didn't recognize, each topped with frizzled fried onions or shredded herbs. On the heat, in a deep metal tub, chunks of beef and preserved eggs floated in a brown sauce. Another vat held pale chicken broth with bitter melon rings and pork nuggets. Other tubs held tofu in copper-sheened gravy and potbellied tomatoes stuffed with minced beef. A volcano of fried anchovies towered on a plate.

Altogether, there were three soups, and about ten other dishes to choose from. Except for the larger fish, each dish cost \$2.

"Vietnamese food is all about texture and contrast," Dai said as we sat down to wait for the dishes she'd chosen. "Every meal, including

com thang, has to include dishes that are salty, sour, crunchy, and soupy. And rice, of course. So”—a plate of vinegary bean sprouts with dark green shreds arrived, which Dai plucked with her chopsticks—“the sour part of the meal is this mix of fresh sprouts and pickled spinach. I adore this spinach. My mom used to make it and preserve it in a big jar on our counter.” I pinched up a taste. The sprouts tasted familiar and refreshing, while the greens were fermented and musky. Together their effect was tonic. I helped myself to more.

“Now, this way of serving food: this is family-style,” Dai said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant. Doesn’t every family eat family-style?

“At restaurants, or even in your house, Americans take their servings complete from the plate,” Dai said. “You take the breast of chicken, or your steak, and you try not to touch the other food while you’re doing it. But here”—she paused, prying a strip of catfish from a caramel-colored fillet—“you break off from the whole. Then you keep going back to get more. It’s okay to double dip, and you are touching other people’s food every time you get your own. It means a lot to us, eating this way. It is intimate. An exchange of energy.

“Watch out for bones,” she added as I hacked off a wedge of catfish. The meaty flesh bristled with translucent splinters. “This is a dish that kids eat?” I asked.

“All the time. You just learn to be careful. If you get a little bone in your throat, eat some rice. That’s what they told us when we were kids.”

I tried a bite of the firm, light-colored flesh. It had been braised in fish sauce and syrupy, caramelized sugar, a combination Dai said was typical of southern Vietnam. The flavors were creaturely and delicate at the same time. The texture rolled, like good chocolate. I hadn’t realized catfish had fat, but peering into the serving bowl, I saw a broad ring of it surrounding the meat. “You’re supposed to eat that,” Dai said. Good. I took more.

Dai grinned, expectations confirmed. “We don’t get tired of this

food,” she said. “This is what our mothers made for us growing up. And after a while without it, even as an adult, you start to crave it.”

### *The Table*

Dai was improvising with her theory of energy transmission via catfish. But I was struck at how many first- and second-generation Vietnamese had the same notion. Communal meals, they said, are not just a pleasure. They are necessary for mental balance. Eating alone can actually foment psychological problems, Tran, the computer science teacher, told me. I’d never thought of family meals in quite those terms. But dinner in my own home, growing up, is without question the most distinct, consistent memory of my childhood. I can see it as if it were a play: each person in the same seat every night, candelabra always lit, the rubber Marimekko place mats for each child—lion for Adam, monkey for Jason, fish for Luisa, and for me a red hen.

Years later, when I was around thirty, my mother, in a spate of preemptive organizing, asked each of us to name the possessions we wanted after her demise. There was rash talk of printouts and stickers. In the end each person named one thing he or she really liked. For me it was the waxed, taffy-colored dinner table with the broad, upholstered chairs that we had occupied in formation for twenty years. I remember slumping with laughter at that table over my brothers’ jokes. I stormed away from it to house arrests in my room. Uneasily, I tried to ignore the empty seat when my sixteen-year-old sister briefly ran off to Florida. I sat mortifyingly mute for an entire meal when my beloved sixth-grade teacher Mr. Carman joined us for dinner.

Even for the 1970s, when fewer women worked outside the home than today, those Kolker dinners were unusually elaborate. In the decades since, such meals have gotten ever harder to create. According to one influential study, Americans reported a 33 percent drop in

family dinners between 1981 and 1997, in part because children's free time had dropped by almost twelve hours a week.

Yet we really are programmed to eat with others. And home-based family meals, a relentless cascade of studies show, are perhaps the signature habit of functional families. The quantity of mealtime that a family shares is the strongest predictor of low rates of behavioral problems and high academic scores—stronger, oddly, than the number of hours spent in school itself. The big question, of course, is whether family meals improve family functioning, or if families pull off nightly dinners because they are functional. For all the stacks of data pronouncing that dinner is magic, all we know is that it simply correlates to outcomes we want.

But the number of those correlations is striking. In *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, writer Miriam Weinstein details a multitude of positive influences linked to communal meals. As she suggests in her subtitle, eating together can make us “smarter, stronger, healthier, and happier.” She's not the only one to find such connections. Some are logical. Diet counselors, for example, say regular family dinners help patients learn what a moderate helping looks like. Families can supersize portions at home, but it's easier to make good decisions if a McDonald's marketing campaign isn't shaping the choices. Talking while you eat also slows a meal's pace, which in turn reduces consumption. Vietnamese cooking exemplifies this principle. You can't just wolf it down, because you're occupied prying, pinching, lifting, or ladling. This is probably rooted in necessity, not some ancient insight about weight loss. With fewer big trees for fuel, many Asian cultures chop ingredients for speedier cooking.

The weight control effect of family dinner may be self-evident, I thought, but the emotional part not necessarily. What about families that doggedly meet for dinner every night, only to repeat the same nasty fights? What about dinners that combust because someone is drinking? I was lucky to really enjoy my brothers and sister and

parents and look forward to seeing them at the end of each day. But I remember with special clarity the pall on meals when we fought. Surely some families would be happier if they didn't keep climbing back in the ring.

But here the findings are counterintuitive. Even for kids growing up in volatile households, dependable family dinners create a continuity. They show how to keep a commitment, crucial for kids at risk of impulse-control problems such as addiction, research suggests. Eating together also seems to build survival skills for ordinary families. In a study of thirty-two families, a team of Emory University psychologists tried to gauge the long-term links between family meals and emotional resilience. The research was well under way when the 9/11 attacks shook parents and children around the country. When the researchers completed the next phase of their work, they found higher levels of emotional resilience in the children who'd been eating dinner regularly with their families.

The explanation was not what you might guess—that those kids had calmer, more organized parents, for instance. Instead, the resilient kids enjoyed a strong inner “locus of control,” the sense of having some power over what happened to them. People with an external locus of control believe their lives are buffeted by luck or by others more powerful than they are. But people with an internal locus of control believe, to an important degree, that they can shape their own lives.

While families talk in all kinds of situations, they tend to share the most information at mealtime. And the kids who ate regularly with their families, the Emory researchers found, knew measurably more about their relatives, from the pioneers to the wastrels. That family knowledge correlated strongly with internal locus of control—and with the kids' resilience. Hearing stories at mealtimes, the lead researcher wrote, built “perspective-taking, critical thinking, theory building and relationship roles within the family.”

All these links reflect correlation, not cause. We really don't know why regular family meals are so closely linked to good health. What's appealing about dinner, though, is how neatly it attaches our psychic needs with the unmistakable demands of our bodies. At the end of the workday, we know we want to get home. We want to eat. And we want to tell someone what happened that day.

We'd feel even better, many Vietnamese think, if we could satisfy those requirements with wholesome food that's cooked, if not with love, at least with care.

After reading one too many reports on the consequences of neglecting dinner, I resolved to step up my own patchy efforts. Causation or not, why not elbow my way into the statistical winner's circle? The problem was that I got home from work at six thirty or six forty-five, and Mike, the better and more efficient cook, got back even later. It then took at least forty minutes to cook dinner and set the table, a process I admittedly slowed by observing my grandmother Lydia's ritual of transferring all condiments from unsightly jars to saucers. Just as ritualistically, at 7:15 p.m., Anna and Elena would start to fall apart.

Often enough, maybe three nights out of five, I managed to pull something off. But two nights out of seven, it was 8:00 p.m. when we finally got to the table and I would laboriously begin my stories about relatives and their life-altering personality traits. Elena would drape herself in an upside-down U on her chair and Anna would find it more comfortable to digest standing up. Mike would find it a teachable moment for what Texans call "home training" while I frantically flipped through my latest journal article clearly stating that for maximum effect, family dinner must be positive and relaxed. In general things got loud.

I know now some of this was because I was new at coordinating

meals for four people. But it also reflected the limits many parents, no matter how adept, face when women work and home fires must be lit anew at six each evening. My mother, the author of those leisurely, laughing dinners I remember so well, hated putting them together on a deadline each night. It's part of the reason I was so slow to learn cooking myself.

Working women find that deadline even more draining, a researcher named Reed Larson concluded in 2001. Intrigued by how families used their time, Larson looked at fifty-five two-parent working and middle-class families in suburban Chicago with at least one child between fifth and eighth grades. He even rigged up a way to measure these parents' emotional state throughout the day. Using what he called the Experience Sampling Method, he fitted out research subjects with pagers or alarm clocks for one week. When Larson signaled them at random moments, the subjects reported what they were doing and feeling.

Averaging their answers, Larson found that women with full-time jobs outside the home reported more happiness in their daily lives than stay-at-home mothers. Single mothers were the exception, reporting most happiness at the moment they returned home. But for most of the working women, those with partners and children, shortly after opening the front door, "their average emotional state fell substantially."

Larson labeled this the six o'clock crash.

But what did it mean? That working mothers didn't want to see their own kids? No. What plagued them was the specter of cooking dinner. When the inquisitive Larson paged his subjects at 6:00 p.m., he found mothers were arriving home to the general expectation that they would make supper. "It was not uncommon," Larson noted, "that our ESM signals during this period found a wife working in the kitchen and her husband relaxing in front of the TV."

Fifty-five families is a small sample, and I think more men expe-

rience the six o'clock crash than Larson's research conveyed. But the crash itself—that part, I knew, was authentic. Lana, an experienced cook whose children were all nearly adults, knew it too. That's why *com thang* was invented, Lana said in one of our frequent phone calls.

"Under pressure," Lana said, "I just cannot cook well. I need time and concentration. After work I'm just too tired. It's too much. And I still have to take care of my baby granddaughter. *Com thang* is a lot of convenience."

Then she said, "I found someone for you."

### *The Triumph of Tiffin*

Teetering on an appliance box poised on a three-legged stool, I poked a spatula at a kitchenware shelf in Viet Hoa Market. The vast store had a full aisle devoted to dried mushrooms in gift boxes, and another department with nothing but household shrines. But there was no one to help me reach the humble object of my desire. I was trying to reach a stainless-steel stack of canisters known as a tiffin box. In fact, I wanted eight of them. I needed these tiffin boxes before dinnertime the next night.

The tiffin box, called a *portaviandas* in Latin America, where it's also used, is an engineering triumph. Four shiny cylindrical serving bowls snap, one on top of the next, into a metal frame with handles on top. The containers are sealed with a latch that swings over the very top. Made of tin or aluminum, they look like sturdy Towers of Pisa without the lean.

Traditionally used to transport home-cooked meals to the workplace, they're still in heavy rotation in Latin America, India—by the millions—Thailand, and Vietnam. The word, though, is British: it means "light meal." The modern, metal version of the boxes was supposedly popularized by colonial British in India who insisted on bringing their own food to the office. That was before, it goes

without saying, chicken tikka masala became Britain's most popular dish.

For generations, tiffin boxes also transported monthly rice. But when I visited the restaurant that Lana told me about, I discovered it had abandoned them entirely. Dismayed at the idea of sending an armada of Styrofoam boxes to sea every week, I asked the owner, Trang Nguyen, if I could do *com thang* the old-fashioned way.

Sure, she answered, amused. She directed me to Viet Hoa, where she bought her own kitchen supplies. At about \$16, the price of a tiffin box was very reasonable. For my purposes, though, the bill was going to be higher. Because I lived forty-five minutes away from Trang and her partner Betty's neighborhood, they couldn't afford to cross town to drop off one meal with the usual \$1 surcharge. Four customers, though, would work. So I signed up for four *com thang* meals to be delivered to my house at 7:00 p.m. every Friday. Trang and Betty asked for my food preferences (lots of fish, little pork). Now all they needed were four starter tiffins to fill and deliver, and four clean empties to collect when they did the drop-off.

Price for a meal that feeds four: \$7.

"Seven? Like this?" I wrote the number on a bit of newspaper. "With delivery? For a four-course dinner?"

"That's right," Trang said. She was a small, burly woman with a weathered face, and the fact that she'd learned English in Texas gave her speech a pioneer twang. "We've only been in business six months," she explained. "Delivering food, and keeping the price competitive with everyone else, helps us get new customers."

She ushered me to the kitchen to meet Betty.

It was a tidy and maniacally organized little space, smaller than the kitchen in an average ranch house. Every single cooking object was neatly stacked or wedged in one square island of shelves. Almost no food was in sight. The day's meal had been cooked by 11:00 a.m. and was already spooned into the ten-compartment steam table out in

front. The only edible in the room was a large, cooked lump of brisket in a Chinese-style bowl.

As a closed-circuit TV of the shop flickered over her head, Trang sliced the meat with a cleaver. She'd been cooking in restaurants like this since she was nine. Trang's family and Betty's family had owned a restaurant in Saigon together. Now they were both in their early thirties: Trang came here as a refugee twenty years ago, while Betty arrived only in 2005. In the United States, Trang first worked at American and Vietnamese restaurants as a waitress. "In my time off, when the other waitresses went home, I went to help in the kitchen, just to learn," she said.

A few years after arriving here, Trang divorced. Waitressing, nail salon jobs, and six years of moonlighting as a *com thang* cook from her apartment kept food on the table for her kids. Then Betty arrived, and within months, married Trang's older brother, who worked at a toothbrush factory. The two women got along and, they found out, had complementary talents.

"Betty is good at appetizers and soups," Trang explained. "I specialize in chicken with lemongrass, salted ribs, vermicelli and noodles with beef in spicy sauce." She made her way to the stove, where she slid the beef slices into a big pot and turned her attention to a wok the size of an umbrella. Turning up the flame, she tipped a cup of garlic, onion, and lemongrass into some already-shimmering oil.

The year before, Trang said, she noticed an ad announcing a *com thang* business up for sale and decided to buy it.

"I don't want to work for other people. I don't want to worry about losing my job," she said.

Inviting her new sister-in-law to be a partner, she took out loans from family and friends and they founded their *com thang* shop. Now the two women worked fourteen hours a day. Betty got in at 6:00 a.m., Trang a couple of hours later. They cooked together until 11:00, when they took turns darting out to deliver as many as forty lunches a

day. This worked because, except for me, all their clients lived within a few minutes drive.

Trang's dream was to buy a real, sit-down restaurant, one that would cater to non-Vietnamese as well as Vietnamese. This place, though, cost much less than an actual restaurant: just the two of them, with no waiters to pay, and no silverware or glasses to buy.

Neither Trang's kids nor Betty's new husband could stand the place. "Our family members say this is too much work," Trang said, fishing lemongrass slivers from the wok. But they didn't understand the independence it represented to them, the just-within-reach step up from waitressing. Owning your own business is the most important thing, Trang said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" she trilled, doing a dance step in her high-heeled flip-flops.

### *Delivered*

After eight hours staring into a screen, an hour editing, and twenty minutes reading proofs, I called it a day at work and drove home. When I opened the door, the girls were mountaineering over Mike's exhausted form, which was prone on the floor. But gleaming on the stove stood four shiny tiffin boxes, each packed with a full family meal cooked by someone I liked. Garlic and shrimp filled the air.

Trang's brother had stopped by just a few minutes earlier to deliver the meal, Mike told me. Now the six o'clock crash, the dread at the end of the day, had been supplanted by . . . Christmas.

"I want to see, I want to see," Anna yelled, clambering forcefully over Mike's skull. I wanted to see too. Gathered around the table, we took turns unlatching the tidy cylinders and peeking inside. My neighbors Bill and Kirste knocked on the door as we looked. They had signed up for one of the weekly tiffins in my subscription, and I'd

invited two other neighbors to take home the remaining pair. Somehow, though, the suspense of unpacking one savory dish after another, and the gradual unfolding of a meal that none of us had lifted a finger to create, turned a takeout plan into a party. Spreading the \$28 banquet across the table, we opened the door for the rest of the neighbors and sat down for a feast.

My grandmother Lydia would have approved. Unpacked, the tiffin boxes made a neat line of bowls, each embossed with sunbursts, leaves, and flowers. In the middle, I'd plopped a glass of lacquered chopsticks. The first bowl contained chicken broth, practically clear, with Asian greens swaying under the surface. When I sipped it, the soup was so light that it seemed more like tea than a food. That's intentional. Vietnamese frown on consuming cold drinks, which they say shock the body and congeal fat inside the gut. Instead, at mealtime you're supposed to sip a light broth like this between morsels.

With four different tiffin boxes holding eight different entrees, the morsels were varied. I'd been surprised the first day I'd dropped the boxes off, when Trang asked me what foods I liked. I'd thought I had no choice. But it's part of the *com thang* cook's business, I learned, to prepare enough options that clients don't get bored or forced into eating something they dislike. "Ask him what's good," Trang had said as I considered the unfamiliar dishes. She nodded at a very lean young black man eating at one of the tables. He waved me over.

"Try the catfish, and the beef with lemongrass," he suggested. "That's what I'm having. I come here every day. I'm a dancer. I teach at a studio just a few blocks from here—ballroom, tap, kids, hip-hop. I can't afford to eat a lunch that makes me sluggish. So I come here and for the price of a meal at McDonald's I get a different lunch each day."

Plenty of *com thang* subscribers do let Trang and Betty decide for them. They know the food will be good. For me, the sense of

surprise made the meal even more tasty. It was a throwback to being a child.

Much of the fun of restaurants is the chance to be a pasha, determining every detail of what you eat. But at least as seductive, I found, is the comfort of being parented: the sensation that someone knows what you like and will make it for you. All you need to do is show up and be fed. On the table that first night were two fish dishes, because Trang already knew from my lunchtime visits that I loved seafood. One tin held chunks of pungent grilled sardine; the other, Trang's version of that swoony caramelized catfish. I peered like a birdwatcher as Kirste, a sparse eater, tasted the catfish. I saw her empty chopsticks pause in the air. Her eyebrows rose.

"This is good," she said as the fish sauce, the soy sauce, and the melted sugar all registered. "This," she said a second later, the alchemy deepening, "is amazing."

Mike, meanwhile, sampled the grilled sardine with a martyred look. "I'm from Amarillo," he told the group. "I don't trust fish." But he soldiered on, this time to the barbecued pork nubbins, each with a tiny rectangular cap of fat. Mike's tragic look vanished. Even to the most American palate, these savory Chiclet-shaped morsels were irresistible. The ribs' tiny size tempered their decadence. Vietnamese typically salt meat and chicken heavily, to a point that makes the same food impossible to eat in supersized portions. It's a strategy that heightens a protein's bang per buck. Rather than gobble meat in costly slabs, you learn to savor one bit at a time, balancing the saltiness with soup and white rice before going back to the next bite.

As I picked, slurped, and surveyed the table for my next serving, my neighbors tried to figure out the economics. You could see, on examination, how a smart homemaker could make a profit here.

One of the yummiest entrees, buttercup-yellow eggs scrambled with bitter melon, must have cost Trang merely pennies. Not only was it satisfying enough for a main course, but a Vietnamese diner

would have appreciated the melon's medicinal qualities. Not everyone could have cooked it, as Trang did, just so: the eggs soft but not runny, meaty but not tough. That is where the art came in.

Trang's most onerous expense at that time was likely not food but gas. Still, we reckoned that the \$1 surcharge for each tiffin box added up to twice what Trang's husband needed for a round-trip to my house. Added to that, I was so incredulous at the low price of the meal that I tacked on a \$1 bonus per box. Since tipping isn't ordinarily part of *com thang* protocol, Trang was actually earning more delivering to us than she would in her own neighborhood.

But our tabletop calculus neglected two crucial elements: the sliver-thin profit margins all this hard work produces, and the hours of planning and labor needed to keep the business afloat. It's these ingredients that prompt most *com thang* operators to quit just about the time they get their footing. They are constantly replaced by entrepreneurs willing to snap up the tiny kitchens and storefront shops they leave behind.

A few days later, it happened: I craved more of Trang's cooking. As Dai predicted, the caramel catfish was excellent the next day. So were the sautéed greens, the eggs, and the surplus white rice. No pork ribs remained. I took absurd, thrifty pleasure working through the various tiffin boxes in the refrigerator until every last scrap was consumed. But I was also savoring the memory of that impromptu dinner. It had been, I reflected, a feast interesting and pretty enough to serve to six guests, yet cheaper than a meal for two in a restaurant.

Mike was less enthusiastic. We have such different taste that it's taken years, and a reliance on his excellent cooking, to come up with a family cuisine we both like. Convinced he would contract a fatal vitamin deficiency without pasta, he felt neutral about the merits of monthly rice. But that, Lana told me, is a liability at her house too.

“My sons don’t like com thang,” she said after I reported on the first delivery. “And I guarantee you will get sick of someone’s else’s cooking after a while. But the point is, I use it on and off. I stop for a while, I get my energy back, and I cook again. Then when I need a break I sign back up.” Nor, Lana warned, does monthly rice totally smooth the obstacle course of assembling her teenagers, husband, and toddler granddaughter for a meal. “We still fight over setting the table and cleaning up,” she said. “The kids still come home at different times, and they don’t honor my trying to sit down together.” But at least organizing a meal is more a personal challenge, and less a physics equation.

In this challenge, the com thang cook and the consumer are allies. Unlike many extremely cheap services, com thang isn’t, at its heart, exploitative. It’s a confluence of interests between an ambitious small business owner and working parents who may be only a few steps ahead economically. The people who use com thang know fluidity is part of the system. Cooks, meanwhile, know it’s a grueling job, but with luck, one that pushes them to a goal: independence, a better restaurant job, or maybe a less labor-intensive small business. I wondered, in fact, why of all the immigrant entrepreneurs in this country, only Vietnamese have developed this particular mix of services.

Indians, it’s true, use a service akin to monthly rice, in locations from London to Silicon Valley to Mumbai. It’s traditionally delivered in tiffin boxes, and based on Indians’ similar pickiness about food provenance and flavor. The great difference is that these hand-delivered meals are almost always lunches. Though wholesome and cheap and homemade, they do nothing to ease the pressure on working women. To the contrary, the mother is usually cooking the food back at home, outsourcing the delivery so she can focus on fixing dinner.

Other variations on the monthly rice formula—cheap, fresh food cooked by someone you know—may well exist in this country on a small scale. When I last talked to cookbook writer Ann Le, she was

hot on the trail of a rumored Honduran dinner delivery business in Brooklyn. Though I'd seen the signs a thousand times, I was oblivious to com thang's existence until a Vietnamese friend tipped me off. I would now know to hunt for Fast Food signs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, northern Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, all Vietnamese hubs.

Maybe, though, it is time for other frugal and talented cooks to broaden the niche. Though food historians don't seem to document anything like com thang in U.S. culture, I would wager numerous stones remain unturned. In any case, Americans excel at spotting good ideas from elsewhere and fixing jet engines onto them. An aspiring chef wanting to show off her creativity, an artisan working with a community farm alliance, or a pair of single mothers renting an old Domino's: if any of these could make meals that were cheap and fresh and real, I'd consider subscribing. As it was, at least one of my crash hours between 6:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. had been transformed. With monthly rice, for the most modest sum imaginable, Friday night dinner was now a ritual I craved all week long.