

Ravenous | The Taste of Home

By MONIQUE TRUONG

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I began the Year of the Dragon with the taste of sea and salt.

It's tradition within my family to celebrate Tet, the Vietnamese lunar New Year, with a freshly bought outfit, a vase full of flowering branches and a good meal. To this checklist of auspicious preambles, I've added my own: a new ingredient or dish.

When I experience an untried and novel flavor, I get the same kind of soulful pleasure as when I learn the meaning of a new word. Both acts make me feel as if I'm the possessor of a slightly more detailed map of the world.

This year, that map took me to back to Vietnam and to Phu Quoc, an island famed for its nuoc mam, or fish sauce, a condiment that is to Vietnamese cuisine what olive oil is to Italian cuisine. Without it, as Gertrude Stein would say, "there is no there there."

Diep Tran, the chef and owner of Good Girl Dinette — a winsome spot in Los Angeles with a straightforward declaration of culinary intent: "American diner meets Vietnamese comfort food" — was the first to sing the praises to me of Red Boat, a brand of nuoc mam nhi, or first press, "extra virgin" fish sauce from the island of Phu Quoc.

There's an oft-repeated quip that you can smell Phu Quoc before you can see it, a reference to the pungent aroma of anchovies fermenting in salt that produce the clear, amber liquid that is fish sauce. The island has long been part of my culinary vocabulary and imagination. Around our table, Phu Quoc and its signature product were spoken about with reverence and a deep longing. When the United States lifted its trade embargo against Vietnam in 1994 and bottles labeled Phu Quoc began appearing on the shelves, I eagerly bought them and imagined that they were the taste of home.

So when Diep told me about Red Boat, I assured her that the brand I used was also from Phu Quoc. She laughed, with a soupçon of derision for the naïve and uninitiated. She told me to read the ingredients on my bottle. I did, and there along with the anchovy extract, water and salt were "fructose and hydrolyzed wheat protein." (This is when you, dear reader, should check your own bottle, and then may I suggest you throw it out.) Red Boat, she said, was made only from anchovies and sea salt. What Diep couldn't prepare me for was how the end products of these two ingredients would be so fundamentally different from anything that I had ever tasted.

Red Boat's nuoc mam nhi, which comes in two grades — 40N and 50N (the higher the level of nitrogen, the more complex the flavor) — were bright caramel and clover honey in color. What I had in my cupboard was closer to a strong cup of black tea. The scent of Red Boat's fish sauce was of the sea and not of fishiness. If



you've tasted the difference between fleur de sel and iodized table salt, then you can imagine the gulf in flavors between Red Boat and its additive-laden brethren. There's no aggressive smack of salinity in the 40N or 50N. Instead, there is a rounded, mellowed, briny marriage of its two ingredients and an almost sweet, buttery finish that is especially noteworthy in the 50N.

I asked Diep what I should make with these elixirs. True to her culinary mission, she suggested deviled eggs, flavored with scallion oil and nuoc mam nhi.

Year of the Dragon Deviled Eggs

6 large eggs

3 tablespoons of canola or vegetable oil

4 scallions, white and green parts sliced into thin rounds

¾ to 1 teaspoon of Red Boat 50N fish sauce

1½ tablespoons of mayonnaise (I use Kewpie brand from Japan, which has a thinner consistency than most American store brands)

Freshly ground black pepper

Handful of watercress sprigs, washed.

1. Place eggs in a pot and cover with cold water. Bring to a brisk boil. After one minute, cover pot with a lid and turn off the heat. Let eggs sit in the covered pot until water is completely cool.
2. In a small pan or pot, heat the oil until hot. Add the sliced scallions and cook for about 1 to 2 minutes. Turn off the heat and let cool.
3. Remove the shells from the eggs. Cut eggs in half and place the yolks in a medium bowl. Mash with a fork until yolks become almost smooth. Add the scallion and oil, mayonnaise (you may need to add more, depending on the consistency of your mayonnaise), black pepper and fish sauce. Continue to mash the mixture until it's smooth and well blended.
4. Spoon the mixture in a quart-size plastic zip bag. Snip off one corner of the bag with a pair of scissors. Press the mixture into that corner and use the bag as a piping bag to fill the egg whites.
5. Tuck a small sprig of watercress into each egg. The leaves look beautiful, but their pepperiness is also a very pleasing contrast with the richness of the eggs.

Red Boat fish sauce is available from redboatfishsauce.com or at select grocery stores like Green Grape Provisions at 753 Fulton Street in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.