

What Are You Waiting Pho?

Food bloggers and chefs behind Prague's Vietnamese food craze offer some pointers

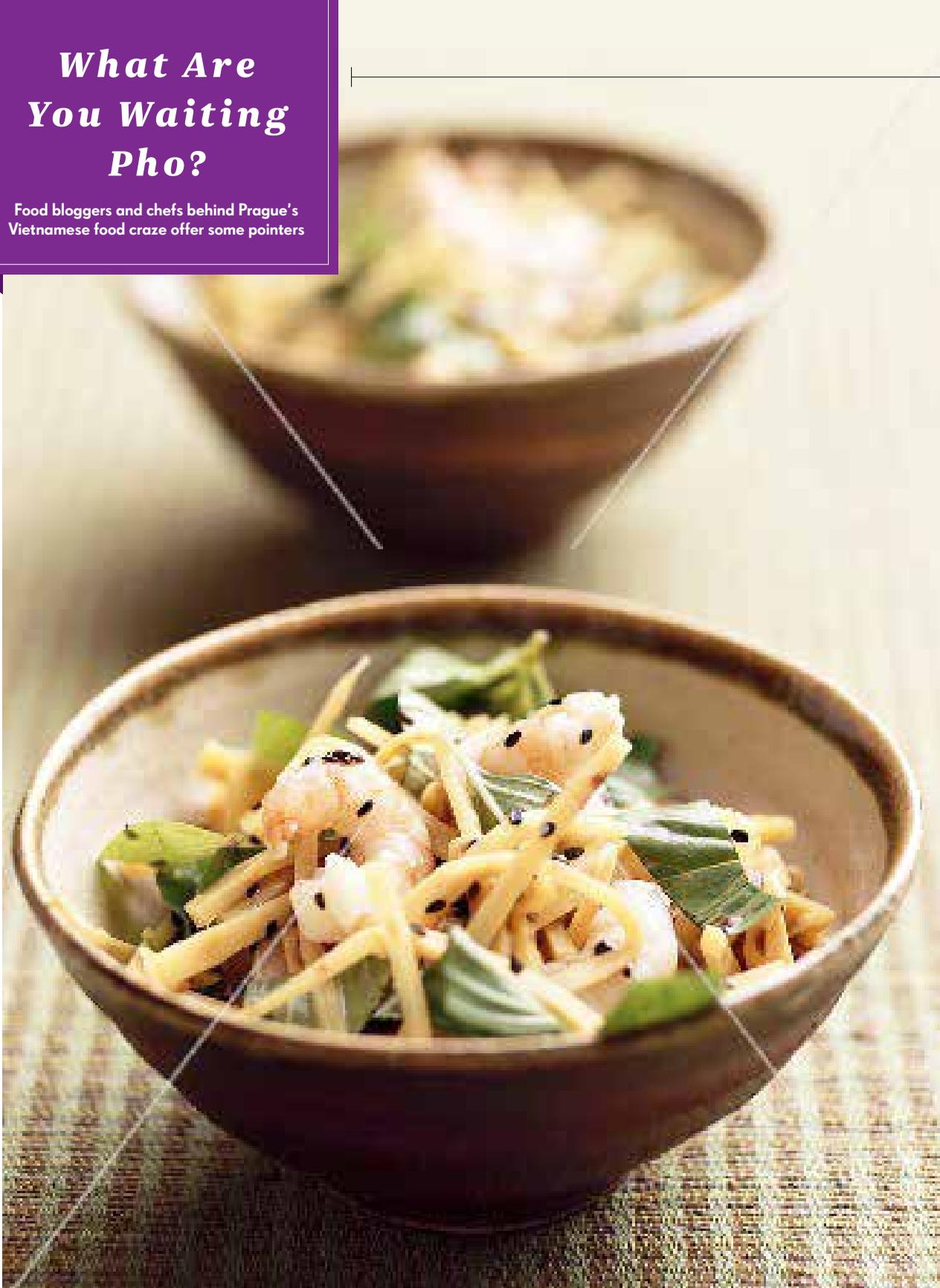
Prague has long been home to a vibrant Vietnamese community. Invited over as migrant workers during the mid-20th century when the Czech Republic (then Czechoslovakia) was under Communist rule, today they make up the largest immigrant community in the country. But, incredibly, for years the only chance of a decent bowl of pho, that world-famous noodle soup, was at Prague's vast Asian market, Sapa, on the outskirts of the city. Thankfully now you don't have to trek too far for a decent meal from the Far East, as Vietnamese locals have begun opening restaurants serving authentic dishes from their home country in Prague's city centre.

At the vanguard of this foodie revolution is Viet Food Friends (vietfoodfriends.cz), a food blog launched by a pair of Vietnamese students, Thuy Duong Trinh and Mai Huong Nguyen. For them, the appeal of their country's cuisine is obvious. "Most people appreciate that it's light, healthy, colourful and full of fresh herbs," says Thuy. Their blog has been a huge success; they've even started running cookery classes to share their culinary know-how with curious locals.

Unsurprisingly, Thuy credits the internet with stirring up enthusiasm among Czechs – more used to stodgy fare like goulash and dumplings – for the exotic salads, spring rolls and noodle soups of her homeland. "The increased interest in Vietnamese food has been greatly assisted by social media and blogs," she says. "People can share their positive experiences and that enthusiasm quickly spreads."

One of the new kids on the block recommended by the blogging duo is restaurant Madame Lyn (*Safařikova 319/18*). "Thai is too spicy for many people and Chinese can be rather greasy," says owner Minh Ha. The challenging Giga Pho is a gigantic bowl of broth consisting of a kilo of beef, a kilo of noodles and 3½ litres of stock. Slurp your way through the lot and it's yours for free; otherwise it will set you back 500 koruna (€19). Only two have ordered the colossal soup so far, but both made it to the bottom of the bowl.

Family-run Pho Vietnam Tuan & Lan began life as a pocket-sized suburban takeaway on



LEFT: A LIGHT PRAWN AND NOODLE VIETNAMESE DISH. ABOVE: VIET FOOD BLOGGERS THUY DUONG TRINH (LEFT) AND MAI HUONG NGUYEN (RIGHT).

Slavikova in 2011. Once the queues began stretching out the door, the couple knew it was time to expand. Their second location on central Anglická has proved just as popular thanks to the speedy service, ample seating and generous portions. Despite the rising popularity of Viet cuisine, not everyone's sure how to eat it: "One group who ordered *bún cha* – grilled pork with rice noodles – thought the bowl of dipping sauce was for washing their hands!" says owner Lan with a smile.

With its sleek interior and hip disco soundtrack, Neb.o (*Perlová 10*) certainly wins the prize for funkier new arrival. The dishes are beautifully presented, too: the soups, which come in small or large portions, are served with chill, garlic and lime in exquisite tiny ramekins. Manager Hana Nyen encourages diners to get out of their pho comfort zone and try *vit cari do* – curried duck – or *udon*, a prawn and seaweed noodle broth topped off with a poached egg.

While Prague's central Vietnamese joints are plentiful, a trip to Sapa Market is still worth the journey. Here renowned Asian chef Shahaf Shabtay leads culinary tours around Prague's Little Hanoi where you learn how to cook up exotic ingredients such as banana stems and galangal, sample

mouth-watering treats like homemade *bánh cuốn* – steamed rice rolls dipped in a delicious green tea sauce – and pamper yourself with a manicure or massage. Tours cost 750 koruna (€29); book at en-prague.sasazu.com/enjoy/sapa-trip

THUY'S TOP 3 VIET DISHES

- **Cá kho with đu'ả chua:** Slowly braised fish accompanied by pickled mustard greens is Viet Food Friends blogger Thuy's favourite dish: "It's real comfort food," she says.
- **Bún cá:** This flavoursome fish soup is made with the same fine rice noodles as bún cha, but includes the dipping sauce as part of the light, fragrant broth instead of serving it on the side.
- **Cà tím xào tôm thịt:** Roasted aubergine with minced beef and tiger prawns is one of the mouth-watering new options on the menu at popular restaurant, Pho Vietnam Tuan & Lan.