



The Southern Migration of Hainan Chicken

How this simple yet addictively aromatic chicken-and-rice dish spread its wings across the streets of Southeast Asia and beyond.

by Katrina Yentch

Chicken and rice is a ubiquitous combination throughout Asia and beyond, with countries customizing the dish with their own unique spices and regional ingredients. Hainan chicken, on the other hand, has preserved most of its original components despite its presence throughout Southeast Asia.

The integrity of the original Hainan chicken ingredients has been so well preserved that a culture war exists over where the original version comes from—even though the Chinese province of “Hainan” is literally in the dish’s name in various countries who serve it. And so, we investigate who actually created Hainan chicken, and explore how it

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ventured south to gain popularity as a signature meal in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

It may be obvious to many American readers, in a country of boundless diversity, that immigrants are responsible for bringing this juicy poached chicken and broth-boiled rice dish to the world. After all, the beauty of relocation is the introduction of distinctive new ingredients to the local cuisine. Therefore, many assume that Hainan chicken is from the coastal island region in Southern China, who enhanced the dish by using the tender, plump Wenchang chicken. However, the story is a little more complicated than that.

While Hainanese immigrants are responsible for inventing Hainan chicken, it didn't actually exist in Hainan until recently. This is because these immigrants invented the dish while they were in Malaysia (before the separation of Malaysia and Singapore in 1965), mostly within Klang because of its history as a port city. According to Hong Kong food critic Chua Lam, Moh Lee Twee is one of the earliest immigrants to have created this dish as a street vendor in the 1930s, who served the chicken alongside aromatic rice balls.

Later on, the native Hainanese version incorporated a local delicacy for the meal, the Wenchang chicken—a supple bird nourished by coconut, sweet potato, peanut, and rice husk, resulting in tender, juicy meat. Other similar stories of “who sold it first” exist, but two common factors point out that Hainanese immigrants created it, and that they did so in Malaysia.

In addition to its history of creation, Hainan chicken's key ingredients and preparation remained consistent in all forms: a whole chicken is poached in boiling water, then ice-bathed to retain its plumpness. Rice then gets cooked in the same savory water and rendered fat from the chicken, completed with a spicy ginger sauce.

After Singapore had separated from Malaysia, Hainan chicken's presence only continued to grow throughout the region. Holly Ong, owner of the Singaporean culinary brand [Sibeihō](#), explains via email how Hainan chicken became a popular street food after the split: “For the many Chinese immigrants that settled in Singapore, all of them had a trade/industry they were known for. A lot of the Hainanese group became cooks for the British families. When the Brits left [in 1968], the Hainanese started to sell both their culture's food and that of the Brits... Other things we grew up eating that's also attributed to the Hainanese are Schnitzel-like pork chops that come in a ketchup-y sauce with French fries.”

Although Hainan chicken started in Singapore, it has undoubtedly received the most international adoration through its Thai adaptation khao man gai (chicken and rice), also created by Hainanese immigrants in Thailand. There, the Thai-Chinese customized the crucial dipping sauce with a spicy kick of Thai chilis and a salty soybean paste, served alongside a delicate soup made with the poaching broth. Even though the Thai name “khao man gai” translates to chicken rice, it is widely accepted by other Thais as a dish that takes inspiration from these Hainan immigrants.

Nong Poonsukwattana, owner of the famed Portland, Oregon joint Nong's Khao Man Gai, weighs in on why Thailand may be considered the reigning champion of this Singapore-Chinese dish: "I believe it's because it's more well-balanced," she explains. "The perfect balance of four components (rice, chicken, sauce and soup). Rice has a good balance of chicken fat and [it is] steamed. Chicken is moist and juicy, cooked to perfection. Thai versions of the sauce work well with the dish because the two components above have fat components. Soup ties all four together."

While Singapore and Thailand lay claim to Hainan chicken as their regions' must-have dish, Vietnam is oppositely obscure about its lesser-known com ga hai nam, an item that proves hard to find on Vietnamese restaurant menus outside the country. Jimmy Ly, co-founder of NYC's [Madame Vo](#), provides some historical context to why this is the case: "Part of this may be political, due to Vietnam's long contentious history with China, which colonized and occupied Vietnam for over 1,000 years," he explains. "In Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese community is more powerful in society. That's not the case in Vietnam."

In addition, although the dish is not openly attributed to the Hainanese by the Vietnamese, it does originate in the coastal city of Tam Ky—whose name is of a Chinese origin. This may suggest that 1. There was a strong Chinese immigrant population here at some point and 2. They are undoubtedly responsible for what is now a regional specialty in Tam Ky. And so, while the dish certainly credits Hainan in its name (hai nam), the political tension may suggest why the Vietnamese may take more responsibility for its own rendition of the dish, rather than the fact that it is inspired by these immigrants. Again, this dish remains a difficult-to-find item outside of the country, which may be because it reminds Vietnamese immigrants of its once colonized past.

In Vietnam, fresh herbs are a way of life, so of course, mounds of rau ram, coriander, and Thai basil stack atop the turmeric-colored rice and poached chicken, shredded and dressed with spicy and sweet essential ingredients that embellish most Vietnamese dishes: sugar, lime, and fish sauce.

Although com gai hai nam is a lesser-known dish globally, it is a must-have dish in Tam Ky. "From what I was told growing up, com ga had staying power throughout all of these years because, even though it's a simple dish, it uses every part of the chicken to enhance the meal," says Ly. "Nothing goes to waste, so it was a great solution for families struggling through hard times... Likewise, the ingredients used were cheap and easily accessible, essentially making com ga a good daily staple."

Whether or not Hainan chicken has deserved the custody battle it has experienced over the years, its ability to be so easily replicated globally definitely makes it a dish worth trying out at home.