

RAISING THE RED LANTERN

For lovers of Indochina, Vietnamese-Australian celebrity chef Luke Nguyen serves up cuisine and culture with his new book and TV show

WORDS ROBERTA MUIR
PHOTOGRAPHY JAY HARRISON/
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I've long been a fan of Red Lantern, Sydney's edgiest Vietnamese restaurant run by brother and sister Luke & Pauline Nguyen and Pauline's partner, chef Mark Jensen. I knew Nguyen to say 'hi' to but had never sat down with him for a long chat, so I was delighted to pin him down recently at *MasterChef Live* to learn a little more about his life and various projects. His story is fascinating and his natural, enthusiastic manner is contagious. As he talked, I found myself immersed in his discovery of his parents' homeland, a country he didn't even set foot in until he was 19 years old.

In 1978, Nguyen's parents fled southern Vietnam along with thousands of others, and shortly afterwards his mother gave birth to him in a Thai refugee camp. A year later, the family made it to Australia, ultimately settling

in Cabramatta in south-western Sydney, where his parents ran a restaurant.

Nguyen recalls that in those early years "it was impossible to even find lemongrass — but slowly, as other Vietnamese refugees were drawn to the area, a community developed and soon Cabramatta had the familiar sounds, smells, language and produce that my parents had left behind. When I left, at the age of 17, and moved to Surry Hills, it was like leaving Vietnam."

After school, Nguyen headed to university to study computer science as his parents expected. "I lasted a week," he admits. "It wasn't for me; I always knew I wanted to open a restaurant." He explains: "My parents had worked so hard in their restaurant out of necessity; they didn't think it was a worthwhile thing for their

STYLING: EMMA WOOD HAIR & MAKE-UP: VANESSA COLLINS
LUKE NGUYEN IS WEARING COTTON SHIRT FROM ACNE & DENIM PANTS FROM NU DIE

Luke Nguyen wants to showcase the 'real' Vietnam through its cuisine

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classic fruit shakes. She was tiny, only about 10 years old, and such a perfectionist I said 'Gee, your mum's taught you well', looking at the older lady at the stall, and she said 'Oh she's not my mum, she's my boss.' I said: 'What do you mean she's not your mum? Why are you working here — why aren't you at school?' and she said 'I don't go to school — it costs \$100 a year and I can't afford it.' I was like wow, I just never thought that there'd be 10-year-olds that weren't at school. I felt guilty — I'd bought jeans for \$100 and that's a kid's education for a year. So Suzanna Boyd, my partner, and I set up The Little Lantern Foundation in conjunction with Reach, a charity in central Vietnam, to train disadvantaged youth in hospitality.

"As I was researching *Songs of Sapa*, which is about regional Vietnamese cuisine, I was intrigued to learn about the ingredients the French had introduced. Before the French came, beef wasn't used in Vietnamese cooking — buffalo were working animals so they weren't eaten. Then the French arrived and said 'Look at all

children to do. They said I was 'wasting my education', but in Australia we have choices and options — here you can follow your passions."

Nguyen also knew that once he opened his own restaurant it would be hard to get away for holidays and travel, so first he set off to see the world, back-packing through 14 countries, finishing up in Vietnam. He was the first of his family to 'return' to Vietnam. "Of course, for me it wasn't returning," he explains. "I was born in Thailand, but even so, it

felt like coming home. But it was only once I arrived in Vietnam and met aunties and uncles and grandparents that I started to understand my own parents; things suddenly made sense — the strictness and the work ethic. Dad would always say, 'We risked our lives coming to this free country — you can't waste the opportunities.' They were always working in the restaurant, and so were we; while our friends were off playing, we were working."

"When I was researching my second book, *Songs of Sapa*, I met a young girl at a fruit stall in a market in Hoi An; she was peeling mangoes and mixing them with condensed milk and ice to make the



"I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE MEKONG THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO VIETNAM"

these cattle — why aren't you eating them?'. Coffee, asparagus, artichokes, dill, tomatoes, beer... We didn't drink beer — now I think we're the second biggest beer-drinking nation. Baking's probably the best example: I used to take a baguette to school in my lunch box every day with pâté and cold cuts and pork terrine — to me this was Vietnamese food.

"So I started researching my latest book, *Indochine*. I travelled around the country and interviewed 90-year-olds who had lived through the colonial times — they were so full of stories. In every home I visited there was an old cabinet called a *garde manger*, which was used to store food before the days of refrigerators. If you ask any Vietnamese kid what it is they'll tell you it's a *garde manger* — and they assume it's a Vietnamese word — but of course

it's French. We don't have a word for it in Vietnamese — we've just adopted the French word."

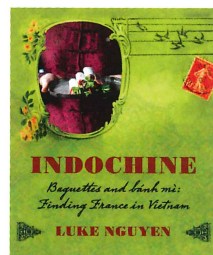
And what's next in Nguyen's discovery of his ancestral homeland? "I fell in love with the Mekong the first time I went to Vietnam. So my next television show, *Luke Nguyen's Greater Mekong*, follows the Mekong from its origin in China, through Myanmar then northern Thailand into Laos and Cambodia then finally into Vietnam — along the way I discovered the different cuisines and cultures and also the different landscapes that it flows through. Next year, I'll also start taking boutique culinary tours to Vietnam. Culinary tours seemed the next logical step. There's so much to see and experience all over the country — I want to showcase the 'real' Vietnam." ★

TOP: Nguyen filming *Greater Mekong* in Chiangmai, Thailand



LUKE NGUYEN'S VIETNAM FAVOURITES

- SAPA** — wild honey and local hill tribes
- HANOI** — eating pho & *banh cuon* (rice rolls) in the streets of the Old Quarter
- HA LONG BAY** — cruising on an old junk, visiting floating villages, eating the freshest seafood
- HUE** — vegetarian food prepared by Buddhist nuns, steamed rice cakes
- HOI AN** — awesome tailors
- DALAT** — old French villas, Central Highlands coffee
- SAIGON** — *banh xeo* (savoury pancakes) at my aunty's restaurant *Banh Xeo 46A* at the Ben Thanh night markets



INDOCHINE — BAGUETTES AND BANH MI: FINDING FRANCE IN VIETNAM BY LUKE NGUYEN, PUBLISHED BY MURDOCH BOOKS, ISBN 9781741968842, IS OUT NOW. LUKE NGUYEN'S GREATER MEKONG WILL AIR ON SBS, FEBRUARY 2012.

TOP LEFT PHOTO: SUZANNA BOYD