EAT LAFAYETTE | Chef Profile

A Poboy By Another Name
The banh mi arrives in Lafayette, begging the question: What took so long?

Even Son Do, owner and proprietor of Do's Deli in the South College Shopping Center, can’t quite explain what took so long for banh mi to truly arrive in Lafayette. From Do's perspective, that of a Vietnamese immigrant and naturalized American citizen, it’s pretty obvious that his culture is well in Acadiana by the number of noodle and pho shops that have popped up around town like bubbles in a simmering pot of broth. Hearty soups and noodles are something folks around here are accustomed to, but in terms of instant familiarity with ethnic food, the banh mi is a no brainer. It’s a Vietnamese pobo, French bread? Check. Mayo? Check. The perfect vessel onto which your meaty hopes and dreams can be slathered, layered, and consumed? Check. By Do's admission, the Vietnamese community tends to play a game of follow the leader when it comes to new businesses and ventures. But for whatever reason, few have made the obvious move to the culinary intersection of Louisiana and Vietnamese cuisine: the pobo. And only Do has put it front and center.

"The thing with Vietnamese people is they kind of follow what everybody else does. First they open up a pho shop. The [Mae Son] Noodle House. And it did pretty well. Then they open another noodle house. Banh mi was slowly getting to be popular. You see it on Food Network. So I thought I should at least try it and see how people gravitate to it," says Do.

Genius is sometimes doing the obvious thing that everyone else overlooks. Maybe it’s a stretch to call Do a genius for opening a banh mi shop in a town that loves meaty sandwiches, but I love banh mi enough to saint the man.

Do grew up in Opelousas, fleeing the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese forces with his parents and 11 siblings in 1975. Like scores of Vietnamese refugees scattered around South Louisiana, the Dos adapted by year of harmony between Vietnamese and Louisiana foodways. If he’s right about the Vietnamese tendency to trendset, it could be a great time coming for banh mi lovers in Lafayette. Better late than never.

Do's recipes show a love for the Vietnamese style of grilled, lean meats with a flair for Louisiana spice and playfulness. Growing up in both worlds, it was a natural extension of what Do experienced as a unity between culinary traditions. Do's Deli is a starting point for the next chapter of his life, one in which he hopes to bring his flavors to full service cuisine. In the meantime, he's a po-boy pioneer even if the map was already drawn by Vietnamese refugees scattered around town. The banh mi is a no brainer. It's a Vietnamese pobo.

"I like serving people. Whenever I have gatherings, I cook for them. People seemed to enjoy the food. I enjoyed that. I do pho. Cajun food. Esouffle. Sauce piquant," he brags meekly through a smile. "I do everyday."

Talking with Do you get the impression that he could just as well have opened a clothing boutique with a shrug. On a whim, he decided to open a restaurant serving his interpretation of the traditional Vietnamese sandwich. The theme is simple: hearty, healthy Vietnamese cuisine served up on a loaf of Poppar's french bread. Do explains that Poppar’s was the closest he could get to the traditional Vietnamese roll, itself a lighter, airier variety of french bread.

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Binge for breakfast

It's been a general rule of mine over the years that if a restaurant has a specific dish in the name, you don't order anything other than that dish and expect a positive result. Obvious exceptions abound, but if you go to Catfish Shack (Chevy Tahoe Pinhoor Road, owner/chef donuteer Nathan Liebert) or Souper Salad, don't get a steak. Building your brand around an eponymous food is not one thing that everyone else over looks. Maybe it's a stretch to call Do a genius for opening a banh mi shop in a town that loves meaty sandwiches, but I love banh mi enough to saint the man.

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PRO TIP: Cajun Market's landmark boudin-stuffed king cake is available year round. Sure it's just a donut, and not an "authentic" king cake. But authenticity is not one of the five flavors, you pretentious nerd. Sweet and salty are. Oh, Boudin-Donut King Cake! If loving you is insidious, I don't wanna be Cajun.