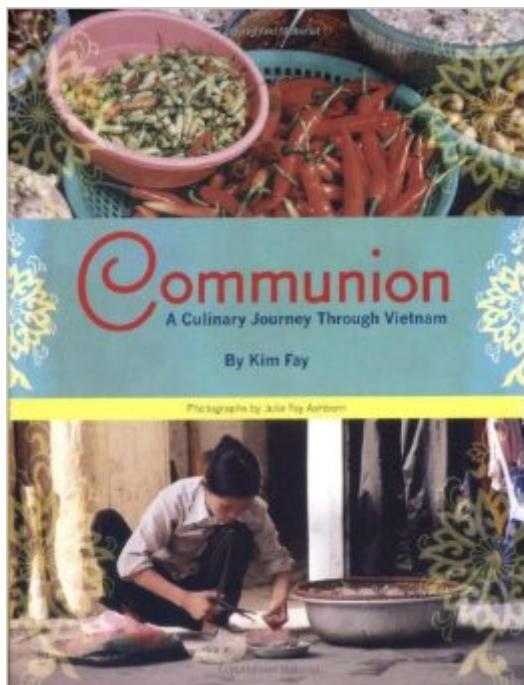


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Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam



Synopsis

Living in Vietnam for four years in the 1990s, Seattle native Kim Fay fell in love with the romantic landscapes, the rich culture, and the uninhibited warmth of the people. A decade later, she grew hungry for more. Inspired by the dream of learning to make a Vietnamese meal for her friends and family in America, Kim returned to Vietnam and embarked on an unforgettable five-week culinary journey from Hanoi to Saigon. Joined by her sister and best Vietnamese girlfriend, Kim set off to taste as much as possible while exploring rituals and traditions, street cafÃ©s and haute cuisine, famine and feast, and Communism and the legacy of war. Together, the three women discovered a society shaped by its ever-changing relationship with food. Every encounter serves up an enticing morsel, from uncovering the secret world of ragu in the French hill town of Dalat to bonding with the Julia Child of Vietnam in Saigon. Epicures and culture buffs will delight in markets, restaurants, farms, fisheries, and cooking classes as Kim assembles her dream meal and shares recipes such as banana flower salad and clay pot fish. Examining how we eat reflects who we are as individuals and as communities, *Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam* offers a feast for armchair gourmets, as well as a colorful guide for travelers hungering for their next adventure. Â

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Customer Reviews

Sometimes I think American women travel to discover the taste of good food and to rediscover "The Art of Eating," as M.F.K. Fisher termed it in her classic volume of travel, cookery, and enjoyment. When I first discovered that book, I carried it with me everywhere and read it every chance I got--waiting at doctors' offices, at soccer practices, at traffic lights. A friend saw me with it

and asked, "Doesn't that title frighten you?" She was a woman who was substantially overweight; I was a woman who was constantly on a diet, but M.F.K. gave me an inkling of what food and eating could be I didn't discover that art until I went to Thailand where eating was an act of pleasure, not one of guilt, shame, and fear. Although I am sure that Kim Fay's relationship with food was much less troubled than mine, it is quite clear from her book that she discovered how much immense pleasure came from good food, freshly prepared, and eaten in the company of friends, during her four years of living in Vietnam. Missing this dimension to her daily life when she returned to the states, Kim returns to Vietnam with her photographer-sister to explore that country's food--its history, its preparation, its flavors, from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. The result is a wonderful mixture of travel memoir, food literature, and cultural history, served up with a generous helping of humor and a number of tantalizing recipes. Kim and her sister Julie are joined by Kim's friend Huong, a fashionable and opinionated woman with a stunningly healthy appetite and a talent for finding the best places to fulfill her ravenous desire for good food.

Let me begin with disclosure: this review comes with attachments. I share entangled endeavors with Kim Fay, author of the newly released *Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam*. Her publisher, ThingsAsian Press, will publish my next two books. And I have contributed essays to Kim's guidebook series, *To Asia With Love*. Though Kim and I have never met in person, sticklers for objectivity would argue that I cannot write an unbiased review of her book. But I can write a fair review. And in fact I've waited months to do just that. Back in October, with days growing shorter and winds colder, Kim sent me a draft of her manuscript--double-spaced type on 8 1/2 x 11 paper, no photos except a rough copy of the book's cover. But now I have the real thing, nearly 300 pages of intertwined essays and full-color photos taken by Kim's sister, photographer Julie Fay Ashborn. It is one of the heftiest, most beautiful food and travel books I've seen from Asia. (The type is a bit tiny--my parents would have trouble reading it--but the photos are big and bold.) "I thought about how much better food tastes when it fits into a narrative." With this, Kim captures the nugget of great food writing. Ingredients are important--yes--but context is so much more so. *Communion* doesn't simply tell us what Kim thought about the crispy fried eggplant she ate in Hoi An. Instead, it guides us through the life of Miss Vy, the restaurateur and instructor who opened her history to Kim. By the time we reach the recipe for that eggplant, "as delicate and flavorful as Miss Vy," we know all about the chef's upbringing, her family's post-war struggles through Doi Moi, and her thoughts on communism, poverty and sexism. In turn, I am all the hungrier for her food.

Fay is not from Vietnam, she moved there for the adventure of living in a foreign country and writing a novel, and stayed for 4 years. She taught English while living there and was befriended by one of her students named Dung, and subsequently was taken in by Dung's Vietnamese family. Fay fell in love with the country's food when she was living on her own in a family run guesthouse, and discovered, outside the door, a street vendor selling chargrilled pork, with wilted water spinach and rice. Dung's mother introduced her to traditional cooking, and Dung and her sisters opened her eyes to all types of Vietnamese food in the city of Ho Chi Minh. Fay returned to the States not having learned to cook anything Vietnamese, but she was living in Los Angeles, as was Duyen, a sister from her Vietnamese family, so while inconvenient she was able, along with Duyen, to seek out and satiate her cravings for Vietnamese food. Fay grew hungry to learn how to cook Vietnamese food, but using cookbooks and taking classes in LA was not satisfying her, so she hatched a plan to return to Vietnam to learn how to cook Vietnamese food, but the ultimate goal was to become an expert on Vietnamese cuisine in all regions of the country. Ten years after first leaving Vietnam she returned, armed with a 'bucket list' of foods, restaurants, and chefs. She brought along her sister as her food photographer, and a friend named Huong that she knew from her prior life in Vietnam who signed up as their interpreter, and the journey was on. Communion is very helpfully broken out into chapters for each major city in Vietnam. From every city she shares at least one recipe, except for the city of Hue. This seemed odd, because in Hue they have a clam rice dish that Fay covets.

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