

Another Bánh Mì in the Oven

Is the humble Vietnamese hoagie poised to become New York's No. 1 sandwich?

BY ROBIN RAISFELD AND ROB PATRONITE

NO ONE KNOWS precisely when the first bánh mì hit New York, although historians of that ingenious Vietnamese delicacy estimate that it was sometime during the Koch administration, back when there wasn't such a huge market for crackly demi-baguettes, warmed in the oven, slicked with mayo and pâté, then layered meticulously with a variety of cold cuts and a thatch of pickled and fresh vegetables. One thing is certain: Since that fateful day, the bánh mì (pronounced *bun me*) has come into its own, transcending its humble Chinatown origins to infiltrate not only hipster enclaves like Williamsburg, which, in the two years since Silent H opened, has become a bánh mì hub, but also the menus of cocktail lounges (Pegu Club, which serves a fried-oyster bánh mì), coffee shops (Roots & Vines, where you can have a bánh mì with your Counter Culture latte), and even wine bars (Terroir offers a mortadella-stuffed bánh mì Italiano). It's fair to say, in fact, that the bánh mì is the new panino, and the toaster oven (found wherever bánh mì are made, including a new financial-district street cart) the new panini press.

It's easy to understand the Saigon sub's appeal. It's got flavor and textural contrasts that elude most others in its category. It's

got a roll that traditionally incorporates rice flour to make it extra-light and crackly, especially when toasted. It's got fatty meats, pickled carrots and daikon, fragrant cilantro, cool cucumber, and hot sauce or hot peppers or both. It's usually got a cheap price tag, too. That's probably why new bánh mì shops have been popping up like spring crocuses of late. There's Baogette in Curry Hill (with two more branches on the way), An Choi on Orchard Street, Nha Toi in Williamsburg, and a new Park Slope outpost of Hanco's. And then there's Num Pang, which claims not to serve bánh mì at all, but their Cambodian cousin, stuffed with things like tiger shrimp and veal meatballs.

Still, for most aficionados, the classic bánh mì is the one most menus call No. 1, typically layered with varying combinations of a beige-colored, bologna-like pork roll, head cheese, a red-rimmed lardo-like substance, and often sweetish, pinkish barbecued pork. To honor that archetype, we went on a bánh mì binge, eating our way through the stalwart veterans and the new wave alike, judging their No. 1's on construction, balance, and overall flavor. Here are our favorites.

1

Ba Xuyen's
Pâté Thịt Nguôn

New York's best bánh mì is well lubed and generously stuffed with four takes on Vietnamese pork product, plus a judicious smear of pork-liver pâté. The key, though, is that every ingredient lives in perfect harmony within its crackly crusted baguette. And they don't stint on the cilantro. \$3.75; 4222 Eighth Ave., nr. 42nd St., Sunset Park; 718-633-6601.

2

Baogette's
Baogette

This is a bold, juicy flavor bomb of a bánh mì. Ask for it spicy and that's what you get. All the meats are made in-house. The jury is out, though, on the correctness of the par-baked baguettes that emerge hot from the oven—but with a slightly doughy crumb. \$5; 61 Lexington Ave., nr. 25th St.; 212-518-4089.

3

Bánh Mì Saigon Bakery's
Bánh Mì Saigon

The frenzied crowd at this sandwich counter in the back of a Chinatown jewelry store is of such a magnitude that the kitchen crew is forced to make some sandwiches in advance. That's not ideal, of course, but the sweet, peppery barbecued pork is so good, you won't mind. \$3.75; 138-01 Mott St., nr. Grand St.; 212-941-1541.

4

Num Pang's
Pulled Duroc Pork

We're talking apples and oranges here because a bánh mì is not a num pang, according to chef-owner Ratha Chau, who doesn't offer anything resembling the cold-cut special. But his slow-roasted Duroc pulled pork on a butter-toasted Parisi roll is too good not to include in a list like this. \$7.50; 21 E. 12th St., nr. University Pl.; 212-255-3273.

5

Sáu Voi Corp's
Bánh Mì Dac Biêt

This ramshackle Lotto-ticket-and-cigarette shack doubles as a sandwich counter and claims to have introduced bánh mì to New York in 1987. That it's still around is a testament to the classic minimalist construction of its house special (ham, pâté, turkey, and pork roll on good bread shipped in from Jersey). \$3.75; 101-105 Lafayette St., at Walker St.; 212-226-8184.

