



Fish Worth Flying For

You'll find *cha ca la Vong*, Hanoi's classic dish of grilled fish with turmeric and dill, at little shops throughout the city. Here's where one chef who brought the dish stateside found the best version he's ever had. BY KATE PARHAM KORDSMEIER

HIDDEN UP A NARROW stairway in Hanoi's Old Quarter is a restaurant so unassuming, you wonder how it could be worthy of a culinary pilgrimage. But Cha Ca La Vong, a bare-bones dining room with wooden tables and bright-blue walls, is well worth seeking out. In fact, it has been credited with popularizing the Northern Vietnamese dish of grilled fish with turmeric and dill after which it's named.

And although Cha Ca La Vong is surrounded by countless knockoffs (so many that the street is named Cha Ca), it

remains the place chefs go to study up on the dish. One such disciple was Chris Shepherd, of Houston's Underbelly restaurant (underbellyhouston.com), who traveled the 8,700 miles or so between his hometown and Hanoi to taste the dish in its original form.

On arrival at Cha Ca La Vong, the six-foot-two chef found that his burly frame barely made it up the restaurant's steep stairs. Once inside, he was handed a laminated sheet of paper proclaiming, in English, **ONLY ONE DISH IN OUR RESTAURANT:**

GRILLED FISH. Then the ceremony began. A server arrived, bearing a shopworn gas burner, a skillet, and yellow-streaked fish coated in turmeric and frying oil.

There was a spark, a sizzle, a heaping of fresh herbs—dill, mint, scallions—and a short wait while the air filled with a briny, herbaceous aroma. Finally, the fish reached the point of crispy perfection. The rest is left up to guests: they can finish their *cha ca* tableside with cold noodles, chopped peanuts, more herbs, and, of course, a drizzle of fermented fish sauce.

Shepherd now serves his own version of *cha ca* made with Gulf Coast catch of the day rather than the traditional snakehead fish or catfish. He advises fellow pilgrims to look for Cha Ca La Vong's address, rather than its name, and to show up after 5 p.m.—early birds risk being shooed away.

Shepherd said, "The culture of doing just one thing really well doesn't exist in the States, but that's Vietnam. And the hole-in-the-wall spots blow your mind." 14 Cha Ca, Hoan Kiem; 84-4-3825-3929.