



## It's not just Guinness that needs to be made with the right water

Everyone has heard the saying 'there is something in the water', but that 'something' in Hoi An is the secret ingredient for one of the most delicious dishes in Vietnam.

"Many people have tried to make *cao lau* noodles elsewhere, but they all fail," says Huynh Thi Thuong, beaming with pride as she shows me how to make the seemingly simple but unique meal at the **Tra Que Water Wheel** ([traquewaterwheel.com](http://traquewaterwheel.com)) restaurant in Hoi An.

Among Vietnamese street food dishes, *cao lau* is unique. It is the only dish with origins in Japan — in this case soba noodles — and it also has a depth of unique flavours not found in other noodle dishes in this country. *Cao lau* is at once spicy, bitter, sharp and sweet.

### An Age-Old Tradition

So what makes the Hoi An version so special? According to local residents, it's not only the water, but the ingredients.

First the rice for the noodles is soaked in ash-water. The ash is taken from cooking wood that must be collected from Cu Lao Cham Island. The soaking of the rice helps to give the noodles their particular colour and plasticity, much like the Japanese version.

Now comes the most important part, the part

that makes the *cao lau* in Hoi An stand out from that produced anywhere else.

After the rice is milled into flour, it is added to water that is taken only from the Ba Le Well, a waterhole that has been in existence for hundreds of years.

"Here is where we get the fresh water," says Thuong. "It doesn't have any chemicals or impurities, and the temperature is nice and cool."

Using a cotton cloth to steam the rice milk, the noodles are then rolled and cut into strands.

*Cao lau* is usually eaten with crunchy bean sprouts and fresh herbs, which are picked at the Tra Que Vegetable Village on the edge of the De Vong River. The noodles are served with pork that has been marinated in spices. According to Thuong, three kinds of spices are indispensable — cinnamon powder, star anise and soya sauce. If one of these three is missing then the dish cannot be called *cao lau*.

It is then finished off with small squares of pork crackling which are sprinkled on top to add additional texture to the dish.

"*Cao lau* can be found on menus in France, the UK, Australia, Hanoi, Danang and Saigon," says Thuong, "But many people still find the dish is not as good as when it is made in Hoi An, even when the noodles are flown in by airplane." — **Matthew Edwards** 