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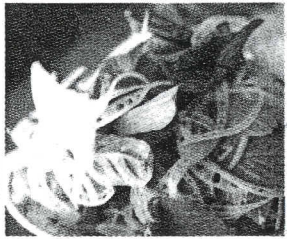
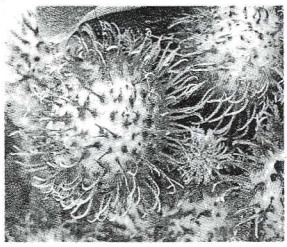
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*Searching for*  
**Indochine**

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CLICK ON TODAY'S EXTRAS FOR AN ONLINE-ONLY RECIPE FOR VEGETABLE PANCAKES





**CHEF'S SNAPS:** Rambutan at a Danang market, top, a plate of herbs and chilies and a toast with rice whiskey and reptile blood caught Bloise's eye.

BY ELIZABETH HANLY  
Special to The Miami Herald

Everybody in the place calls him "chef" as he walks by. At 30, Michael Bloise presides over the kitchen at Wish, the highly regarded restaurant at The Hotel, one of South Beach's toniest venues.

Bloise can be plenty serious. But he had taken some time off a few months back, and on one night in particular, "I was very busy getting drunk."

It was on a trip — his first — to Vietnam, his mother's country. At a small roadside restaurant, "the house specialty, a six-foot-long grass snake, was brought to our table. It was alive and well, but off with its head, its blood mixed into a bottle of rice whiskey. Then the toasts began.

"It is customary to make almost continual toasts, especially while being served various innards of the snake: its still-beating heart, for instance.

"Yeah, it all can seem pretty grotesque. I did, after all, grow up in the States eating Cheerios. But . . . after a while I was eating the snake with my hands, discarding its bones on an earthen floor, drinking shots of the blood whiskey. There was something primal about it, something essential."

The three-week trip with his mother, Hien Thu Bloise, and older brother Andrew had been a long time coming.

"But with the death of a parent — my Dad passed away two years ago — when you begin to realize the mortality of the grown-ups, all those issues of heritage and identity become far more real.

"As a kid, I never felt particularly Asian, not with my grandmother's marinara sauce all around."

The only relatives Bloise (rhymes with noise) knew were his father's Sicilian-American ones. His Dad was a career mil-

itary man; the family was on the move, living in Germany and several states before settling in retirement north of Tampa.

"I was your all-American kid breaking my heart over baseball. At school people thought I looked Alaskan. No, I never felt Asian except when we would go visit some of my Dad's friends. I'd wonder what they had seen in Vietnam and what they thought of me, especially since some of his friends had been badly hurt.

"Growing up, the only thing I would have possibly called Asian about me was my great love of soy sauce. I even put it on macaroni and cheese," Bloise says with a grin. "Soy's still a favorite." His tone changes almost imperceptibly. "A soy application with braising gives a depth salt never can.

"It was as I became more interested in food that I became more interested in Asia and how to bring it to my grandmother's blunt, round flavors — those Sicilian ones that I associated with home."

Since his graduation from Johnson & Wales University in 1998, it's been the SoBe fast track for Bloise — The Tides, The Gaucho Room at The Loews, Tantra and, for nearly three years, Wish, where he has earned three stars from The Herald, four from the Mobil Travel Guide and a "where to eat on South Beach" mention in The New York Times.

Everybody is impressed. Except, perhaps, his mother.

"Proud, yes. Impressed, I doubt it. My

## Vietnam is a revelation for Wish chef Michael Bloise



Mom doesn't get blown away easily. Besides, she is very much of the school that if one does feel something intensely, it's put away, saved for later and the quietest and most private of celebrations."

She doesn't talk much about her past. Bloise knows only that her family — and thus his own — had been important during Vietnam's struggle for independence from the French in the 1950s. She was orphaned and lost any trace of her siblings during a bombardment of her village, Hue, just south of the demilitarized zone that then divided Vietnam.

In a nervous note to himself on the long flight to Hanoi, Bloise wondered, "Will I fit in with those people I am said to belong to?"

At first it was all landscape as the family drove south to Ho Chi Minh City, as Saigon is now called.

"There were immense limestone rocks jutting from the sea, the forest. . . . The view was staggeringly beautiful, at the same time, chilling. It wasn't like Japanese or Chinese silk screens one sees in books; the landscape was far more raw than that, and, curiously, far more feminine than I could have imagined. . . .

"I had heard that the architecture of Hanoi was very beautiful with all the romance associated with 'Indochine,' but we mostly saw uniforms; men in uniform were everywhere. Perhaps Indochine no

longer exists. . . . In any case, we didn't linger in the north. My Mom was visibly more relaxed in the south. . . . Saigon is far more liberal. It has very much its own identity. The flavors are lighter there.

"Maybe if 'Indochine' still exists, it's there in the roadside stands in the south. We saw rows of pommels [larger cousins of the grapefruit]; the rinds had been cut back to look like a star. The center of each was an icicle of pulp. . . .

"More than the sheer beauty of the stands, the flavors everywhere seemed so unpretentious. People seemed to know how to throw a few simple herbs into a dish and create downright brilliant contrasts and deep flavors.

"They seem to have mastered the bass and the treble. Cinnamon and anise, mint, sea salt, bird chiles: It becomes earth and air. No nonsense. Nothing is muddled. This was what my mother was doing when she added a touch of sugar to her chicken when we were growing up."

Boise sits back and recalls the violet light at sunset, the endless rice paddies and reflecting pools. Men in cone-shaped hats worked water buffalo. Children worked them, too, but standing on top, some of the youths no bigger than his 8-year-old son, Christopher.

"I'd like very much for my son to know Vietnam, but when he's ready, when he begins to want to know."

This trip was about something more primal: a mother and her sons finding their way home.

\*TURN TO INDOCHINE, 14E



**BACK HOME AGAIN:** Hien Thu Bloise returns with sons Michael and Andrew.

# The Mother Count





CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**WISH FISH:** Caramel-glazed salmon with bok choy and summer roll.

## COVER STORY

# The mother country

• INDOCHINE, FROM 12E

"Our mother was completely different in Vietnam. I could describe her as more playful, but the change was far more subtle than that. We traveled all about Vietnam; we were able to show her more of her country than she had ever seen.

"But that, too, was only a small part of what I am trying to say. We were able to see her in her own context for the first time: not as Mom, but as who she is. We were able to give her that, to show her what she was, to let her know we knew. All of this was wordless, of course. All of it told in a look, a hug."

The family stopped at palaces and temples. One had so many stairs, Bloise carried his Mom on his back.

"Somebody thought I was Vietnamese. I was so happy I couldn't sleep that night."

The family visited the caves of Cu Chi village, once a Viet Cong stronghold.

"My Dad was ordered into them. Imagine, 230 kilometers of tunnels. Booby traps all the way. . . . Here my Dad was, surrounded by dense forest. This place was scary even during the day. The enemy was everywhere; it must have been madness for him."

Mother and sons found their way into other forests. "Enchanted ones. There really are such forests in Vietnam as well, with giant bonsai trees making curves impossible even to dream. Better than 'Indochine.' Past all contradictions.

"You know, that is what I want my food to be. I've never been as much interested in how it tastes, as how it feels as you taste it."

## Indochine on the menu

"I have little interest in presenting Vietnamese cooking per se. I am interested in translating certain experiences I had in Vietnam into dishes," Wish chef Michael Bloise says, pointing to his caramel-glazed wild salmon, served with grilled baby bok choy and a duck confit-soba summer roll.

"After one of our hardest days of driving in Vietnam, we stopped in another small roadside restaurant. We were served beautifully sliced pork accompanied by a hot shrimp sauce — strong, elemental flavors that were in opposition; only in your palate would they find balance. That is my intention with our salmon dish."

Bloise returns again and again to the almost casual Vietnamese use of herbs to create high contrast. This time he is referring to his cinnamon-braised oxtail.

"It's not just the cinnamon in the dish. I might have worked with that anyway. It's that now I understand far more deeply what can happen when something as light as star fruit and jicama tops something with flavors as deep and hearty as oxtail."

Pho, a rice-noodle soup served with basil, bean sprouts, cilantro and lemon wedges, is standard breakfast fare in Vietnam.

"I found it so light and nourishing, so flavorful, that with only a few variations — my pho is a beef soup with an oxtail stock — I've placed it on the Wish breakfast menu."

— ELIZABETH HANLY

• *Wish is at 801 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; 305-674-9474.*

MIAMIHERALD.COM: CLICK TODAY'S EXTRAS FOR MICHAEL BLOISE'S CRISPY-SKINNED SNAPPER RECIPE.