

Vietnamese Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Vietnam

Primary Language(s): Vietnamese

Percent of Iowa's Population: 0.3%

Where is Vietnam?¹¹



Traditional dress typically included light weight and thin clothing. For women the typical dress was “ao dai”, which was consistent with a long skirt or dress.⁴



Education and Literacy

Education is highly valued in Vietnamese culture, before wealth and age.³ The Vietnamese education system has a 98 percent literacy rate.⁶ Community is extremely important as well, so education is seen to create a community of good citizens instead of a way for a person to advance individually.⁷

Background

“The Vietnamese culture is one of the oldest in Southeast Asia and is heavily influenced by the Chinese culture. After Vietnam attained independence from China in the 10th century, the country began to expand southwards which led to the incorporation of elements of the Champa and Khmer cultures into the Vietnamese culture. Later, French colonial rule in Vietnam introduced the Western culture to the country and led to the spread of Catholicism and the adoption of the Latin alphabet. Since the establishment of the communist government and declaration of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976, many Vietnamese have fled their country. Most initially settled in refugee camps in neighboring South East Asian countries. In Vietnam, family and clan are valued over individualism. Clan is the most important social unit in the country and each clan features a patriarch heading the clan and a clan altar.”³

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Family members are expected to behave and work for the good of the group.³ Even today, you will often find a three or four generations of family living in the same household.¹ Respect is a very important aspect of their culture. Respect is typically shown by avoiding eye contact and bowing your head when talking with someone of a higher status or a different gender.² Many also won't voice disagreement because that would be disrespectful. It is common for Vietnamese people to smile. This can be a sign of respect, agreement, apology, or embarrassment, and is not necessarily related to an emotion.² The predominant religions are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism; however, you will also find a small following of Catholicism.³

Holidays & Celebrations

Vietnam also has a rich tradition of music and dance. They have nearly 50 national music instruments.¹ Instead of having baby showers, it is common to have a “one-month celebration” after the infant is born. Family and friends will visit the infant's home bearing gifts for the infant and family. Likewise, it is common to have a “one-year celebration” held in the same manner.³ Tet is the Vietnamese New Year and is usually celebrated between the month of January and February depending on the Lunar Calendar. This is a time of new beginnings and traditions can differ slightly depending on the religion practiced by the family. It is a time to pay debts, forgive others, improve self, and make friends out of adversary.

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Health Disparities

Asian Americans are disproportionately affected by many health disparities. Cancer and cardiovascular disease are the two leading causes of death in this ethnic group. Hepatitis B is one of the largest health threats for Asians as well as tuberculosis.¹⁰ Mental health problems in the Asian American community are disturbingly high. Asian women have a high risk of Osteoporosis, this is primarily due to the high rate of lactose intolerance in this group. Many of these health threats are disproportionately high because this ethnic group faces cultural and linguistic barriers that may discourage or prevent them from accessing health care services available to them.¹⁰

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Vietnamese cuisine varies between the North, South and Central regions of Vietnam.² Noodles are regularly eaten, along with vegetables, soups such as pho, rice and fish.^{3,2} Dishes can be sweet or spicy, and may be flavored with soy and fish sauce, mint or basil.² Dairy products and red meat are not generally consumed.³ There is a large belief in the 'hot' and 'cold' properties of food in the sense that an imbalance in hot and cold can cause health issues.⁴ WIC vegetables and rice can be utilized to accommodate the traditional Vietnamese meal patterns.

Considerations for WIC

- Communication styles among this culture may be very different than many WIC staff are used to. This is important to make sure communication is clear and positive.¹
- An important piece to note among male WIC staff is that Vietnamese women may not feel comfortable with shaking hands of men.¹
- People of this culture may avoid eye contact as a sign of respect because eye contact can be interpreted as provoking another.¹
- A smile in this culture may display respect as well as be used in place of an apology or words of gratitude.¹
- Rice and fresh vegetables are some of the main staples in the Vietnamese diet as well as considering the balance of "hot and cold" in dishes. Understanding these aspects will help to tailor the WIC food packages, such as discussing the rice option and ways to utilize other WIC foods to create "balanced" dishes of hot and cold.³
- Regarding breastfeeding, WIC should take time explaining the importance of colostrum as some mothers of this culture may believe that nursing the child before the milk supply comes in could have negative impacts on mom such as decreased fluids status and heat.³
- Discussing the value of colostrum is a great way to empower Vietnamese to overcome potential barriers to breastfeeding.³

What's the Iowa Connection?

The Vietnamese people began immigrating to the US and Iowa following the end of the Vietnam war. Governor Robert D. Ray was instrumental in bringing the Vietnamese people to Iowa and providing aid.⁸ The Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services is uniquely certified as a resettlement agency by the U.S. State Department which was started by Governor Robert Ray.⁸ Another resource available to the Vietnamese people is The Vietnamese American Community in Iowa which partners with organizations in the community 'to promote Vietnamese culture, customs and language'.⁵

Traditional Pho which originated in North Vietnam, typically includes rice noodles, chicken or beef, scallions and bean sprouts.^{1,2}



How are we Living?

This culture often eats in "communal style" where everyone will take portions from food centered in the middle and place the food in their own bowl. The typical foundation for a meal is soup and rice or noodles topped with vegetables, meat, and fresh herbs.⁴ In Iowa, regarding the highest number of Vietnamese per city: Des Moines with 203,433, Cedar Rapids with 126,326, Davenport with 99,685 individuals.²

