

**PETER NGUYEN**

**Vietnamese Farmers' Market/Community Gardening Project Manager – New Orleans, LA**

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Interview Date: February 22, 2007

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Southern Foodways Alliance

Project: New Orleans Eats/Guardians of Tradition

**[Begin Peter Nguyen Interview]**

00:00:00

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, February 22, 2007 and I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana in New Orleans East. Could you tell us—state your name and what you do for a living?

00:00:20

**Peter Nguyen:** Okay, my name is Peter Nguyen; I work for Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation. My main job is project manager for community gardening. And besides that, whatever job needs required for—for us to perform my community service. We also provide a translation for our community members that doesn't speak English; so—.

00:00:55

**SR:** And let me just make sure it's working. So just a little background on yourself—you've been in—you came to the New Orleans area at some point after the storm—after Katrina?

00:01:12

**PN:** Yes, back in August—the beginning of August. I heard about the project, I guess, earlier in the year but at the time I was—I just got another job. Basically I was farming at a family farm in Florida, and I just needed some time off, so I was just like ignoring this and just take my time off and travel a little bit. In August when, you know, my brother James keeps mentioning it. You

know he'd say *Come on over*. So I came and—and spoke to Father Vien, and he's—he's the visionary of—of how this—how we should rebuild this place and—and make it so that it is keeping up culture as farmers and—and—and fishermen. We need to create programs and projects that will keep it going, right, because our elders are getting old; our youngsters are doing new things and moving on. They're not—they're not catching onto—to our old ways and culture. So there's this community garden. We're hoping to educate and—and have a living witness so that children can come and—and visit the elders and watch how they do things, and hopefully some of the skills will pass on to that next generation and encourage them to continue.

00:02:50

**SR:** And where is the community—is there a community garden that's located somewhere?

00:02:56

**PN:** Not at this time; there are many gardens in our—most of the community members. Instead of having grass, they use the front yard, back yard, and some of them—if they don't have a yard, they'll move onto other people's land and they will be squatting like. Over the levee, even some of the vacant lots that hasn't been developed, they'll come in there and—and build a little garden; so—.

00:03:29

**SR:** I've noticed one big garden that's not near any house that's like at the end of Alcée Fortier [Boulevard].

00:03:36

**PN:** Oh at the corner, yes. That—that belongs to someone from New York. And actually, whoever is in charge of that garden has permission of the owner to garden in there. Why—why it is not being developed, so you know they figure it'd be nice to—to have someone to use the land and—and not leave it, you know, overgrown in—in weeds and stuff.

00:04:02

**SR:** So that's one person gardening in there?

00:04:04

**PN:** Actually one person in charge and several gardeners are—are doing it together.

00:04:13

**SR:** Okay. Well I have a lot of questions about the sorts of things that are grown, but first your—you grew up in—where did you grow up?

00:04:21

**PN:** I was born in Vietnam. I came here when I was 11; our family was sponsored by a—an American Catholic parish up in Illinois. Basically educated, got my college degree up in—also in—in Illinois, you know, and moved down to Florida and decided to do some farming. But what I know from—from the point of entry here in the United States, from—from there to now, is—it's all American. It's—it's—this is the first time that I even lived in an area that have so many Vietnamese in this place. And I'm glad to be here because many times I feel I'm losing—I'm

losing my language and—and I've only been here four months, but I'm learning a lot. I basically learned some new words and hopefully the—the—I don't lose my language. I'm getting better and better every day.

00:05:38

**SR:** Do you—well, how old are you if you don't mind me asking?

00:05:42

**PN:** I'm 43.

00:05:44

**SR:** And do you find that other people around your age still have their language—people who were either born in Vietnam or raised here with Vietnamese parents?

00:05:55

**PN:** Actually if—people my age that live, say, here in this country but far away from, say, a Vietnamese community, most of them probably lose most—most of the Vietnamese language. I know that for a fact because most of my brothers—even the younger ones and some older ones—beginning to—I mean they won't be able to—they can speak normally, but then when you need to do translation it's a little more difficult because when you translate you can't translate directly. The meaning will change, so all my brothers are having that problem; so living here basically seeing and speaking Vietnamese practically every day—especially the elders who—they can't speak English, so it forces you to—to speak the—the language. You can't go through English

because you know they can't understand it. So this is—it's a learning process, right: helping people and also learning at the same time, because you can't beat it.

00:07:08

**SR:** What kind of—well what was your college degree?

00:07:12

**PN:** Mathematics—Statistics.

00:07:14

**SR:** And what kind of farming did you do? Was it on a Vietnamese farm or—?

00:07:18

**PN:** No, it was on—owned by my mom. We were doing some tropical fruits: longan, cherimoya, jackfruit.

00:07:29

**SR:** At the Vietnamese market that's here in this area on Saturdays, I see a lot of those fruits.

Are they mostly grown in—in Florida and other places, or are there fruit—those fruit trees here?

00:07:39

**PN:** Some of them are grown here, but in very low quantity because of the weather. Most of them you grow either near the house or they need to be covered in the winter, so quantity-wise they're very low. But most of the fruit is probably coming from Florida—Miami area.

00:08:07

**SR:** Uh-hm. Well how about—can you tell me—I know that, you know, you just recently arrived, but what—can you tell me what you know about the market that happens in this area on Saturdays?

00:08:22

**PN:** I know—very early in the morning—5:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.; I have come out once or twice but—at the time they were beginning to pack up. But I've seen stuff that, you know, like people selling rabbits and some—some vegetables that they—they grow from their own little garden at home—whatever they have to bring out to sell. I don't know if they make any profit, but just being out there, being able to—to involve themselves into an activity that—that, you know, they don't make money but they're meeting people. It's like a socialize time for them.

00:09:10

**SR:** Because I've—I've been out there and I've seen a lot of people that look like they've come from Mass. Is that—?

00:09:15

**PN:** Uh-hm. Saturday—actually no—there's no Mass on Saturday morning; I don't think so.

00:09:24

**SR:** Well I thought there was a real early one.

00:09:27

**PN:** Maybe there is; I'm not up early enough to catch it. *[Laughs]*

00:09:33

**SR:** Do you—is it—is it your sense that that's like a sort of a glue for the community, having that there on Saturdays, or how is it viewed by the community?

00:09:47

**PN:** It's not a negative thing. It is like all activities, where people can have their own things to do, for gardeners like to come and show their pride—what they've grown and—and—and share to the community you know that *Hey, I can grow this*. You know, and *It's good enough for me to eat, so it should be good—good enough for you to eat too*; so they—they bring it out. The community—I mean with—with all the modern grocery stores, they can ship in tons and thousands of pounds of almost anything. But that—that's too easy, you know. You've got to do—you've got to know where it come from, how—how the fruit became and how a good one—one has entered your body, you need to know where it comes from. That's why we're promoting organic only, because before I was farming chemically because that's the fastest way to get things done. So for now, because the landfill—we don't want none of that in our community. We want it to be healthy.

00:11:03

**SR:** The landfill.

00:11:05

**PN:** Right.

00:11:05

**SR:** Yeah.

00:11:07

**PN:** And then from there we have to keep on going. We have to go all-natural, which means organic farming. We're trying to bring in alternative energy; we—we've been researching into wind-power, windmills, bio-diesel and solar, to see if we can generate some of this energy based on the nature of the wind and—and the sun instead of ruining the air with gas-burning engines.

00:11:37

**SR:** And how is that—how does the—how is that received by the community? Are people open to that?

00:11:44

**PN:** Most of our older members don't quite grasp the concept of—of—of new things. So what we—what we do now is for the next—for the future—future generation. So we do things

presently—create the community garden, yes, to start out with the elders; it's for the—it's—it's designed for—for the next generation; the cleaner fuel is for our next generation because they're the ones that's going to be using all of it, not the elders. Elders here, they would love to walk to church every morning; that's why everything is so close. That's why all their homes is built around the church within one—one square mile, so that they can walk to church. And we want to keep it going because we look at our elders that's 80, 90 years-old and still walk to church, you know, and nowadays people are dying of cancer [in their] teens, babies—20—30s, you know. And they—they are doing something right that we need—we need to know, and we need to keep it going.

00:13:08

**SR:** Do you think within the—the gardening traditions of the—the elder people in the community, are there a lot of organic practices already or not?

00:13:17

**PN:** Already yes; there—

00:13:20

**SR:** Just naturally?

00:13:21

**PN:** Naturally; they do a lot of organic already. My job is—is to learn more—better ways of doing things, higher productivity. And either way, I mean they're old; we're not expecting them

to go out there and—and do all the work themselves. We—we just want to—we—we produce the garden and prepare everything for them, and all they have to do is go plant the seeds and—and—and—and do the rest, the harvest and—.

00:14:02

**SR:** What about—can you—can you maybe describe for the record what the—**[Knock on Door]**. Want me to—I can pause this if you need to—? Okay, so we had to pause the tape for a minute. So can you describe to me sort of what the—what a lot of the—what’s going on when I see these gardens that seem to be right on the bayou? Are people growing things—

00:14:30

**PN:** They’re growing.

00:14:31

**SR:** —things in the water, or how does that work?

00:14:33

**PN:** They’re not in the water; just on the side. They grow on the sides, near the water—have to move the water. The water is heavy and if you do it by hand you—you don’t want to be walking buckets of water too far away, so if you grow along there, and basically it just takes care of itself.

00:14:59

**SR:** Irrigation?

00:15:00

**PN:** Irrigation, yeah.

00:15:01

**SR:** Okay.

00:15:02

**PN:** One of the reasons we want to do a community garden because that bayou water—we're not sure it is clean. Because that same body—body of water runs by the—the landfill that Waste Management dump basically right next to it; so any drainage from—from the landfill, it drains into the—the bayou and it runs through the community. And we're not sure the water is clean enough for them to use it to—to irrigate the vegetables and fruits.

00:15:36

**SR:** And so I think I heard that there's testing going—they've—they've stopped officially dumping in the landfill, right?

00:15:44

**PN:** Right, they stopped officially. They haven't given opportunity to go in there and test the—the material yet, but Father Vien and Leo Esclamado—he's—he's working right now with the—they're set to do testimony on this Monday on the landfill and all the illegal dumpsites at—in this

area. They've been doing a lot of helicopter rides to—to—to look all over the sites, and Monday is testimony.

00:16:26

**SR:** I heard that there are going to be some big politicians here on Monday.

00:16:28

**PN:** Uh-hm, yes.

00:16:31

**SR:** Well that's good. When you see the—the, you know, private gardens here of individuals, and when you go to the market, do you personally recognize all of the—all of the things that they're—that are grown?

00:16:48

**PN:** I haven't bought anything from the market because I haven't done any cooking. **[Laughs]** But I recently been visiting some—some—some of the homes, some of the gardens, and catalog what they grow, so that when we have a community garden—we're—we're trying to persuade people not to plant the same thing. Because a lot of people would basically—basically eat the same type of vegetables, and if everybody—if you have 30 or 40 gardeners planting the same thing and there are other herbs that we need and won't get—grow, you know, so I catalog them so that later on when we have our garden, when we—when we divide the lots and assign or rent them out to—to people, you know, we'll—we'll try to have some kind of system to have say

*Okay, this season you plant this amount of herb and vegetables and—and then next season you get to plant something else; you know, keep doing that—rotating—so that people get to basically grow everything and have experience and—and learning so that we have a variety of vegetables instead of just 10 or 12.*

00:18:04

**SR:** And what about—I guess—I mean, Katrina pretty much destroyed most of the gardening that was going on here before.

00:18:08

**PN:** Uh-hm.

00:18:11

**SR:** Were there plants that were lost that haven't been replaced yet?

00:18:16

**PN:** As up to now the—the community had grown—we—everyone has grown something different. Some grow the same stuff, but we haven't been able to find out what—what's—what some species have been destroyed. I mean, I've been hunting down seeds and—and I have a list that lists—that list seems too short for—for a lot of the vegetative that we eat. I've been asking to see from different elders to, you know, to see you know—even Father Vien to see what else, because there's much more. I recently found a—it's a root type of—what you call it? It's a root, it's like a sweet potato—similar—but the species has to come from Vietnam. So what I found, it

came from Thailand; yeah, so it was slightly not exactly the way they want it, but it's acceptable for now because the other breed is not available.

00:19:52

**SR:** Where did you find the one from Thailand?

00:19:53

**PN:** Houston.

00:19:55

**SR:** And you found the seeds or—?

00:19:55

**PN:** It's—it's a root; it's like sweet potatoes, which is—they sell at the market. I have a friend that she keeps—she works here and then on the weekends she goes home to Houston. And I say *Hey, you want to do me a favor and stop by the Hong Kong market that is big in Houston and see if you can buy me this root?* So that request—I gave her—I asked her that two months ago; she just—she last weekend, she just found it. It took her that long to get because it's seasonal, I guess.

00:20:29

**SR:** And then are you able to reproduce it just with one of the vegetables?

00:20:33

**PN:** Yeah, it's—it's a root so it's—they can slice it a certain way and you bury it underground.

00:20:43

**SR:** Huh. So there's a list of things like that—that are sort of scavenger hunt?

00:20:45

**PN:** Uh-huh, a list—and a lot of them is still in Vietnamese that I need to translate—to find out what it is in English and where can I find this. One of the—the same family with cilantro: it's called culantro. It's different; we use this in pho a lot, and so far the only place I can find the seeds for this is from Jamaica. Nowhere sells it.

00:21:15

**SR:** What about from Vietnam?

00:21:17

**PN:** The problem is importing anything. The seeds, they don't make it through customs. Unless you package them—if it looks like coffee it will pass through, but otherwise as soon as they find out what it is, they won't let it through. So it—I don't—I don't know if there's a company out there specializing in—in importing seeds and plants from—from other countries to bring it here. So far, that's how my mom got her—her seeds for her cherimoya: that came from Vietnam. They packaged it in a package that looked like coffee. **[Laughs]** That's how it got through; otherwise—no.

00:22:12

**SR:** I have so many questions. What about, do you know when this community started being developed?

00:22:24

**PN:** Seventy-seven, I believe; seventy-seven. The Fall of Saigon in '75—everybody, I think they started building this back in '77 or '79.

00:22:39

**SR:** And a lot of people in New Orleans call this area Versailles. Did the Vietnamese people call it that?

00:22:46

**PN:** Actually there's a sign that says Versailles. It's a French—actually it's a French word, but we—they're changing it, right. I mean the CDC, I don't know if it's our right to try to change this place, the name. We call it Versailles, and some say—call it Vietsailles and stuff, and our business development team is trying to trademark it and call it Viet Village or something like that. And—and it—it's one of their marketing schemes, trying to bring I guess tourists to this area.

00:23:37

**SR:** What—it seems like from what I’ve heard—and you can tell me if I’m wrong—this is—this is sort of an unusual community even like within the rest of the United States: the concentration of the culture. Is that true?

00:23:54

**PN:** It’s the densest outside of Vietnam, anywhere in the world.

00:23:58

**SR:** Really? Do you—

00:24:01

**PN:** Within one square mile before the storm was like 6,500 population, just in one square mile, door-to-door.

00:24:10

**SR:** So outside of Vietnam it’s the densest in the world?

00:24:14

**PN:** Yes.

00:24:15

**SR:** Do you—have you heard theories, or do you have your own theory, about why that is—why that happened here?

00:24:23

**PN:** You see, the history from what I learned is these people here are from three different villages. They all originated from the North back in 1954, when I guess the rise of the Communists. [*Cell Phone Rings*] The rise of Communism pushed—they followed the priest—actually, the Communists against Catholic, and—and so the church moved South and the village moved South and split. One—one stayed—one at one village being agricultural, and one a fishery. [*Cell Phone Rings*] So when Saigon fell, they all came over here and now they're joined.

00:25:38

**SR:** The different villages?

00:25:38

**PN:** Yes, so you—you have—now you have the—the fisheries people and the agricultural people that are in the same area. You know their—their dock is somewhere around Chalmette and—and down—further down Chef Menteur [Highway]. And all the agricultural—agricultural peoples are here.

00:26:03

**SR:** And so, I mean, do you think that it had anything to do with the land being similar to—to what's in Vietnam or—?

00:26:11

**PN:** Climate and mostly, I think, it's—it's their faith. Vietnamese Catholics, they revolve themselves against—around the church. I know because my mom is that way. **[Laughs]** Her dreams is to be able to live right next to a church and walk to church. So when—when the storm came and every—everyone evacuated, right, it is the—Father Vien and—and two other priests—I mean, they lead their flock in a different way, but then when—when it was time to bring them back, right, Father Vien would go wherever they—they were fled to and say *Hey, you ready to come back? Come back.*

00:27:08

**SR:** He would go to wherever they were evacuated to and talk to them?

00:27:11

**PN:** Yeah because there were rumors that if you don't come back they're going to bulldoze your home and turn this into a green space or some—some heavy—heavy industrial—something like that. So they all came and—and they heard the cry of their pastor—their priest came. I mean the first—the first Sunday after the storm, there were only 200 people come to Mass, and then the following Sunday it would be 800, and then after that it—it multiplied. They all come. I mean, some of them—most of the homes are flooded and—and they need to be fixed and to come and just attend Mass and then fix their home, and they go back where they were: Houston mostly; most of them went to Houston. Just slowly now, basically 85-percent of the community are back from—from the—from the storm. Some of them stay out, so—we're trying to bring—bring them all back, trying to, I guess make it more attractive for them to stay. I mean a lot of us are, you

know, they—they've been Americanized and they see—go to school, get a good job and go follow your dreams, get your white picket fence, your own home, start a family. We all have the same dreams, so if we do—we don't do anything now, in about 30 years when our elders and the immediate generation die off, this place might—might just sit you know—just be—just history. It might be no more Vietnamese here; it will just be Viet-Americans that only speak English and not Vietnamese.

00:29:11

**SR:** Do you—so you—I mean, you're really passionate about it and you're coming from—you didn't grow up in this area but—

00:29:18

**PN:** No.

00:29:20

**SR:** —you've come to this—to your people, you know.

00:29:23

**PN:** Uh-hm.

00:29:22

**SR:** Have you seen other people like you that were, you know, Vietnamese Americans that have come from other parts of the country at this post-Katrina time to sort of rally?

00:29:33

**PN:** Hmm, yeah. There are—the one that I said that come here and work during the week and go home to Houston—she’s from California. I mean she came here; I mean Father Vien looking for someone to—to be on the staff of one of the City Council members, so that we can you know—if we need something at least we have someone inside that will help us to get things done. I mean she—I mean she took a drop in salary. I mean for someone in California making \$80,000—\$90,000 and coming here only making \$35,000—it’s a big sacrifice; so—.

00:30:14

**SR:** And people are doing that?

00:30:16

**PN:** Yeah; there are a lot of people doing that. The younger generation, they—they see that there’s a need. And at first I didn’t want to come with them, and I’m glad I came because it was more than I—what I expected; so—.

00:30:36

**SR:** It seems like from an outsider’s perspective it—it looks like the food is really important in Vietnamese culture here.

00:30:47

**PN:** Yeah, mine too. That's why when I volunteered for that booth over there, 'cause they're going to have a special—we—we—I don't know if I should tell you. We've got some goats, okay.

00:31:02

**SR:** Yeah.

00:31:03

**PN:** And they're going—they're going—the blood from the goat, from when it's fresh, you can—there's a way for them to gelatize it, gelatin it and with special herbs and spices and little peanut, and then a little fish sauce on top when—when you get ready to eat it. It's called blood soup; it's the best thing.

00:31:34

**SR:** Well that reminds me of something that I've had at the celebration, and also at one restaurant, which is—it sounds like that but it's with duck.

00:31:42

**PN:** Yes, we do it with duck too. Duck is good; goats—I think goats are better.

00:31:50

**SR:** And is that—so the blood is never cooked, huh?

00:31:53

**PN:** Never cooked; just regular lime and lemon on top before you eat it, and that's—should sanitize it. *[Laughs]*

00:32:02

**SR:** So you'll be having that at the—at the Tet celebration this weekend?

00:32:04

**PN:** I'm going to hang out with them. I'm going—I'm going to give them my free labor, hopefully in trade for some of that stuff. *[Laughs]*

00:32:12

**SR:** Well I'll come find you. *[Laughs]* What about—I just want to ask you about a couple other things. So that was one of them I wanted to ask you about, was the duck blood. I had a funny experience where the people didn't want to serve it to me because it's so specific—.

00:32:28

**PN:** Right, right. It's—it's a delicacy and it's—even many Vietnamese Americans don't—don't really want to try that, because they see that as being unhealthy and you know—. So it's a health issue, but people have been eating this for thousands of years. I've been eating it and I have no problem; so—.

00:32:56

**SR:** What about the rabbits? I've—I've noticed that there are rabbits—both live and already butchered—that somebody butchers them and sells them at the market and—but I've never seen a rabbit in a Vietnamese restaurant offered. What kind of preparation—what do people do with the rabbits at home?

00:33:17

**PN:** I—I'm not sure. I mean the Vietnamese don't like to keep pets.

00:33:22

**SR:** No, no. I'm assuming they're eating them.

00:33:22

**PN:** I know they eat it, but it would be the same. I mean, they used to eat that, you know, how people get together among friends and to drink and—and talk? Those are the delicacies that they like to eat and drink at the same time. So, you see that—rabbits doesn't find itself into the main dinner course, regular time. It's a delicacy that—that people you know drink, having fun, they like to eat those things. So it's a delicacy; it's not—it's not a—it's not a food-food that you eat to nourish yourself.

00:34:12

**SR:** Right.

00:34:13

**PN:** It's a special food.

00:34:14

**SR:** Well that makes sense because the place where I finally got to have the duck blood, the—the people said that this is beer-drinking food.

00:34:24

**PN:** Right; that's what it is. [*Laughs*] When you have something to drink, you eat that.

00:34:30

**SR:** [*Laughs*] Let's see, what about—I want to ask you about pho: do people eat that at home?

00:34:37

**PN:** Yes, but usually on the weekend only because it takes time to—to make the broth. When you—when you make it at home, you tend to make it more from scratch and you put in a lot of carrots, so it takes a lot more time to cook than a restaurant would do it; so usually they save it for the weekend: Saturday and Sunday.

00:35:02

**SR:** So it's better at home than at the restaurant?

00:35:04

**PN:** Yes, because even some of the places that I go to—I know, you know—I don't know for sure, but a lot of places I can feel if they put MSG in it, because I can feel on my cheek that little tendering up: *Ah, they use MSG.*

00:35:24

**SR:** What about—I have the impression just from, you know, reading the paper and just sort of urban legend that the Vietnamese fishermen have also made a really big comeback relative to the non-Vietnamese fishermen in this area. Is that—does that ring true?

00:35:44

**PN:** I know a lot of them is in trouble, but there is—the thing with Vietnamese, when they're down they're down. I mean they're—I mean they're—if they're in business they don't have to turn a profit, right. Your labor is your profit, and a lot of businesses—especially American businesses—don't understand that 'cause if you go to work for someone else, you get paid the same and then you're taking orders from someone else, right. If you open your own business and your profit is your labor, you're making about the same and then you'll be your own boss. Why not do it? And a lot of times it is hard at the beginning because that's what you have to do until you can expand your business. That's how you survive, right; that's—that's how you survive through some of the tough stages. I guess statistics say 50-percent of—50 or 75-percent of any business fail the first year, right. Not true with Vietnamese because they'll stick with it until—to the point where *Okay, I give up.* Otherwise, if they don't make a profit the first three to five years, they're going to stay with it; if they know that's a good idea, they're going to keep on

working at it because they sort of make some money to—to—for them to get by and keep on going.

00:37:28

**SR:** And so that's happening with the shrimpers? They just keep going—?

00:37:31

**PN:** Keep going; it's also, there's a lot of shrimpers who also import from—from Vietnam and Thailand too.

00:37:43

**SR:** A lot of the shrimp?

00:37:43

**PN:** Yeah; they have to compete with that also because those are cheaper—coming from Vietnam—and the thing is they're frozen; so that they're I guess—they're—there are advantages because here you get them fresh; from Vietnam and Thailand they're frozen. So and—and I've heard a lot of horror stories out of Vietnam—what they do to keep it fresh.

00:38:12

**SR:** Yeah, me too. Do you get the sense that the Vietnamese people here consider themselves New Orleanians?

00:38:26

**PN:** Yeah, they do. I mean even the root—their root is Vietnamese, but they're here to stay. They're—they're not here to plan one day to go back to Vietnam. Otherwise they wouldn't—they wouldn't be opening up businesses and sending their children to—to good universities and—and start a family and stuff. They're here to stay, and they're—they're not here as a temporary place. This is their home now. Even though their—their culture is back in Vietnam, yeah, sure they can come home—go there and visit anytime, but this is their home. This is where they work and their children are growing up there; this is their home.

00:39:19

**SR:** Back to that rabbit for a minute.

00:39:23

**PN:** Okay. [*Laughs*]

00:39:25

**SR:** [*Laughs*] So the beer-drinking preparation of that rabbit—would it be cold? Would it be a cold thing with, you know—?

00:39:31

**PN:** It could be cold or it could be hot; it could be in the form of soup. But most likely it would be cold; it would be a cold type of food.

00:39:42

**SR:** Uh-hm; what about at the Tet celebration they also had duck eggs that had fetuses in them.

00:39:53

**PN:** That's another good stuff. It's high—it's very high in nutrition. Yes, that's another delicacy that—that we love to eat. Just—I mean they know when the time—they know when—when to—when to sell and—and it just—you have a little chick in there and you sprinkle a little salt and pepper and a little special herb you eat with it.

00:40:24

**SR:** What is that herb?

00:40:28

**PN:** I don't have the name for that. It's—I'm not sure it's even—I mean it was even grown here before we came. It—it—those herbs usually only go certain—see our—our herbs are usually specialized in certain foods. Like culantro, you only see them in pho; you don't see them anywhere else. So that—that leaves—it's—it's—it tastes kind of like minty—just not mint; it's something else.

00:41:05

**SR:** It's kind of metallic.

00:41:06

**PN:** Yeah, and it doesn't taste good without that herb.

00:41:11

**SR:** And does it have a Vietnamese name, or you don't know the Vietnamese name?

00:41:13

**PN:** I don't know the Vietnamese name; so—.

00:41:16

**SR:** And that—that chick in the egg [*Laughs*], is that something that is only mostly a celebratory food, or do people eat that at home?

00:41:28

**PN:** It's—it's forbidden, USDA.

00:41:33

**SR:** Oh.

00:41:33

**PN:** But you still get—you can get them. [*Laughs*] It's—it's not a celebrated food. You can—people eat them all the time, you know: go to the market on Friday and pick up some for Saturday morning. It's like—almost like a—it's a snack kind of thing. It's not even an appetizer; people just, you know: *Hey, I got some.* They call it *vit lon*; it's—you just boil them up and then

you just sit there and eat a few of them. That's your snack and then wait 'til the next meal.

**[Laughs]**

00:42:19

**SR:** What about—I've noticed that Vietnamese coffee here in this area is made a lot of times with, like, New Orleans maybe Café Du monde chicory and coffee blend.

00:42:30

**PN:** Uh-hm, it is.

00:42:30

**SR:** Is chicory a thing in Vietnam, or is that just a good local substitute for how coffee is in Vietnam?

00:42:41

**PN:** When I was—I don't think I started drinking coffee until I came here.

00:42:49

**SR:** Until you came to New Orleans?

00:42:50

**PN:** No, to the United States.

00:42:52

**SR:** The United States, okay.

00:42:54

**PN:** But as far as I can remember, yes, it—it's part of, you know—I mean we—we usually don't use the—the coffee maker, the electrical. We just use a strainer and hot water. We like it nice and slow so you can sit down and relax and take your time drinking your coffee. Rush every morning and, you know, turn on your coffee maker and drink it as fast as you can and run—. No, it's always—we—we don't eat because we—we need the food. We eat because we like the taste of—we like to taste our food. We like to taste our drinks, so we do sometimes take a lot of time to—to eat or to drink coffee. Because we want to enjoy it, you know. If I just want to eat to survive, I just go to McDonald's, Big Mac—you know. With different foods, you have to cook it and you have to enjoy it.

00:44:01

**SR:** I'm wondering if you've noticed, you know coming here—have you noticed any crossover between Vietnamese traditions and New Orleans cooking traditions? Have you seen any dishes that you're like *Oh, I sort of recognize that*, but that's a sort of New Orleans dish with a twist. Or has that not really happened?

00:44:21

**PN:** No, I think everything here—it's Vietnamese. Until, if they want to do some Creole cooking, then they do Creole cooking. They won't mix Vietnamese in it. I mean, New Orleans, New Orleans; Vietnamese, Vietnamese. No crossover; no mix.

00:44:39

**SR:** But you have seen people cooking Creole-type things in their homes?

00:44:43

**PN:** Yeah, we do for festival stuff. We did jambalaya, gumbos, because we're involved in with the—I guess the New Orleans Come Alive Festival, a few months ago. And we were out there, but we were out there with New Orleans food: jambalaya and gumbos, and other things. We're not out—we're out there as New Orleanians, not as Vietnamese, so we didn't bring any Vietnamese food; so—.

00:45:18

**SR:** Oh really? Before—we can wrap up; I appreciate your time, but can you just tell me a little bit about the harvest dinner that you plan to have?

00:45:27

**PN:** Okay, this is new to me. This is going to be the first year, or the first ever held in this community. It's—it's going to be like a bridge for this community and outside communities to come in and say *Hey, we're—we're the same; you know, we're people. We can enjoy each other's foods.* So this year New Orleans Food & Farm Network want to do it here; want us to do a five or six-course of Vietnamese food. So we picked five of the most common traditional, like

spring rolls, crepes—it's a crepe but it take a lot—I don't know how we're going to do this because we're supposed to do it for 150 to 200 people, and the process of making this crepe is—it's—the Vietnamese name is banh xeo and it's—it takes a lot of time to make just one; so—. We haven't figured out how we're going to make either 200 of these crepes, or making one crepe and dividing it in four; so making only 100 or—or 50 crepes. And we have water spinach sautéed with garlic, and canh chua is a sour fish soup, right, and make—and a few other. So I'm still trying to—this is my first time doing this and they're not telling—giving me much as to how to do this, so right now I'm just trying to gather some—some cooks and some people willing to be in front of a camera and—and basically show people how to make certain—each of these dishes. And then I need to find five more people to—to do the recipe cards to—to write up the recipes, say how you do it, little story about that person or about the recipe, and take a picture of that person and put it on the card and then, I guess, find out if we can do something with them.

00:47:59

**SR:** And so this will be to invite people from all over New Orleans to come out here and have—  
?

00:48:04

**PN:** Yeah, reservation only naturally.

00:48:06

**SR:** And where will it be held?

00:48:07

**PN:** Here.

00:48:09

**SR:** At the church?

00:48:11

**PN:** I was looking at the reception hall, but see the date they want to do it is on a Saturday, and Saturday is—it's a no-no because those are wedding days and there are a lot of receptions, and so for us to have a good price in this reception hall or get it for free, it can't be on a Saturday. But the—the film network—they're going to film this—this event, they can't do it on—on a different day. So I'm thinking of the kitchen right here that they use to prepare for the festival, and then see if we can get the same tent that size; I think that will fit 200 people and just do an outdoor—.

00:48:54

**SR:** Right. And when is—when will this be?

00:48:55

**PN:** April 22<sup>nd</sup>.

00:48:59

**SR:** Oh it's usually warm. So by the way, for the record, the—the music that we're hearing now in the background is—they're getting ready for the festival tomorrow.

00:49:09

**PN:** Yes, they're testing out the sound. So we're going to have a group of professional entertainers from, I guess—from the Paris By Night Productions. They've been doing video and do a lot of live shows, so they'll be coming down here to perform. It's free for the—for the people; it costs the organizer money, but they're going to make it up with the stuff they sell; donations, and things. It will be a lot of fun—lot of food and a lot of drinking.

00:49:44

**SR:** Yeah, it's a lot of food at that festival. I've been there. Well thank you, Peter.

00:49:47

**PN:** You're welcome.

00:49:48

**[End Peter Nguyen Interview]**