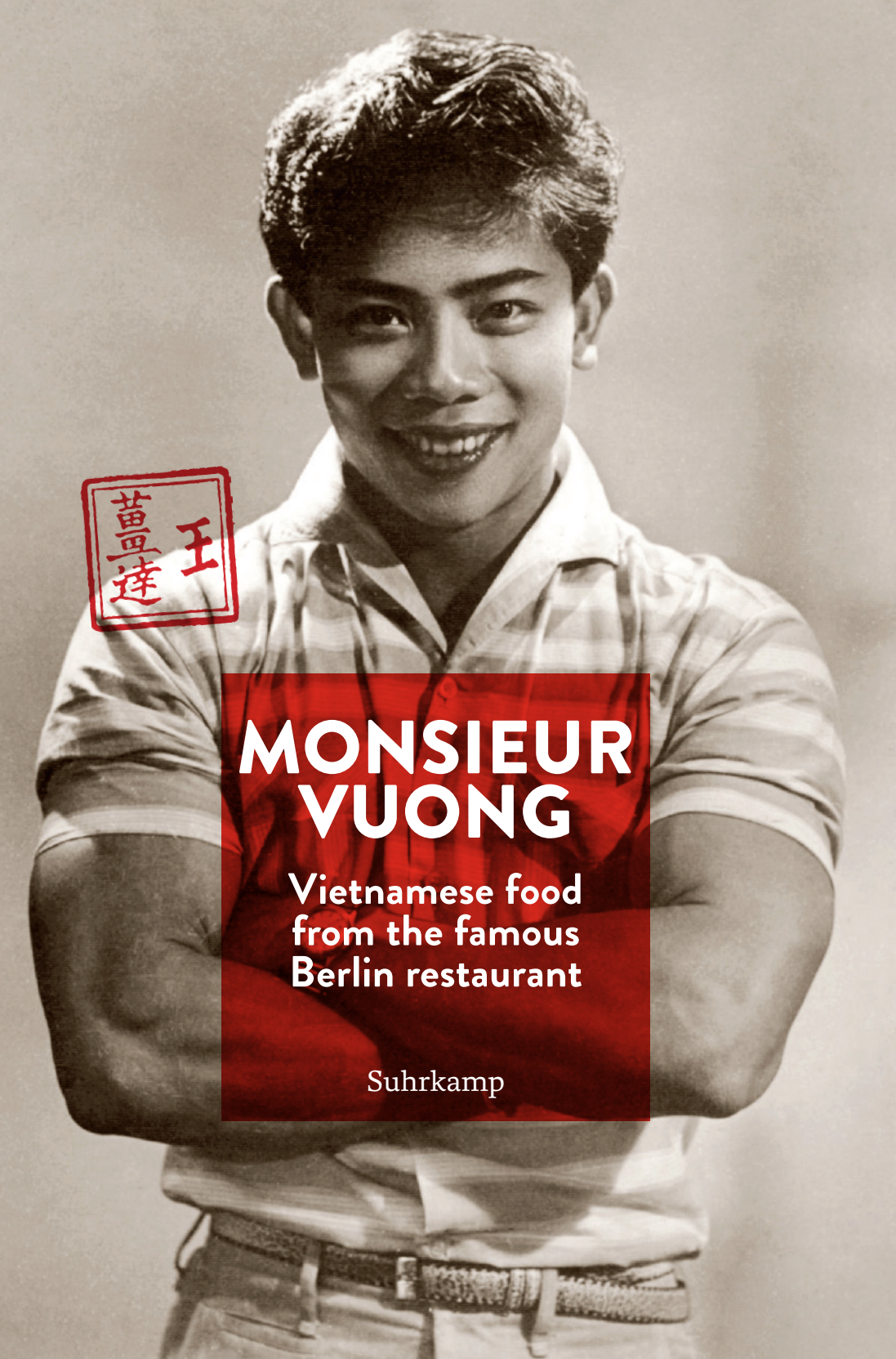
MONSIEUR
VUONG
Vietnamese food
from the famous
Berlin restaurant
Suhrkamp

There is a restaurant at 46 Alte Schönhauser Strasse in Berlin's Mitte district that evolved into an international place of pilgrimage many years ago. It is Monsieur Vuong's eatery. His photo hangs on the orange red wall, and has become its symbol. But wait, that's the father, a portrait photographer who came from Vietnam to Germany with his family in 1987 and took this »selfie« at the age of 24. His son Dat is the owner of the restaurant in front of which long queues form. No surprise, because the dishes taste heavenly and are of a soothing, unpretentious simplicity. They are authentic as Dat Vuong, culinary ambassador and culture hopper, cooks in the tradition of his mother and frequently returns to his roots, to Vietnam.

Whoever eats at Monsieur Vuong returns. Whoever meets Dat Vuong wants to know his story, how it has led to his success. High time to erect a monument in his honour. Here it is, with the finest recipes from the restaurant, all easy to cook, with advice and inspiration, and all the flair of a Vietnamese cook-shop that has become an international hot spot.

Ursula Heinzelmann is the author of nine books, the most recent being ›Die China-Küche des Herrn Wu‹. She has been a regular at Monsieur Vuong since the beginning.

Photographer Manuel Krug turns his experience into pictures, accompanying Dat Vuong with his camera on a trip to his roots in Vietnam and at Monsieur Vuong.

Ursula Heinzelmann

MONSIEUR VUONG

Vietnamese food from the famous Berlin restaurant

THE COOK BOOK

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Photos: Manuel Krug

Suhrkamp

Dat Vuong thanks

Andreas Bodenstein
his mother Lê Thuỷ
Vương Khương Tấn
Đỗ Thị Lan
Vu Van Doanh
Nguyễn Binh Phương
Trần Thị Loan
Hồ Thị Thu Cúc and
the whole team at Monsieur Vuong

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MONSIEUR VUONG: DREAMING AND LONGING.

First you notice the smell of incense, as you walk along Alte Schönhauser Allee, right in the centre of Berlin's Mitte district. You look around, see red benches and tables, bells ring when you open the large door. Stepping into the restaurant the aromas of rice, lemon grass and coriander mingle with the incense. The walls and ceiling glow a warm orange red, and a French chanson takes you into its joyous embrace. A handsome young man with dark eyes watches from one of the walls: Welcome to Monsieur Vuong. A Vietnamese soup kitchen. And yet, much more than that. This friendly place has been at the heart of a whole movement and is so well known and loved, far beyond the city's borders, that queuing for a seat at one of the long wooden tables is taken for granted.

Dat Vuong, the owner of Monsieur Vuong, is Vietnamese. He came to Germany as a twelve year old refugee with his family in 1987. Why he established Monsieur Vuong, and how Monsieur Vuong grew into what it represents today, is an exceptional story. A story of flight and starting anew, of persistence and pragmatism, openness and longing – and this coincided with a very special moment in Berlin's history.

CHILDHOOD. ROOTS.

The story starts in Vietnam, and it starts with Dat's father, Hoanh. The dark eyes in the large self-portrait greeting guests at Monsieur Vuong and the symbol of the restaurant are his. Hoanh had been a successful photographer with a studio of his own, working with film stars and celebrities, riding a Harley Davidson and, like many of his countrymen, a passionate dancer, when as a young man he moved from the old imperial city of Hué in central Vietnam to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. Here as there Asian culture mingled with European, Buddhist temples stood next to cathedrals modelled on Notre Dame. The perfume of elegance, Parisian chic and croissants wafted through the large cafés lining the boulevards while from the small cook stands in the narrow side streets surged the aromas of noodle soup, rice and fish sauce.

In Saigon Hoanh married the young Thuy Le, and Dat and his three siblings spent their early years in the middleclass District 1, right in the political and economic centre of a city of over a million inhabitants. Thuy Le ran a Vespa garage and as is common in Vietnam, the family lived on the upper floors of the same building. Just as common was the central role food and cooking played in their lives. Dat grew up with the sight of delicious smelling and steaming cooking pots, and from his mother he learnt to taste with great precision: »A bit of sweetness is missing here, there the spiciness is too sharp …« Till this day he swoons over Thuy Le's grilled pork belly. His favourite dish, then as now, is caramelized pork, Heo kho tộ, both sweet with the sugar the Vietnamese love and hot with black pepper.

In addition to the maternal kitchen, numerous cook stands beckoned in the neighborhood, each offering its own special dish. Some of those businesses were very small and could be moved; they consisted of two flat bamboo baskets carried on a long stick the women hung on their shoulders, complete with a fireplace and small stools for their customers. Others were proper stores, with an open front onto the street and closed with a large garage door at night. Everywhere it smelled of frying meat and simmering marrow bones for phở, the ubiquous Vietnamese noodle soup; herbs shone bright green, fresh fruit was piled up high. Of course there were huge differences in the food on offer. Not all of it was good or to their liking, some, however, represented real highlights, and an important part of this culinary education was his mother's principle that no distance was too great for a good meal.

Her son Dat was a fast learner. Even as a small boy he was very taken with the wonton soup of a certain cook stand. At that corner in District 1 he regularly spent his pocket money on a steaming bowl of noodle bliss, and even today no visit to Saigon is complete without a stop there.


DONG.LUC
TAILLEUR & CORDONNIER

FLIGHT, HOME, TEMPLE.

Dat was born in 1975 when the war came to an end and socialist North Vietnam seized power in the southern part of the country. During the war his father had worked as an army photographer for the South Vietnamese government. After the fall of Saigon, he ended up in a re-education camp and was banned from his profession. Everything was in turmoil. Where would things go from there? For South Vietnamese such as the Vuongs prospects were sombre. Therefore, in 1981, Hoanh and Thuy Le decided to leave the country with their four children, and to do this separately, to reduce risks as much as possible. Thuy Le ventured out first, taking Dat's brothers. Their escape was successful at first try. They were picked up as boat people by the German rescue vessel Cap Anamur and via a reception camp in the Philippines came to Germany. Hoanh, Dat and his sister Thy, however, who were due to follow shortly afterwards, were caught again and again; twice the children were jailed. Only the official procedure of a request by Thuy Le in Germany reunited the family in Solingen after six long years.

A small town in the Rhineland instead of Saigon: that was the culture shock twelve-year-old Dat had to cope with. A literally cold country, a foreign language, currywurst and fries instead of noodle soup. The small group of Vietnamese refugees in Solingen battled against homesickness by getting together for meals and cooking familiar dishes. That was easier said than done, as neither chillies nor fish sauce were on offer at Solingen's supermarkets, to say nothing of fresh ginger or Vietnamese coriander. But Thuy Le wasn't an excellent cook for

nothing. She knew how to make do with what could be found in Solingen's shops, and once a week she travelled to Düsseldorf to stock up on at least some of the familiar spices, herbs and other ingredients at the region's then only Asian supermarket.

Her children quickly familiarized themselves with the new surroundings, went to school and learnt German. But it proved to be an exhausting balancing act. How to link the two worlds? When Dat turned sixteen, he took the decision to move into a Buddhist temple. He didn't want to become a monk, as his surprised parents initially feared, but he was searching for a way to balance his old and new homes. Intuitively he strived to strengthen his roots to be cope with the present, and for three years he lived boarding school-like in the Vien-Giac temple in Hanover. Sweeping the courtyard in the morning was as important as cleaning vegetables in the kitchen and school lessons because Buddhism integrates itself in a hands-on manner into everyday life and considers such tasks as to be meditative and spiritual as religious chants.

Dat was profoundly shaped by that period. It reinforced his natural openness and friendliness, taught him to stay calm in difficult situations and, through his own loss, show sympathy for others' problems. It also gave him the courage to acknowledge his cultural roots – which was by no means easy at the time. In Germany Vietnam stood above all for Apocalypse Now and the mafia of illegal cigarette sellers; Buddha statues weren't yet considered decoration and except for a few temples, simply did not exist.

Dat was eighteen when he went to visit friends in Berlin. After small town life in the Rhineland and the reclusiveness of

his temple life it was love at first sight – »I suddenly felt like a fish in water!« He sensed the city's energy, everything was in upheaval shortly after the wall had come down and with it major political changes. Here was the same lively chaos he was familiar with (even though in a very different form) from his childhood days in Saigon, here was the opportunity for development and personal fulfilment.

Dat moved to Berlin and studied Japanology, because that culture's aesthetics fascinated him. He supported himself with casual jobs in bars, quickly working his way up from dishwasher to barkeeper and waiter because he showed such skill in dealing with people. Even in difficult situations he remained friendly, open and calm, he knew how to defuse and mediate. He was at ease meeting new people, his circle of friends grew. Because he missed the aromas of the cook stands, of what had been home for him, he invited his new friends to dinner and cooked Vietnamese meals. They all were delighted – and immediately asked why such wonderful food wasn't on offer in Berlin, where Asian cuisine had barely emancipated itself from Chinese dishes listed by number to coriander-Thai and sushi-amazement. Dat recognized his opportunity: he would introduce Germans to Vietnamese food culture, be the ambassador of a new Vietnam, no longer associated with war, but a gorgeous cuisine.

THE FIRST MONSIEUR VUONG. THE BEGINNINGS.

When Dat gave up his studies to enter the restaurant business he had to comply with bureaucracy as the concept of underground or pop-up restaurants would only emerge much later. His funds were very limited and he borrowed from friends. In 1999 he opened a tiny café not far from the present location. The house at 3 Gipsstrasse where the first Monsieur Vuong resided in 28 square meters had a similarly chequered past to that of Dat himself. Gipsstrasse was amongst the Scheunenviertel's oldest streets, and number 3 had been an elderly people's home, a Jewish kindergarten, an assembly camp during Nazi times and then a music school, until after reunification the building was finally taken over by Eva and Lothar Poll. The lawyer-galerist couple restored it from scratch and redesigned it. Next to small Monsieur Vuong was Restaurant Fournier where Andreas Klöckner, who had learned about fusion cuisine while working as a chef in Australia, translated southeast Asian food into a European context.

From the start Dat had taken a liking to the Scheunenviertel, overshadowed by the TV tower behind the Hackesche Höfe in the city's former east. The old low houses, so rare in Berlin, were interspersed by small green oases, and radiated a very special charm, a peculiar combination of the ramshackle and the lively. He wasn't alone in this. The Spandauer Vorstadt as the neighborhood between the old synagogue, Rosenthaler Platz and the Volksbühne theatre is officially called, attracted actors and photographers, film people, singers and artists


EXPOSITION NATIONALE
COLONIALE de MARSEILLE 1922
INDOCHINE