

The Year of the Cat

What NOLA's Vietnamese American Luminaries Are Doing for Lunar New Year

December 30, 2022 By [Thuc Doan Nguyen](#) and [Illustrations by Camelia Pham](#) | [New Orleans Magazine January 2023](#)



With many of us ringing in the January 1st New Year with our resolutions and hoping for auspicious outcomes, another renewal will be happening a few weeks later. Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết) celebrations will be on January 22, 2023, about a month prior to Mardi Gras Day (February 21, 2023). Some years, these events are closer together. How fortunate to have two New Years to ring in for another season of cross-cultural revelry. Dong Phuong Vietnamese Bakery is famous for their Mardi Gras King Cakes. It's a great post-December holidays continued celebration that warms the early months of the year. While there's no official Vietnamese American Krewe in New Orleans represented with a parade, no overt integration into Mardi Gras, a collective of artists and filmmakers have started to get together and call themselves the "Viet Krewe" of which I am a member.

For many Asian-descendants, 2023 will mark the Year of the Water Rabbit, however, for members of the Vietnamese diaspora, it will be the Year of the Cat. (Another Asian zodiac difference with the twelve animal signs is that we of Vietnamese heritage have the Year of the [Water] Buffalo when other Asian groups have the Year of the Ox, according to my dad who was born in that year.)

Many Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans today came over as refugees right after the Vietnam War in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with other waves coming over later in the 1990s and beyond. Some Vietnamese Americans have relocated to the New Orleans area from elsewhere, crediting the concentration of Vietnamese culture here as a key draw, myself included. I grew up in the south (North Carolina and southern Maryland) and transplanted from Los Angeles. I spoke with a Vietnamese American woman shopping for groceries in New Orleans East who moved from Idaho. Bau Nguyen, who owns Singleton's Market Uptown, told me he moved from California. I officially move into my new permanent home a week before Tết. It's a special homecoming. My parents will be in town to help me with setting up the house, so I'm especially excited to spend a real Lunar New Year with them, which hasn't happened since I was a child. I didn't see them for two and a half years over the pandemic. It's extra special that we will get to have Tết in New Orleans together with new friends. I was born in the Year of the Dragon and so was my mom.

Even though most people in New Orleans are aware of the plethora of Vietnamese food available in the city and know about the population of those of Vietnamese ethnicity, to the world outside the Crescent City, this isn't apparent. New Orleanians, for the most part, are very well versed in Vietnamese food like bánh mì and phở, and grocery stores like Hong Kong (don't let the name fool you— it's a Vietnamese market.) I spoke with a handful of Vietnamese Americans, who help make the culture of New Orleans what it is, about their Lunar New Year traditions and what Tết means to them.

Jane Chaisson is the owner of Golden File Nails and Spa, with one located on Magazine Street and one on Tchoupitoulas Street. In 2006, when Jane was 15 years old, her mom told her that she would be moving from Vietnam to America. Jane recounted, "I had so many mixed emotions. At first, I was sad because I was leaving behind my family and childhood friends. Also I was sad that I would leave behind my brand new scooter that my grandma gave to me! In Vietnam I was driving a scooter at 15 that was not automatic. It had shift pedals. I felt cool when

I was the only one with a scooter and my friends were riding bikes, but then all my friends got automatic scooters. The next emotion I felt was nervous that I was going to have a new dad – an American dad! Lastly, I was filled with excitement for the opportunities that America could present. With the benefit of hindsight now, I owe my mom and stepdad a big thank you for bringing me to America and raising me in New Orleans. I love living in New Orleans.”

Jane’s been in the city now for a decade and a half. She got her college degree in visual arts at Loyola University. “I have been doing nails in New Orleans ever since high school as a part time job and throughout my time as a college student. I’m very passionate about nails and about art. My fiancé, Niko, really pushed and inspired me to become the best version of myself and to take my nail game to the next level.”

As for Jane’s zodiac animal, “I don’t want to brag, but there is no easy way to say this! I am the GOAT!” This goat will also be welcoming a baby Tiger or a baby Cat into the family soon. Jane’s daughter is due on January 6, making her a tiger. If she arrives a couple weeks late (on January 22 or after), she may be a cat. (She will also be born half Vietnamese American and half Greek American.)



For Jane, Lunar New Year is all about tradition. “First and foremost, I love giving and receiving “lì xì,” a.k.a. lucky money in little red envelopes. I like seeing the dragon dances and all the food. I miss all the street food in Vietnam.” For most of my Lunar New Years, I spend them with my family and loved ones and I go to the Buddhist temple. My fiancé wants me to teach our daughter, Amalia, all about the Vietnamese traditions and wants me to bring her to the temple. I think it’s pretty cool to have someone like that to support you.” “Before the pandemic, we would eat in New Orleans East at the Church. We plan to go do that again in 2023 if my doctor says it will be ok to go after the baby is born.”

Jane is also planning for the future, “My fiancé is so excited to buy our baby girl her first áo dài (Vietnamese traditional dress). He wants one too! I will teach her about the traditions of her sign,

respect for her elders, and how to cook for us when we get old and lazy. It takes a village to raise good kids and we will depend on the Vietnamese community to help us teach our traditions to the new generation.”

Peter Nguyen is the founder of Banh Mi Boys, a chain of restaurants in the New Orleans area where you can get “Vietnamese po-boys,” Vietnamese beers, as well as Big Easy standards like bread pudding. New Orleans is his hometown, and he started his eateries here because he “wanted something exciting, fun and delicious to bring to the community.”

Peter’s zodiac sign is the Snake. He says he’s a prime example of one for these reasons, “The most snake trait I have is that I’m calm and laid back. As I get older, I become more chill and patient in life.” In 2023, Peter hopes to bring Banh Mi Boys to Texas and South Carolina too. Peter is also ready for Lunar New Year, “My favorite thing about it is the celebrations and gathering of friends and family and also of course the massive amounts of food.” He plans to stay busy with Banh Mi Boys and make time for a family gathering and the community fairs around the city. He says there are big events in Marrero and Woodlawn, as well as the main one in New Orleans East. Peter says the activities are announced and most often spread by word of mouth the week before Lunar New Year. Peter’s favorite things to eat are sweet sticky rice with steamed pork roll or bánh tét. He adds, “We stay pretty busy at the restaurant, but if things slow down, I might make time to create something special for the menu for Lunar New Year.”

Anh Luu is the Executive Chef at Bywater Brew Pub. She moved away from New Orleans to Portland, Oregon and then returned. “After over a decade of cooking Viet-Cajun/Creole food for Portland, I felt it was time I cooked this food for the people that inspired me to create it. After my mom passed away suddenly in 2017, the longing for home became too strong for me to ignore. I wanted to reconnect with so many parts of myself that I felt I had lost after living away from New Orleans for so long, especially my Vietnamese roots. I also missed the warmth of the sun and tropical vegetation. Portland was never going to feel like home to me.”

Anh was born in the Year of the Tiger. “I think it is very fitting of my personality, especially since I’m also a Leo. So, technically I’m a ‘Liger.’ Having tiger qualities has definitely helped me excel in becoming a manager and leader in the restaurant industry. Being self-motivated, driven, and resilient are my most tiger-like qualities that have helped me most in my journey as a chef.”

In 2023, Anh hopes to do more traveling and self-care. “Sometimes I completely lose myself in my job and forget about what’s important to me in my personal life.” She and her partner Sam want to start their own YouTube channel focused on food and cooking, and especially their “hilarious trips to the Asian market.” She wants to teach people how to cook with proper techniques and discover new ingredients from the Asian markets.

Anh’s favorite thing about Tết, has always been the dragon dance and lì xì. “The only person that still gives me money every year is my dad... because, let’s face it, I’m too old now. The dragon dance always brings back childhood memories of the big Tết Festival that happens at the Mary Queen of Vietnam church every year. The loud ass firecrackers really pump you up for the new year!”



She also tells me a personal family story about the holiday. “My mom always made bánh chưng for Tết every year— sticky rice cakes stuffed with mung beans and pork steamed in banana leaves. She would cut them into slices and pan fry them for us for breakfast. It’s very labor intensive, so I don’t make them every single year, only if I have time, but I have vivid memories of my mom sitting on a tiny wooden stool on a blanket of newspapers on the floor of the kitchen with a big tub of all her ingredients, stuffing them into these perfectly folded square banana leaf packages. Making these helps me to feel more connected to my mother’s spirit.”

Anh has a suggestion for where to go for Lunar New Year. “The festival out in New Orleans East is honestly the best place to go eat for the Lunar New Year. There are so many traditional foods, music and entertainment. It’s just a grand ole time. Another food I always associate with every

major celebration is the Vietnamese eggroll, chả giò or nem rán. My family is from Hanoi, so they called them “nem” growing up. I was planning on making a version of these as a Tết special at the Brew Pub in January.”

Giuseppe Anthony Tran is the Parish Coordinator for Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church in New Orleans East. He has the scoop on what’s going on there for 2023’s celebrations.

“Our Archbishop will be with all of us to celebrate the New Year’s Eve Mass on Saturday night, January 21, at 9:00 pm. According to our culture, the community gets together in this church to thank God, to appreciate the past year and to welcome the New Year of the Cat, ‘Xuân Quý Mão.’ After the mass, the Archbishop and the Pastor will bring out the lì xì envelopes to everyone who attends church. The lì xì is the lucky money or lucky gift that the ‘father is giving out to all children.’ After the church celebration, we will turn on the fire-crackers and dragon dance outdoors to welcome another new year.”

Anthony joined the community in the 1980s and has been part of the festivities ever since. This year he’ll also have a similar schedule as all the rest – “A week after celebrating the Lunar New Year’s Day, the parish opens the following three days of the weekend to celebrate Lunar New Year for all the people to get together. It doesn’t matter what ethnicity or religion they are. In this special festival, the Vietnamese people of Mary Queen celebrate in the exact styles and traditions as we had before in Vietnam. Mary Queen of Vietnam Parish always invites famous singers/performers from all over the world to come and entertain during the three-day festival for immediate community people and for public visitors. Our church is the Vietnamese Cultural Center for everyone to maintain our Vietnamese traditions and to pass them onto the next generations.”

For Anthony, New Orleans is very much the “homiest place,” as it’s “very similar to Vietnam in temperature, atmosphere, and environment. Vietnam has the Mekong River that runs across the land. New Orleans has the same pattern with the Mississippi River which also runs across the city. The city of New Orleans is highly motivated for every culture to celebrate, so that the residents in this city can join in and enjoy each culture.”

Anthony outlines his hopes for 2023, “After the time of COVID pandemic, Mary Queen of Vietnam Parish would like to reach out to every parish in New Orleans (Eastbank and Westbank) and all the other cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida so that people can join in with the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebrations— as everyone has waited too long. The main concern of our parish is to ensure that all people can gather together during this wonderful occasion.” He thinks it’s pretty cool that “many schools in New Orleans also let the Asian diaspora and Vietnamese American students have a day off to be with their families for the celebrations. This local government shows a very great respect to all cultures in officially allowing for this special chance.”

We get a peek inside Anthony’s personal traditions. “In my own family, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year Day is indeed a very holiday. It doesn’t matter how busy we are or what schedule anyone has set up, everyone in the family is “required” to be together; therefore, my nephews,

nieces, and cousins... from five different states: California to Florida all come home to join our hearts together in the Lunar New Year.” He adds, “Our time on earth is really short. If we can realize our presence is important to each other, we must be with one another.”

Here’s how Anthony’s Lunar New Year Day will go. “I will bring my family over to my mom’s house on the Westbank to join together with my five sibling families (a total of 43 young and old people) to eat many meals. The main food is “hủ tíu dai” (noodle soup). We also cook the original Vietnamese foods with pork, duck, and goat meat. Besides the main food, we’ll eat ‘bánh chưng and bánh tét’ (stuffed sticky rice cakes) as our dessert. Everyone on my Tran side of the family really loves these foods.”

Jacqueline Thanh is mixed heritage Vietnamese American and Chinese American. She’s the Executive Director of VAYLA, a nonprofit that trains Asian American leaders and aids the Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans. She grew up in San Francisco and moved here seven years ago. “New Orleans has a magnetism that cultivates a level of equanimity that is rare. It’s full of possibility and has constant reminders of history all at once. I would say that chance has brought me and kept me here.”

“Jax” is a dragon who reveres and honors Tết. She’s “unapologetically ambitious about the future for the Vietnamese diaspora— how we can reimagine joy and cultivate community.” “Lunar New Year is hard as we get older and watch our elders age, but what has always made it special for me as someone who grew up Buddhist is my auntie’s canh chua chay and all the vegetarian staples we share as we visit each other’s homes. Jax’s wish for 2023 is “more integrated rest, more compassionate wisdom, more collective liberation through authentic presence.”

Christian Dinh is a renowned ceramics artist and Tulane University MFA graduate who’s had his work (which reflects upon his Southern upbringing in a Vietnamese refugee family) on display at The Ogden Museum here in town. He’s part of the foundation of the “Viet Krewe” which also includes musician and composer Dylan Tran, director Marion Hoang Ngoc Hill, film producer Katie Pham and actress Amy Le.

Christian and his partner moved to New Orleans in 2018 from Pensacola, Florida. Prior to that, they had been visiting New Orleans for over a decade, sometimes driving over every other weekend, so they “inevitably decided to make the move.”

Christian is based in New Orleans for various reasons. “I have always been drawn to the unique culture here, which is what brought me to the city in the first place. Then, after spending more time here and getting to know the people and the city, I realized how welcoming and diverse the community really was. I specifically became very immersed in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans. There is a certain familiarity within the Vietnamese community that made me feel as if I have always lived here. Being a part of a Vietnamese community is something I haven’t experienced since I was a child. When I was about ten years old, my family began moving frequently and began to lose touch with the Vietnamese community. It wasn’t until I moved to New Orleans that I really began to reconnect with my Vietnamese heritage and identity.”

Christian was born in the Year of the Monkey. He feels like he aligns with a lot of the traits of his zodiac animal. “The monkey is supposed to be flexible and fluid in their pursuits and can find success and happiness in any route. In my life, I have constantly changed directions. I never thought that I was leaving something behind, but taking from those past experiences and applying them to something new to move forward.”

In 2023, Christian hopes to “slow down a little” and enjoy everything around him. “I have been very fortunate and had a lot of opportunities these past few years and it would be great to have a chance to sit back and take it all in.”

Christian always thinks of Tết very fondly. “My favorite part of the Lunar New Year is going to Tết where everyone from the Vietnamese community joins together. The atmosphere is always so exciting— with dozens of food booths, people singing and dancing, kids shooting those cans of silly string all over the place, and of course all of the performances like the dragon dance. My family usually cooks food at home for the Lunar New Year. My grandparents would cook phở, chả giò (eggrolls), bánh chưng and xôi nước dừa (Vietnamese sticky rice).

Get your passion and your appetite ready for the Year of the Cat. We Vietnamese Americans are hopeful about the future and glad to be part of the culture that is New Orleans. See you out at the Tết fests!