

# KIM LOAN LE

---

Kim arrives at the demonstration kitchen at Tarrant Area Food Bank with a cooler and bags laden with cooking equipment and ingredients keenly observing the amenities with expert confidence. She unpacks bags of batter, bunches of verdant herbs, and neatly grouped slices of proteins, mindful of vegetarian diners. She's making *Bánh xèo*, a cheerful yellow savory crepe that



is normally white in Vietnam. As she orients herself around the kitchen, her daughter and loyal sous-chef, Shalini, set to washing produce and de-stemming herbs. The kitchen becomes alive with the sounds, smells, colors, and textures of all the ingredients and with the people lovingly transforming them into a communal meal. Creamy crepe batter peppered with chartreuse scallions splashes around sizzling shrimp and changes states of matter into a crispy semi-circle busting with bean sprouts and onions. The rich flavor and hot temperature of the crepe are cut with cooling acidic spears of green mango and leafy herbs. Tearing off pieces of crepe, enveloping it in crisp lettuce, and dunking it in chunks of garlic, chilis, and ground peanuts swirled in sweet, tangy fish sauce is the recommended way to enjoy this dish. Over several hours, Kim tirelessly rolls out piping hot crepes for food bank staff to gather together and enjoy. Her tireless efforts are fueled by the people who file in and light up watching the aromatic and beautiful home-cooked Vietnamese meal being assembled. By age 10, Kim was skilled at food preparation, thanks to her



*Bánh xèo* is traditionally cooked on seasoned clay vessels.

mother involving her in the processes. She believes it's important for families to involve their children in the process of making meals, from grocery shopping to age-appropriate kitchen tasks, such as washing produce. She breaks from handling four pans of crepes at different stages of done-ness to lovingly shoo her daughter's hands away so she can instruct on the proper method of cutting limes to extract the most juice. Shalini does not mind and explains, "I am 23, and I'm still learning from her; I'm always



learning from her!” With the help of her son Hai translating Kim can speak freely about all things food and life. She grew up as her father an American soldier, and her mother a Vietnamese woman. Being one out of eleven children, her mother greatly sacrificed to keep her children alive and fed. To protect her life as an American Asian child in

post-war Vietnam, her mother would shave her head and send her to the local temple to blend in with Buddhist pupils to avoid capture by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. She describes childhood meals, if available, as simple. Rice was essential and could be pared alongside whatever was caught or harvested in moments of hidden solace. It was wise to eat as much as possible, as the next meal was not guaranteed. As a young woman in Vietnam, she began her days at one o’clock in the morning baking goods to sell at a market in her hometown. Her first customers of the day were children, arriving at six in the morning to buy breakfast before school began. After the breakfast rush, she sold a variety of bean and plant-based desserts. Having limited and unstable access to food in childhood did not hamper her passion for cooking and nourishing her family.

Today, her cooking style “has evolved to the taste of the family and their preferences.” She draws inspiration from restaurants and recreates them at home, and her children quickly clarify that her rendition is always superb. For people like

Kim, cooking in Vietnamese culture is a happy occasion, allowing individual creativity and love to radiate through flavors and beautiful presentations. She advises home cooks to prepare meals with heart, guaranteeing that food prepared with genuine love will be well-received. A quiet exchange between Hai and Kim sums up her views on what food means to her, “when her family is full, she is full.”



During the North Texas growing season, Kim supplements her cooking with traditional produce such as jujubes and bitter melons grown in her own backyard. For her, gardening is a source of joy, and she takes pride in maximizing her backyard space.

PREP TIME: 1 hour  
COOK TIME: 45 min  
SERVES: 8-10

#### INGREDIENTS:

- Water
- Cooking oil
- 1 c. Fish sauce
- 1 c. Sugar
- 2 Limes
- 3+ Thai chilies
- 1 Pod of garlic
- 2 unripe mangos
- 4 bunches of green onions
- 2 large heads of sturdy lettuce
- 2 large onions
- 1 handful of assorted leafy herbs (Spearmint, Vietnamese coriander, Thai basil)
- 1 handful of bean sprouts
- 1 lb. protein of choice (such as shrimp, sliced pork belly, tofu, tempeh)
- 1 lb. rice flour
- 1, 17.5 oz pkg. [MIKKO](#) Huong Xua Vietnamese Rice Flour for Pancake

#### EQUIPMENT:

- Stovetop
- Frying pan or skillet with lid; a non-stick or seasoned cast-iron is best
- Cutting board
- Knife for chopping vegetables and meat
- Ladle
- Spatula
- 1 large plate for garnishes
- 2 bowls for sauces
- 1 large mixing bowl

# Bánh Xèo

## Vietnamese Crepes



#### -KEEP IN MIND-

- Use your nose, ears, eyes, and hands to sense and “feel” when to move on to the next step.
- Ingredient measurements are not always meant to be concrete and exact; in many traditional cooking styles, the chef will rely on smell, appearance, sound, and feel to know when a desired consistency or flavor is achieved.
- Measurements may be slightly more or less depending on the sizes of your cooking utensils. Your stove may burn hotter or cooler; the humidity in the air will affect how a batter absorbs water and reaches consistency. Be flexible and in tune with your environmental factors.
- Adjust the flavors to suit your taste and those for whom you’re cooking.
- Have sauces, vegetables, and protein prepared in advance; the end product is best eaten hot off the skillet.

# Bánh Xèo

## Vietnamese Crepes

### - SAUCES -

#### FISH SAUCE

- 2 c. water
- 1 c. fish sauce
- 1 c. granular sugar
- 1 lime

1. Heat water to boiling, then remove from heat.
2. Add fish sauce and sugar and stir to combine.
3. Before serving, add a squeeze of lime.

Note: This sauce can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

#### PEANUT SAUCE

- 1 c. fish sauce
- ½ c. roasted peanuts
- 1 lime

1. Grind peanuts in a food processor until coarse.
2. Carefully stir peanuts into fish sauce until combined.
3. Before serving, add a squeeze of lime.

Note: Re-stir the sauce before serving to mix up the sediment.

#### SPICY GARNISH

- Thai chilies
- 1 garlic pod

1. Select the desired amount of Thai chilies and remove stems.
2. Mince chiles with seeds.
3. Mince the desired amount of fresh garlic and combine with chilies.

Note: This can be added to sauces for heat if desired

### - PRODUCE & PROTEINS -

#### VEGETABLES TO EAT FRESH

- 2 unripe (green) mangos
- 2 bunches of green onion
- handful of fresh leafy herbs; Spearmint, Vietnamese coriander, and Thai basil work well
- 2 large heads of sturdy lettuce, such as Romain or green leaf lettuce
- 1 large onion

1. Peel the skin from the green mangos, and slice them into matchsticks.
2. Roughly chop green onions.
3. Peel the leaves from the herb stems, then wash, and drain them.
4. Slice onion into thin rounds.
5. Wash, separate, and drain lettuce leaves.
6. Loosely arrange herbs, mango, green onion, and lettuce into separate piles.

#### VEGETABLES TO COOK WITHIN THE CREPE

- 1 large onion
- 2 handfuls of beansprouts
- 2 bunches of scallions

1. Thinly slice onion into rounds.
2. Roughly chop green onions.
3. Mix all three ingredients together.

#### PROTEIN

1 lb. of protein of choice; shrimp, boiled pork belly, drained tofu, or tempeh work nicely

Ensure protein is sliced thinly and does not contain excess moisture.

# Bánh Xèo

## Vietnamese Crepes

### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Gather all ingredients and equipment.
2. Begin by following instructions to make the sauces.
3. In a large bowl, mix 1 bag of crepe powder with 1 lb of rice flour. Slowly stir in enough water to reach the consistency of unset custard or omelet batter, about six cups.
4. Ensure lumps are dissolved and set aside to hydrate for about 20 minutes.
5. While the batter is hydrating, wash and chop the vegetables to be eaten fresh, those to be cooked within the crepe, and the protein.
6. Return to the batter and ensure consistency is similar to unset custard or omelet batter, you may add more water if needed. Add  $\frac{3}{4}$  c. chopped green onions to the batter and stir.
7. Add enough oil to thinly coat the bottom of a skillet and bring to medium heat. Add the desired amount of protein (about  $\frac{1}{3}$  c.) to skillet and sauté until lightly golden, about 2 minutes. Note: adjust the heat if it appears the meat is cooking too quickly or not quick enough.
8. Once the protein is lightly golden and sizzling, ladle about  $\frac{3}{4}$  c. of crepe batter into the skillet, it may be more or less depending on the size of ladle used. The batter should fill the skillet up to about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch and make a sizzling sound as it floods the pan. Allow the batter to surround the meat.
9. Add a handful of the vegetables to be cooked within the crepe (onion, beansprouts, scallion) to the center of the crepe, on top of the meat.
10. Cover with a lid and allow to cook for about 2 minutes.
11. When the batter solidifies and pulls away from the edge of the pan, drizzle cooking oil along the edges for extra crispiness.
12. Using a spatula, gently fold one half of the crepe onto the other half. Cook for about another 30 seconds, then slide onto the serving plate.
13. Grab desired amounts of vegetables to be eaten fresh with the crepe and spoon desired sauces into small serving bowls.
14. This dish is traditionally eaten by tearing off a portion of the crepe and placing it with fresh vegetables into a lettuce leaf, then folding the leaf to create a wrap. You can then dunk the lettuce wrap into the sauce and enjoy!