

# SOMETIMES THE BEST MEALS ARE A SURPRISE

When I travel, my husband and I love to go off the beaten path to discover things many tourists might miss. We love the back roads and small towns where every day life just moves along in its normal flow. While in Hanoi, we wanted to get a sense of life outside of the city, so we made arrangements for an unusual culinary side-tour which included hand-made vermicelli production and a lunch at the mayor's house. (It was a very small village and the mayor was able to charge a hefty fee for the honor).

We weren't quite sure what to expect, but within an hour of leaving our hotel, we were somewhere out in the country in a small village called Cu Da. Compared to the chaos of Hanoi where you take your life in your hands just to cross the street, this small village was almost silent and everyone seemed to walk at half-speed.



Our first stop was a small hut by the side of the road that was making hand-made vermicelli sheets. It's an amazing process to watch. Arrowroot is ground and mixed with water to make a paste. Then super-thin long sheets—almost the consistency of those fruit strips you ate as a kid—are spread out onto large bamboo trays to dry. They are then cut into thin strips, dried again before packaging, and then shipped around the world. The people of this village have been doing this for generations and it has become the main income for the villagers.



We were then taken to the mayor's house for lunch. We were told the mayor would not be joining us, but the host insisted we first take a nap. This was not optional. Not wanting to seem rude, we tried to relax on the hard bed and pretended to sleep. Watching us from a crack in the doorway was the mayor's granddaughter, an adorable and curious seven-year old. Catching my eye, she giggled and ran away.



When nap time was over, we were presented with a multi-course feast. Fried tofu, beef with scallions and bok choy, sautéed greens, vegetable spring rolls, some tasty stew concoction and, of course, vermicelli noodles served in a light soy sauce topped with fried shallots. The home cooked dishes were flavored so delicately and the ingredients were so fresh that it was better than any meal we've eaten in any Vietnamese restaurant.

We kept noticing our little spy standing in the shadows and eventually coaxed her out to come sit with us. She was as curious about us as we were about her. She kept staring at my iPhone, so I picked it up to show her how to take a selfie.



That seemed to wipe away any language challenges as we posed for our glam shot. Once she was satisfied we got a good one, she gave us a little hug, waved goodbye and ran out to play with her friends. As good as this lunch was, the company was even better.

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## **GRILLED                      EGGPLANT                      WITH TZATZIKI**

During my college semester abroad, I made my way from Belgium all the way to Greece to meet up with my college roommate, Sarah. We spent a month on the southern side of Crete in the little beach town of Matala. We lived on grapes, chocolate

cookies, and beer, but once a week we would treat ourselves to a real meal and always order pastitsio, moussaka and grilled eggplant with tzatziki. I still don't have a great recipe for the pastitsio and moussaka, but this grilled eggplant dish has become a summer staple.

#### **FOR TZATZIKI**

1 cup finely grated cucumber  
1 cup whole milk Greek yogurt  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, finely minced  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon sea salt  
2 tablespoons chopped chives

#### **FOR GRILLED EGGPLANT**

2 tablespoons salt  
1 cup warm water  
5 cups cold water  
2 large eggplants  
Olive oil, for grill grates  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup olive oil  
sea salt  
chopped dill for garnish

#### **PREPARATION**

#### **FOR TZATZIKI**

Grate the cucumber using the large holes on a box grater. Squeeze as much water out as possible.

Place cucumber in bowl. Add in yogurt, lemon juice, olive oil, garlic, salt and chives. Stir to combine. Cover and refrigerate at least one-hour before serving.

### **FOR GRILLED EGGPLANT**

In a large bowl, dissolve 2 tablespoons of salt into the warm water until the salt is dissolved. Add 5 cups of cold water and set aside.

Cut the eggplant into 3/4-inch thick rings and place them into the brine. Use a plate to hold down the eggplant so it is fully immersed in the water. Allow to soak for 45 minutes.

Remove eggplant and pat dry.

Oil grill grates and heat grill on medium-high. Brush both sides of each ring with olive oil. Season lightly with sea salt.

Place on grill until eggplant starts to brown, but not burn. Flip each and brown on other side, about 4-5 minutes each side.

Plate eggplant, drizzle tzatziki on top and garnish with dill.

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## **BLACK BEAN BURGERS**

If you're trying to cut back on meat, but miss the experience of burgers on the grill, here's a vegetarian version that will make you wonder why you ever ate meat in the first place. Okay, that may be an overpromise, but these bean burgers are

still pretty tasty.

**INGREDIENTS** (Makes 4 burgers)

1 (15.0-ounce) can black beans, drained and rinsed

1 egg

1/2 sweet onion, chopped

1 cup panko

1 tablespoon KK's Magic Rub\*

1/2 teaspoon hot sauce

1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive or canola oil

6 brioche buns

Ketchup, avocado, lettuce, tomato, red onion slices for garnish

**PREPARATION**

In a large bowl, mash the beans.

Add egg, onion, panko, magic rub, hot sauce and cheese. Mix well to combine, then shape into 4 patties.

Oil grates on grill. Bring grill to medium heat. Place patties on grill and cook for five minutes. Flip and cook for five minutes more until cooked through.

Transfer to buns.

Garnish with ketchup, avocado, lettuce, tomatoes and red onions. Or you can dress it up with an aioli, melted cheese or whatever else you like on your burgers.

**\*KK'S MAGIC RUB**



## **INGREDIENTS**

2 Tbsp Paprika

2 Tbsp Kosher Salt

1 Tbsp Ground Pepper

2 Tbsp Garlic Powder

1 Tbsp Onion Powder

1 Tbsp Brown Sugar

2 tsp Chipotle powder

1 tsp Cayenne

1 tsp Dried oregano

1 tsp Cumin

## **PREPARATION**

Mix all ingredients together.

Adjust to taste.

Store in airtight container. Best used within three months.