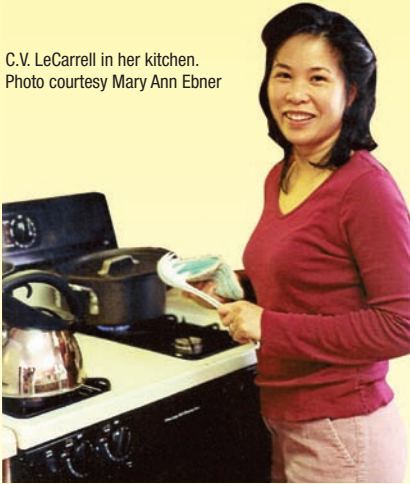


# At Home Anywhere: Preserving the Past in Vietnamese Soup

By Mary Ann Ebner

C.V. LeCarrell in her kitchen.  
Photo courtesy Mary Ann Ebner



Câm Vân LeCarrell, “C.V.” as she is known to friends and family, finds herself far from her Vietnamese roots as she moves around the world with her U.S. military family, but she finds her way home no matter where she lands with each PCS.

Currently in Germany at her husband’s most recent duty station, Câm Vân appreciates each new culture she experiences, but preserves her ties to her homeland in a bowl of traditional soup. Look deep into Câm Vân’s stout ceramic bowl of pho (pronounced “fuh”), enhanced with herbs and vibrant Asian seasonings, and you’ll discover more than a list of ingredients.

In Câm Vân’s version of this dish — along with the noodles, Thai basil, cilantro and bean sprouts — memories and traditions of a culture and homeland she left in Vietnam linger.

Her Asian-American recipe reveals more than what’s for lunch at the home of this Army family. Câm Vân, (“Silk Cloud” in her native Vietnamese) has developed her own version of the mound of rice noodles and rare beef afloat in a clear brown broth and smothered with fresh herbs.

Purists who cook the broth up to 24 hours won’t consider Câm Vân’s recipe conventional. But she takes pleasure in her variation.

C.V. and her husband manage a family of three children and she has carved out a career for herself as an optometrist. Once though, she was a

refugee, one of the boat people who escaped a war-torn Vietnam.

As a young girl in Vietnam, life for C.V. and the Lê family changed forever after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Her family struggled to get from one day to the next, and doing without represented her normal life as a young girl. One unforgettable evening in 1979, Câm Vân Lê thought she was going on a vacation with her family. She didn’t realize that they were actually fleeing their home country.

“Military obligations were mandatory. My oldest brother was already 18 and in hiding,” C.V. recalled. “My parents couldn’t bear [to have] their four boys being dragged off to war.”

Her parents planned their escape with all seven children from the harbor near their home in Quy Nhon. Nine-year-old Câm Vân crossed the waters by herself on a small dinghy from the shore to the fishing boat that would carry them away from Vietnam. When the time arrived and the family counted heads on the boat, one of the children wasn’t there.

“My oldest brother, Tuông, missed our rendezvous,” C.V. said. “He got left behind and had to hide in the home of family friends.”

For five years, Tuông survived among these friends, spending many hours concealed in their residential photography darkroom during random neighborhood inspections. With no alternatives, he invested his time in learning to process film while hoping to reunite with the family he trusted would find safety.

C.V.’s family and other fugitives on the rickety 31-foot fishing vessel were rescued by the crew of a Panamanian ship after nine days at sea.

“We were taken to an island, Palau, in Indonesia, and then went to a United Nations refugee camp on Galang Island [also in Indonesia],” C.V. said. “We stayed there for a year.”

With their hopes pinned on better lives in the United States, the family obtained immigration status from America. Making their way first to Tennessee, they finally settled in Southern California.

Tuông’s dream came true many years later. The eldest Lê brother now lives close to his family in California and works as an engineer.

C.V. values her life beyond words, but she’s not fully content unless she occasionally enjoys the traditional foods of her homeland. If she had it her way, she would run out to a neighborhood Vietnamese restaurant for pho every day.

“At home in California, my mom would never cook it,” C.V. said. “It’s labor-intensive and there are so many restaurants that serve it now. It’s only \$4 for a big bowl, too.”

But when her optometrist husband, a U.S. Army officer, transferred to New York’s Hudson Valley seven years ago, C.V. noticed a scarcity of Vietnamese restaurants. Her closest choice was nearly 25 miles from her own kitchen.

With no options for pho takeout or delivery nearby, C.V. modified the traditional preparations.

“I only cook things that don’t take too long,” she said as she picked up her toddler. “Some people will cook pho for hours. I can make it in two.”

C.V. found her way home to Vietnam after three decades, when her husband, Jim, was assigned to work in a clinic in Korea. She was able to travel to Vietnam for the first time since her escape as a nine-year-old. She dreamed of that return home for many years. And for now, she’s back home again with her own cuisine in Germany. Separated from her roots and relatives, Vietnamese food keeps her connected to her heritage.

*Mary Ann Ebner is a freelance writer and military spouse on her own PCS journey this summer.*

See C.V.’s recipe for pho on page 29

## Gates: U.S. Committed to Robust Presence in East Asia

The United States remains committed to maintaining a robust forward presence in the East Asian region, outgoing Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said in June.

Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto and Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa for the first U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee Meeting held since 2007.

The meetings, informally known as the 2+2 ministerial, underscore the strength of the U.S.-Japan security alliance and its role as the cornerstone of stability in the region.

Discussions during this year's meeting focused on the most critical challenges facing the Asia-Pacific region, Gates said. "Those include the denuclearization of North Korea, supporting continued progress in Afghanistan, and maritime security," he said.

Gates said committee members agreed "on a framework to transfer jointly produced missile-defense interceptors to third parties, to deepen our cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and to start new initiatives in space and cybersecurity."

Discussions included the response to the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that disabled Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant and left tens of thousands of people dead or missing and hundreds of thousands homeless.

"The sight of U.S. and Japanese forces working side by side to bring aid to the survivors of the earthquake and tsunami in March demonstrated the high level of interoperability between the U.S. and Japanese forces," Gates said.

"It also validated years of investment

by both nations in training and capabilities," he added, "... [and] demonstrated to a new generation in both countries the close bonds between our people and the value of this alliance."

During the June 21 meeting, Kitazawa expressed Japan's "heartfelt gratitude for the very generous support given by the United States in the aftermath of the great east Japan earthquake and for the kindness extended."

All of Japan is grateful for Operation Tomodachi, he said, adding, "I believe it will be very important for us to learn from the experience of the earthquake and adapt to changing circumstances."

### Base Realignment to Take Longer Than Planned

Also on the agenda was the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Ginowan city on the island of Okinawa.

The United States and Japan agreed on realignment initiatives in a May 2006 roadmap document that included a target year of 2014 to relocate the base to the Marine infantry base at Camp Schwab in northeastern Okinawa.

"The purpose of the realignment is to maintain deterrence and reduce burdens on local communities," Matsumoto said. "And the agreement this time is to achieve both."

In a document released in June, committee members said the relocation would not meet the 2014 target and "confirmed their commitment to complete the above projects at the earliest possible date after 2014."

"The decision ... on the Futenma replacement facility configuration, along with other elements of the 2006 realignment road map, shows we are making steady progress toward modernizing U.S. forward presence in the region," Gates said.

"It is critical," he added, "that we

move forward with the relocation of Futenma and construction of facilities in Guam for the U.S. Marines."

Doing so, Gates said, will reduce the impact of U.S. presence on local residents and allow the United States "to maintain capabilities critical to the alliance in Japan."

International topics discussed at the meeting included North Korea, Afghanistan and other global issues.

"On North Korea," Clinton said, "we remain committed to deterring further provocative behaviors by North Korea, supporting a North-South dialogue, and promoting the complete and peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Committee members discussed efforts to improve regional cooperation in several multilateral forums "and through a trilateral dialogue with India," she added.

Clinton said the members also addressed "joint efforts to advance peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan."

As the U.S.-Japan alliance enters its second half-century, she added, "It remains indispensable to the peace, security and economic dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region."

Gates said one of the most positive changes he's seen during his time in government and after becoming defense secretary in late 2006 was an "extraordinary improvement" in U.S.-Japanese relations. "Those ties have only grown and deepened in recent years," said Gates, who retired at the end of June.

"I leave this post convinced that the future of our alliance is a bright one," the secretary added. "It will continue to be the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific [region]." ●

—Cheryl Pellerin, *American Forces Press Service*