



Food Street

Street food, controversy and a road called Nguyen Van Chiem

On Nguyen Van Chiem, behind Diamond Plaza in District 1, stand around a dozen identical stalls, all selling different items of food and drink. Nothing unusual perhaps—but it's an initiative set up by City Hall that could potentially change the face and eating habits of Saigon.

The sidewalk clearing campaign has caused controversy since it was launched in February of this year, as government trucks have intermittently scooped up all in their path, leaving food and drink sellers with hefty fines to recover their belongings. It's estimated at least 500 businesses have been affected by the purge, so designated street stalls are the government's way of allowing the vendors to continue selling, while in theory retaining Vietnam's famous street food culture.

"There are good days and bad days," says one of the new vendors. "At first we thought it would be good, but not as many customers have come as we thought," says another. It's near to famous landmarks like the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Reunification Palace, but its location is obscured by the Diamond Plaza shopping mall, which has led to a slightly disappointing footfall. It's still a work in progress, and more streets like this are set to open in the near future.

"Before I came here I had a small store on Nguyen Du," says one vendor. She likes it here, as it means she is free from the aggressive street game of cat and mouse that plagued her in her previous location. "When I work here, I don't have to run," she says. "Here we feel safe".

All the vendors wear the same purple-coloured shirts as a uniform

which each have the same branded logo. According to one vendor, they had to apply to City Hall, who would then choose the poorest applicants. They seem grateful for the opportunity, and the opening hours of 6am to 9am and 11am to 2pm are less taxing, with all the equipment being provided by the government.

I visited on Sunday, when business is slower than usual, but it was by no means deserted. And the sellers who would usually work alone in the street look to be enjoying each other's company as they work side by side. There are plastic tables and chairs for customers to sit on.

The Food

There was the juice seller, the *banh mi* seller, the *che* seller, many noodle soup sellers, and the prices were fair, with all the takings apparently



going straight to the vendors. I tried *ha cao*, three dumplings for VND10,000 and a delicious, freshly made melon juice for VND15,000.

It is easy to criticise the project as an insult to a way of life in Saigon, but the fact is many tourists and even locals are put off by street food vendors who do not show prices and practice questionable food hygiene. Each stand here has a visible menu and it is clear how much everything will cost before you order. Vendors were sent on food safety courses, and there are regular inspections from city officials to check that food hygiene standards are being upheld. All the ingredients that go into the meals must be approved by City Hall.

City planners in Vietnam have long cast envious glances towards Singapore — a city that has successfully moved street vendors into food courts. But this is Saigon, and homogeneity is a concept that doesn't sit well with many. The government will support designated food streets but like any business, people will vote with their feet, and time will tell if the public are ready to give up on their street stalls just yet. — *Thomas Barrett* 



PHOTOS BY BAO ZOAN