



THE IMPERIAL CITY IN A BOWL

# Cơm Hến

*the cold-rice clam bowl of the Perfume River*



ORIGINS · ANATOMY OF THE BOWL · THE RECIPE · VARIATIONS  
· WHERE TO EAT IT

# Humble, baroque, and gloriously contradictory

A mound of cooled rice, buried under tiny river clams, raw herbs, crackling pork skin and a fierce spoonful of chilli — eaten at room temperature, with a cup of hot clam broth on the side.

Few dishes capture the spirit of Hue completely as *cơm*

*hến*. It is, on paper, a frugal scrap-meal — day-old rice that nobody wanted to waste, dressed with the smallest, cheapest shellfish in the river. Yet a single bowl arrives carrying a dozen or more components, each prepared separately and layered with the fussy precision the old imperial capital is famous for.

The pleasure is in the collisions. Cool rice against warm clams. Soft herbs against shattering pork rind. The sour snap of green starfruit against the deep, almost funky hum of *mắm*

*ruốc*, the fermented shrimp paste stirred up from the bottom. Crushed peanuts and toasted sesame add grit; banana blossom adds a faint, clean bitterness; and over everything goes chilli, in quantities that make first-timers blink.

It is street food in the truest sense — sold from shoulder-pole baskets and plastic-stool stalls, cheap enough to be a daily habit, eaten as a morning or late-afternoon snack rather than a sit-down meal. And it travels: ask anyone from Huế what they crave when they are far from home, and *cơm hến* is near the top of the list.



## AT A GLANCE

### Cơm hến

“clamrice” — the dish in its original form

### Huế, central Vietnam

former imperial capital on the Perfume River

### Cồn Hến islet

its birthplace, mid-river

### Served cool

room-temperature, hot clam broth alongside

### Always chilli-hot

heat is non-negotiable



“Cơm hến without chilli,” locals say, “is no longer *cơm hến* at all.”

# From a poor man's breakfast to the emperor's table

The clam inlet. Run a finger down the map of Huế and you reach the Perfume River – *Sông Hương* – curling through the city. Mid-stream sits a slip of land called *Cồn Hến*, literally “clam inlet,” named for the *hến*: the tiny basket clams that were once dredged by the basketful from its silty shallows. The dish was born here, an improvisation of whatever the islet’s families had on hand.



A meal made from leftovers. By most accounts the dish goes back roughly two centuries. The story told on *Cồn Hến* is a humble one: on days the river gave up no fish or shrimp, a family would stretch cold leftover rice with the broth and meat of boiled clams and a handful of garden herbs – enough to take the edge off a morning’s hunger. The room-temperature rice that defines *cơm hến* today began as simple thrift: it was wasteful to throw good rice away.



Feng shui and the city. Huế’s planners chose the citadel’s position by reading the river. Two inlets flank it, understood as the topographic body of *âm* and *dương* – yin and yang. *Cồn Hến* is the eastern one. Harmony – of opposites, of hot and cold, sour and salty, soft and crisp – is woven through Huế life, and few plates express it as neatly as this one.

The royal turn. Huế’s elders tell of *cơm hến* reaching the court of Emperor Thành Thái (reigned 1889–1907): a woman of the inlet is said to have presented its clams to the palace, where a far more elaborate, many-garnished version became a festival dish. Before the court, the story goes, it had been little more than cold rice, broth and clams. The royal chapter is oral tradition rather than firm record – but it captures something true about how a peasant snack was dressed up in imperial finery.

Today. The Perfume River’s salinity has shifted and it no longer yields its famous clams; most are now trucked in from the Tam Giang lagoon and elsewhere. *Cồn Hến* keeps the name if not the harvest. In the city, a *cơm hến* vendor waits on nearly every street – and the late Anthony Bourdain counted himself a fan.

# A dozen parts, one harmony

Everything is prepared apart and assembled at the last moment. Order matters: the cook layers from the bottom up, then the diner stirs it into a single, riotous whole.



## Cơm nguội

COOLED RICE

The base— day-old rice, served at room temperature.



## Hến

BABY BASKET CLAMS

Tiny river clams, sautéed with shallots, the dish's soul.



## Mắm ruốc

SHRIMP PASTE

A pungent spoonful stirred in from the bottom.



## Bắp chuối

BANANA BLOSSOM

Shredded raw for a faintly bitter crunch.



## Khế / Xoài

STARFRUIT / GREEN MANGO

Sour, julienned, cutting through the richness.



## Bạc hà

TARO STEM

Spongy elephant-ear stalk, sliced thin.



## Da heo

CRISPY PORK RIND

Fried golden, shattering on the tongue.



## Đậu phộng

ROASTED PEANUTS

Crushed, toasted, scattered over the top.



## Rau thơm

FRESH HERBS

Rau răm, mint and perilla, torn by hand.



## Ớt

CHILLI

Without heat, locals say, it isn't cơm hến at all.

### HOW THE BOWL IS BUILT

1

#### Cool greens

Herbs, sprouts, banana blossom and taro stem line the bottom

2

#### The rice

A mound of day-old rice at room temperature

3

#### The clams

Warm sautéed hến spooned over the top

4

#### Crunch + heat

Peanuts, pork rind, sesame, mắm ruốc, chilli oil

5

#### The broth

Hot clam broth served alongside, sipped between bites

THE RECIPE

# Cơm Hến at home

SERVES 4

THE CLAMS & BROTH

INGREDIENTS

- 1 kg small clams or cockles (or 300 g shelled baby clams)
- 2 shallots + 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1–2 tsp *mắm ruốc* (fermented shrimp paste)
- Fish sauce, pepper, a little oil
- Water, to boil & make the broth

THE BOWL

- 4 cups day-old rice, at room temperature
- Bean sprouts & shredded banana blossom
- Taro stem (*bạc hà*), thinly sliced
- Starfruit or green mango, julienned
- Rau răm, perilla & mint, torn

CRUNCH & HEAT

- Roasted peanuts, crushed
- Crispy pork rind (*da heo/tóp mỡ*)
- Toasted sesame + fried shallots
- Chilli oil or *sa tế*, fresh chilli
- Lime wedges, to finish

METHOD

- Purge the clams**  
Soak live clams in lightly salted water (a splash of rice-rinse water helps) for 1–2 hours so they spit out grit, then rinse well.
- Boil & save the broth**  
Simmer the clams in fresh water just until the shells open. Lift them out and strain the cooking liquid – this clear *nước hến* is the broth you'll serve on the side. Pick the meat from the shells.
- Sauté the clams**  
Fry minced shallot and garlic in a little oil, add the clam meat, and season with fish sauce, a small spoon of *mắm ruốc* and pepper. Toss over high heat until fragrant and just dry.
- Season the broth**  
Keep the reserved broth hot; adjust with a pinch of salt or fish sauce. It should taste clean and savoury, not heavy.
- Prep the garnish**  
Shred banana blossom, slice taro stem, julienne starfruit or green mango, tear the herbs, crush the peanuts, break up the pork rind. Pile everything separately.
- Assemble**  
In each bowl: a base of cool greens and herbs, a mound of room-temp rice, the warm clams, then peanuts, pork rind, sesame, a dab of *mắm ruốc* and chilli oil.
- Serve & mix**  
Bring the hot broth alongside. The diner stirs the bowl into one, sips broth between mouthfuls, and adds chilli to taste.



VARIATIONS

# One inlet, four bowls

The same clams, broth and parade of garnishes — carried by a different starch, or none of the original protein at all. The sign board at a Huế stall usually offers all of them.

## ■ *Cơm hến*

### CLAM RICE – THE ORIGINAL

Cooled rice as the base. The traditionalist's choice, and the form said to have reached the imperial court. Elders tend to insist on it.

## ■ *Bún hến*

### CLAMS WITH RICE VERMICELLI

Swap rice for soft white *bún* noodles. Lighter and more cooling — the version younger eaters in Huế reach for most.

## ■ *Mì hến*

### CLAMS WITH NOODLES

A newer, casual riff using egg or instant noodles instead of rice. Springy and quick; purists shrug, students love it.

## ■ *Cơm hến chay*

### THE VEGETARIAN BOWL

Huế's deep Buddhist tradition gives this meat-free cousin. Clams become sautéed mushroom, tofu or young jackfruit; the shrimp paste, a fermented-soy stand-in. Common on full-moon and fasting days.

### REGIONAL & EVERYDAY TWEAKS

Beyond the big four, the bowl bends to the cook. Some Huế kitchens add a little coagulated pork blood for richness; others lean harder on the *mắm ruốc*. Stalls that see a lot of visitors will quietly dial back the chilli and shrimp paste — so if you want it the way locals eat it, it's worth saying so. The constants never change: cooled starch, warm clams, raw herbs, something sour, something crunchy, and real heat.



# Field notes from Huế

## FOUR PLACES TO START

### 01 **Cơm Hến**

ON THE INLET ITSELF

Eat it at the source. Small family eateries on the inlet (locals point to *Hoa Đông*) serve some of the most authentic bowls in the city.

### 02 **Đập Đá**

JUST ACROSS THE WATER

A cluster of tiny, much-loved shops – *Tí Hon* among the names regulars mention.

### 03 **The gánh vendors**

STREET SIDE SHOULDER - POLES

Look on *Mai Thúc Loan*, *Trương Định*, *Nguyễn Sinh Cung* and *Nguyễn Công Trứ* – plastic stools, a basket, and a queue of locals.

### 04 **Chợ Đông Ba**

BIG RIVERSIDE MARKET

Among the fruit and spice stalls, make shift kitchens turn out *cơm hến* for the morning crowd.

PLATE 04  
a streetside gánh / stall scene



#### TRAVELLER'S TIPS

- It's a morning and late-afternoon snack – some stalls sell out before 10am.
- Expect real heat. Ask for less ớt (chilli) or rốc (paste) if you're easing in. Room-temperature rice is the tradition, not a mistake.
- It's cheap and casual: tiny stools, shared tables, a few thousand đồng.
- Tables often hold extra chilli and salt – season your own bowl to taste.
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“To know Vietnam, start eating in Huế.” The *cơm hến* stall is as good a first table as any.



*a cold bowl, a hot broth,*

# *and the soul of Huế*

Cơm hến is proof that humble food can carry a whole city's character – its thrift, its love of contrast, and the imperial habit of making something elaborate out of almost nothing.

## SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- Vietnam Coracle – Huế Food Guide
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  - NGON Vietnam – Cơm Hến recipe
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  - Exotic Voyages; Adventure Journey – Huế cuisine
  - Local Huế food writing (mlefood; Đại Việt Tourist)
- The imperial-court origin is recounted as Huế oral tradition.  
Illustrations original.