

Let's Talk Food

Cultural cooking in Borderland

Hoa Sobczynski shares her Vietnamese roots with local family and friends

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Not many people in Borderland may know what a tamarind is, or for that matter even cook with one, but Hoa Sobczynski needs it to make one of her favorite dishes.

The pod-like fruit is a key ingredient in sour soup – one of Sobczynski's favorite meals growing up as a young girl in Vietnam.

"The soup is a mixture of several different vegetables, greens, and ingredients to make it sour," said the Backus Community Center business manager. "And shrimp or fish can be added to it."

It has been many years since Sobczynski left Vietnam and made the United States her home, but the roots of her culture are still much alive within her.

In fact, she admits to cooking one Vietnamese dish or another almost daily.

"I do it because it's what I like to eat," she said, adding some recipes are altered to please the taste buds of her husband, Kurt.

But Sobczynski has a firm rule when it comes to her cooking.

"I tell people, 'If you like it, don't ask what's in it,'" she said with a laugh. "I tell my husband that a lot."

Vietnamese traditions

Sobczynski was born in 1964, one of five children growing up in her household. Aside from her parents, Sobczynski said she also lived with her grandparents, making for a very full house.

"There was always at least 10 of us living in the home," she said. "In Vietnam, it is common to live with extended family."



Hoa Sobczynski and her twin sister, Truc Pham, prepare a Vietnamese meal.



Sobczynski's mother, TuyVan Nguyen, far right, sits down to have lunch with family in Vietnam.

A full house makes for a large meal, and not just at dinner – three times a day.

"We got together for a meal three times a day, every day," she said. "Life wasn't busy like it is here."

And, each meal was prepared fresh.

Sobczynski recalls waking up early to visit the market daily to gather food for that day's meals.

"We don't make something in the morning for the rest of the day," she said. "Every meal is fresh. And when it is done, it goes right on the table so it is hot."

Even after leaving Vietnam, the tradition of gathering for a meal is something Sobczynski has instilled in her own family.

In fact, Sobczynski said her daughter, Helen, is always shocked to hear of friends who don't have similar traditions with their families.

"We always had at least family dinner," Sobczynski said. "That is a time to gather for a meal and hear about everyone's day."

'A' for nutrition

Another reason preparing Viet-

namese food is a high priority for Sobczynski is its nutrition. Traditional Vietnamese cooking, Sobczynski said, includes fresh ingredients, minimal use of cheese and butter, and reliance on herbs and vegetables. With the balance between fresh herbs and meats and a selective use of spices to reach a fine taste, cultural food websites list Vietnamese food as one of the healthiest cuisines in the world.

"Sometimes, American food is heavy on meat and starch," Sobczynski said. "Vietnamese food is full of nutrition."

And for dessert?

Sobczynski said cake and cookies did not cure a sweet tooth after a meal. If her family's Vietnamese meals included desserts, she said they ate fruit.

Learning from the best

Learning to cook came naturally for Sobczynski, who said she watched her mother.

"Whatever we liked, we'd get together and make it with her," she said. "I never really had a recipe."

And she still rarely follows a recipe. "I just go by my own judgment."

She also swaps cooking tidbits and

ideas with her siblings, who Sobczynski said all live in California and who she still talks to on a daily basis.

"We always tell each other about recipes and what we changed about it to make them better," she said.

Differences in cultures

There are some challenges to being a Vietnamese cook in Borderland and one of the biggest is finding necessary ingredients.

"When I go down to the Cities, it's a treat to stock up," she said.

One item she makes sure to buy when out of town is catfish to make one of her family's favorite meals – barbeque catfish.

While catfish can be purchased locally, it is only sold in fillets. If Sobczynski had her way, she'd buy the entire fish.

Sobczynski recalled one of her first experiences fishing in the area with her husband and a guide on Rainy Lake. Sobczynski said the guide cleaned the fish and threw everything but the fillet away, which she said surprised her.

"We cook fish with the bone still in," she said, smiling. "The skin and the bone keep the flavor in. Otherwise, it's a waste."

But, she still eats Rainy Lake wall-eye – just the fillet, she said with a laugh.

Sharing is caring

Sobczynski admits while it may sound like she enjoys cooking, it is still quite a chore.

"I don't like to cook, but if I have to, I can make a good meal," she said.

And she likes to share her food and culture with family, friends and neighbors.

"When I have the opportunity, I will share what anybody would like to know," she said.