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Finding France in Flour

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Mr. Darles would have better chances at success if he could demonstrate that the colonists preach by example and that rice is eaten in many forms both in the colony and on the tables of the major importers of Marseille. This is sadly not the case, in Saigon much as in Hanoi, the French population rebels against rice and eats too much bread to the detriment of the people’s health.

(H.C. 1928: 4–5)

These words, featured in a 1928 publication of L’Éveil Économique de l’Indochine, a colonial business journal, refer to the activities of Mr. Darles, a member of the colonial lobby and booster of Indochinese rice in the metropole. The article illustrates empire-wide tensions pitting rice against bread in a complex attempt at balancing French dining habits with economic necessity. Bread, as the undisputed foundation of the French diet for much of the nation’s history, has maintained a crucial place within French culture, both at home and abroad. While the status of carbohydrates has fluctuated in popularity in recent years, this statement dating from 1928 is an exception to general views of the period relating to bread and its place in a healthy diet.

Perhaps more bizarre than this is the historical context in which this paragraph surfaces; by 1928 although the French colonial foothold in Indochina was long established, the colonists still relied extensively on foods from the metropole. These foods were either imported directly from France or amalgamated from combinations of local and foreign commodities and forced into a sort of ersatz French cuisine. Though the Indochinese Union was productive enough to generate ample sustenance, including a wide selection of European fruits and vegetables, colonists continued to devote considerable funds to the importation of metropolitan foods. The complaint transcribed here is significant on two counts, first for its criticism of the French colonial reliance on bread, an expensive habit to maintain, dependent on wheat non-indigenous to Indochina, and second as a condemnation of the French government, which in an attempt to support the colonial rice trade had toyed with the idea of introducing colonial rice flour into metropolitan wheat bread (H.C. 1928: 4–5).

The creation of a rice versus wheat binary within the French Empire stands as a key example of culinary “othering”. The value of these carbohydrates at the base of both French and Indochinese diets assists us in disentangling the knotted foodways found within the colonial landscape.
Though bread existed as a basic staple in France, a necessity even, within Indochina it became a comfort food of French origin, one which relied on expensively imported wheat flour. This stubborn dependence on food from the metropole was often contrasted with the purportedly more adaptable agents of the British Empire who did not hesitate to rely on local fare. The French reliance on bread as a dietary staple goes a long way in illustrating the established place of bread in French gastronomy, as well as the new roles it came to take in the colony. Bread was perceived of by the French as both a necessity and a potential means through which to distance themselves from their subjects. However, this did not always align with the realities of baking and bread consumption in French Indochina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Historiographical context and methodology**

The consumption of bread in Indochina reveals underlying tensions found in attributing notions of “Frenchness” to food. Burgeoning concepts of gastronationalism become particularly interesting in the context of colonial encounters where foods, such as bread, become a symbol of colonialism. These foods are by extension important when identities formed along these lines are challenged by hybridization as outlined by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1985: 154). The French saw wheat bread as embodying notions of “Frenchness” and feared any challenges to this conceptualization. However, by bringing bread to the colonies, the French brought it into a context where it could be hybridized in the hands of native bakers using foreign flours. In the context of the colonies, food becomes a platform upon which hybridity manifests, justifying to a certain extent the fear which the French had in relation to native foods entering their own foodways.

The complications caused by blurred lines within the colonial experience have been alluded to in Patricia Morton’s *Hybrid Modernities*, Alice Conklin’s *A Mission to Civilize* and Eric Jennings’ *Curing the Colonizers* as ever lurking concerns for French colonial administrators (Conklin, 1997; Jennings, 2006; Morton, 2000). Fear of colonial cross-pollination, particularly in the context of the physical, was alarming and permeated the attitudes of the colonists in charge of implementing the French “civilizing mission”. Conklin mentions that the mission to civilize provided moral justification to the French occupation of its colonial holdings (Conklin 1997: 256). This form of colonization justified French republican imperialism from a moral perspective, affirming the need to colonize, even in areas which provided no economic impetus for doing so. This concept served to placate a French public which was not always supportive of colonialism. The civilizing mission encouraged them to have faith in an enterprise which would promote imperial prestige throughout the various political and economic shifts experienced by France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Questioning this division between colonized and colonizer casts dubious light on the necessity of the mission to civilize and, by extension, on the imperial project as a whole. This is reflected in the ever-evolving nature of the civilizing mission, which was constantly redefined in order to remain relevant (Conklin 1997: 7). French civilians in Indochina eagerly grasped at overpriced supplies of canned food from the mainland in order to reassert their “Frenchness” as opposed to eating significantly fresher and healthier local foods (Peters 2012: 155). This decision, substantiated by a combined nostalgia for French cuisine and a chronic fear of “going native”, is particularly relevant in the context of bread. Notions of purity in bread are common in primary sources of the period, and to many French people only wheat bread was considered as truly being bread (Le Courier Saïgonnais, 1928: 19). Other grains such as rye were seen as contaminants to the classic French *pain de froment* both on the mainland and in the colonies. The addition of rice mentioned in the opening quote of this chapter was especially vilified in part due to its colonial ties (Janes 2016: 74).
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This chapter centres predominantly on the beginning of the twentieth century ending with the years predating the Second World War with some overlap into the late nineteenth century. By this time the French had strengthened their grip on the area, having formed the Indochinese Union in 1887, effectively binding Cambodia and Laos to Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. The period in question spans through the food shortages of the First World War, which affected French supply links with the colonies, and the Depression years, which affected the Indochinese economy in the early 1930s (Janes 2016: 15). My work relies primarily on sources collected from the records of the Résidence Supérieure du Cambodge, which are administered by the National Archives of Cambodia. I had the pleasure of accessing these documents on a research trip conducted in May 2016. The sources are remnants of the French colonial administration dating from 1863 to 1954 and are carefully maintained by the incredibly helpful archivists and archival staff. As is often the case with imperial projects, I am forced to rely heavily on government documents, newspapers and other documents that the colonial government stored, providing me with only a sliver of an infinitely bigger picture, a process which often feels like peering through a keyhole. As such I have endeavoured to bear in mind the advice of Ann Laura Stoler and remember that many government documents outline plans, rather than accomplishments (Stoler 2009: 4). To paraphrase Penny Edwards, my work remains captive to its reliance on the very European colonial sources whose fundamental assumptions I set out to question (Edwards 2007: 18). The archival documents used herein are supplemented by sources from the French archival website Gallica in addition to a range of secondary sources of which the recent works of Erica Peters and Lauren Janes have been especially pertinent.

French bread

Ideas of French culinary exceptionalism have long been tied to bread, baking and French culture. The obvious springboard from which to understand the value attributed to French bread is the work of Steven Kaplan. Although an early modernist and Europeanist by training, Kaplan’s Good Bread Is Back provides useful insight into the status of bread, its production and consumption in France (Kaplan 2006). The use of bread to measure livelihood and earnings, being associated with wages and life, places it as a central tenet of the French foodscape and a food which belonged to every class in French society (Kaplan 2006: 1, 6). The centrality of bread to French culture and its democratization have also been alluded to by Rachel Laudan in her Cuisine & Empire (Laudan 2013). Laudan describes wheat bread, certainly white wheat bread, as trickling down beyond the French middling class in the early nineteenth century (Laudan 2013: 248). Parisian bread gained its worldwide reputation, and the prestige of French gastronomy made it easier for colonizers to justify their need for this European staple. It cemented French bread’s place in the dietary canon, legitimizing on a personal level the place which bread took in Indochina. By following French bread to Indochina we do not only expand Kaplan’s seminal work beyond the boundaries of Europe but we also study how the identity of French bread was treated in an exoticized context. French bread became a symbol of colonial culture one which, unlike other colonial hallmarks such as language, architecture or fashion, was directly consumed.

Bread and colonial language

Within colonial sources bread holds an abstracted yet important place in the daily expressions found in various documents. One communiqué from the Indochinese Press referred to the education of indigenous children as “the bread which their souls need”, all the while referring to the children in question as protégés of France (Communiqué de la Presse Indochinoise 1920: 7).
In doing so this turn of phrase blends bread, the religious significance attributed to it and the civilizing mission together into one uncomfortable statement. To claim that French education was like bread for the colonized soul evidences the flagrant irreverence that the French colonizers had towards Indochinese cultures, in more ways than one.

Bread also surfaced in expressions which were not quite so vividly colonizing. For instance, in relating to hard times one rubber planter referred to the “bitter bread of poverty” which planters would be forced to consume should French policy on rubber tariffs not favour them (Sipière 1922: 769). The use of this expression in Indochina is particularly interesting in the context of the dearness of internationally shipped flour. The cost difference between wheat flour and rice did not make bread, no matter how bitter, a poor man’s food. In 1930 bread was purchased by the Indochinese government in Cambodia at twenty-seven Indochinese cents per kilogram, while rice cost only fourteen cents per kilo (Commande faite à Roussely pour le compte de l’Hôpital-Mixte RSC 34420 1930). The price of bread in 1930 was only one cent more than the price projected for it by government sources in 1918, demonstrating that wheat prices remained high even beyond the First World War (Rapport au Conseil du Protectorat RSC 37078 1917). The use of this terminology speaks more to a long cultural heritage of using bread allegorically in language than to the actual realities surrounding bread consumption in the colonies. Author Louis Cros in his guide for prospective colonists referred in 1931 to coal as “the bread of industry”, to rice as “Asian bread” and to bananas as being “the bread of the poor” (Cros 1931: 266, 359). The significance of bread for the French thus emerges as the basis for a comparative understanding of carbohydrates but also as a source of ethnic polarization. To see rice as Asian bread serves to highlight not only that rice was labelled as belonging to the colonized but also that in reverse, bread belonged to the colonizer.

Finding flour

The place of bread in French culture begs the question, where did the flour from which to make bread in Indochina originate from? While modern enthusiasts of French terroir might assume that the flour used in Indochina was of the finest French stock, they would no doubt be disappointed to discover that this crucial ingredient originated, more often than not, from elsewhere. A number of primary sources stress the importance of foreign flour in fuelling Indochina’s appetite for bread, and Lauren Janes has demonstrated that particularly during the First World War and in the interwar period, French-grown wheat was in short supply even in the metropole (Cros 1931: 153–154; Le Courier Saïgonnais 1928: 19; Janes 2016: 74). Erica Peters has demonstrated that wheat flour often came to Indochina from the United States or Australia rather than France (Peters 2011: 120). The importation of foreign flour was the norm except for some notable exceptions such as the Resident Superior of Cambodia who imported French flour even during the war year of 1917. Records show that arrangements were put in place to import 100 kg of French wheat flour for use by the protectorate of Cambodia in the first semester of 1917 (Cahiers des Charges RSC 37078 1916). However, such consumption seems to have been anomalous behaviour in the colony. Colonial police records document samples of Owl and Monkey branded flour imported from Hong Kong being seized from a Chinese baker for chemical analysis in the same year (Répression des Fraudes, Procès 8427 RSC 17855 1917). In other years Hong Kong was an important source of flour for Indochina. Sourcing the flour traveling through British-held Hong Kong is an interesting case in itself. The climactic improbability of massive wheat cultivation in Hong Kong, as well as colonial references to major imports of wheat from Australia seem to indicate that Hong Kong flour was made using wheat which came primarily from the British colonies or the United States (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture
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du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). In addition to this a 1938 summary of Indochinese imports and exports in 1937 specifically referred to large quantities of primarily Australian flour traveling through Hong Kong (Tableau du Commerce Extérieur de l’Indochine Année 1937 RSC 36623 1938). This flour was both more reliably available and less expensive than French flour.

Issues pertaining to French flour in Indochina were highlighted in a 1930 letter from the mixed-race Chamber of Commerce of Cambodia to the resident superior of Cambodia which summarized a recommendation by the former concerning proposed changes to the special tariff on grain imports to Indochina (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). These changes aimed to augment the duties on foreign wheat flour in order to favour the flour produced by farmers in France (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). In this document the Chamber encouraged the consumption of French flour but expressed doubts about how competitive metropolitan flour might be in the long run alongside flour imported from abroad, particularly from Australia (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). They expressed their interest in potentially favouring French flour should they be guaranteed a steady supply of high-quality and affordable flour yet ultimately chose to sacrifice nationalism in exchange for the reliability and affordability long established by foreign sources of flour (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930).

The Chamber of Commerce placed the required imports of wheat at 20,000–21,000 tonnes and stressed that consumption of wheat in the colony was ever increasing (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). Their fear that France would not be able to maintain the high export numbers made possible by the 1930s bumper crop and that the colony would later need to revert to importing foreign flour at a higher price encouraged the Chamber of Commerce to err on the side of caution as they voted to maintain the current tariffs (Le Président de la Chambre Mixte de Commerce & d’Agriculture du Cambodge à Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge RSC 2535 1930). This decision ultimately paid off when French flour exports to Indochina subsequently plummeted alongside French production and foreign flour filled the breach once more, entering the colony with an average of 17,164 tonnes of flour yearly from Hong Kong alone between 1935 and 1937 out of a total yearly average of 18,445 tonnes imported in the same period (Tableau du Commerce Extérieur de l’Indochine Année 1937 RSC 36623 1938). French flour was not at all competitive, averaging a meagre 68.6 tonnes traveling from metropole to colony yearly in the same period (Tableau du Commerce Extérieur de l’Indochine Année 1937 366231938).

Divisions: racializing carbohydrates

It has been argued that French colonizers designed their homes in an attempt to avoid being tempted into sexual intimacy with natives; their food was also segregated in the hopes that this would act as a racial divider, preventing hybridization on even the most mundane level (Peters
These boundaries are evident in the categorization of rice as Asian and wheat flour as European. Lauren Janes in her *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris* has stressed the extents to which different groups went in encouraging the consumption of Indochinese rice in the metropole with varying levels of success (Janes 2016). Within France rice from Indochina had difficulties competing with rice from the Carolinas as well as with Patna rice from India (Janes 2016: 83). This was in part due to its quality as well as the reputation attributed to it (Janes 2016: 83). While attempts to popularize Indochinese rice in France did experience some success, as seen in the case of the *Cordon Bleu* demonstrations on proper rice preparation complemented by the sale of affordable sacks of rice at the 1931 colonial exposition in Paris, rice from the colonies did remain perceptibly tied to their origins (Janes 2016: 93). As Janes mentions, popular cooking magazines referred to boiled rice as *riz à l’annamite* alluding to the method of preparation used in the central protectorate of Vietnam (Janes 2016: 83). Most problematic of all was the use of relatively small amounts of rice flour in French bread in the metropole, a topic which Janes describes in depth and one which saw very little success in France despite the dear price of wheat flour in Paris during and immediately after the First World War (Janes 2016: 7). Indeed, in the short periods of time where rice was legally permitted to be used in bread, it was derided for undermining the purity of the national French wheat loaf, and loaves with rice in them were legally required to be referred to as rice bread even though they were never allowed to contain more than ten percent wheat flour (Janes 2016: 74). As such the identity of rice as the “other” when juxtaposed against wheat in bread baking encouraged its rejection. In the context of Indochina where rice was the dominant grain, the fear of bread adulteration was ever present. The 1917 seizure of flour from a Chinese baker in Phnom Penh named Lo Linh is indicative of this suspicion. Lo Linh, who had no prior convictions, was suspected of food adulteration alongside three other bakers (Répression des Fraudes, Procès: 8427, 8428, 8429, 3773 RSC 17855 1917). The flour and bread seized from the four bakers were all tested chemically for adulterants, but all of their products were ultimately cleared (Répression des Fraudes, Procès: 8427, 8428, 8429, 3773 RSC 17855 1917). No samples from European bakeries were tested (Répression des Fraudes, Procès: 8427, 8428, 8429, 3773 RSC 17855 1917).

**Breaking boundaries**

The case of bread as the primordial French staple but also as one of the more affordable and thus accessible French foods seems to muddy the waters of colonial foodways. Contemporary texts reveal a wide variety of excerpts containing different opinions on rice. While there is definitely a theme of colonial rejection of rice, as seen with a variety of primary sources both bemoaning the colonizer’s reluctance to eat rice and the rising price of wheat flour, not everyone opposed the native grain. Cros writes that rice was not only enjoyable but sometimes too expensive for native consumption, leaving the lowest classes in the colony to rely upon millet and other substitutes (Cros 1931: 266). He further mentions that Indochina exported over 134,000 tonnes of rice to France and its colonies in 1924, although estimating how much of this actually made its way onto French tables rather than being used as animal feed or for distillation is difficult (Cros 1931: 139, 141). In addition to this, Cros brings to his reader’s attention, with no particular antagonism, the consumption of bread by certain “well-off natives” when flour costs were not too prohibitive (Cros 1931: 141). Such instances demonstrate fluidity when attempting to pin nationality to food. The complexities of the colonial space were subject to a variety of racial and class factors which made it nearly impossible for any French food that was not extracted directly from a French ship or can to truly be French.
With an estimated national consumption within France of 200 kg of bread per capita yearly in 1928, the French remained reluctant to abandon this safe and relatively affordable staple in the colony (Cros 1931: 376). Perhaps it is due to this that they were willing to ignore how hybridized their bread had actually become. Though some bakeries remained French in name and ownership, the actual bread consumed by the colonizers was not made by French hands for very long. Peters has stressed that upon arrival in Indochina, many bakers took advantage of the positions of power that their nationality granted them to escape the difficult conditions of their trade (Peters 2012: 157). Much as the French baker on the mainland passed off the hardest work to apprentices, the colonizers were quick to pass on the skills of their trade to native peoples, who in turn did the brunt of their work (Peters 2012: 157). This occurred in part because of a need to provide French-style bread to colonial soldiers and later to other wings of the colonial administration as evidenced by records from the mixed-race hospital of Phnom Penh (Cahier des Charges RSC 37078 1914). It also served to relieve French bakers from the backbreaking work of the trade, particularly in colonial locales considered by the French as too hot for habitation, let alone baking (Peters 2012: 159). The shifting of this difficult labour and its offloading to the colonial body reveals not only hierarchies based on class and race in the colonies but also alludes to notions of imperial climatology. The rhetorical commitment to bread being “French” and thus acting as a marker of difference contrasted sharply with the reality of who was actually doing the baking.

French dough, Indochinese hands

Commercial baking in an era which had not yet seen a full mechanization of the trade remained a career that intimately tied baker to bread. Kaplan expands on this by describing how in hand-kneading it was estimated that every 172 kg of dough produced contained 500 or so grams of human sweat, and this in the cooler weather of the metropole (Kaplan 2006: 112). While this statistic is by no means easy to quantify with specificity, suffice it to say that French consumers of the period were well aware of the sweat they consumed (Kaplan 2006: 112). The near certainty that indigenous sweat was present in French bread in Indochina, particularly when one considers the heat of bakeries in tropical environments, combined with the bodily notion of native hands kneading dough for a product marketed as French is captivating yet conspicuously absent from sources. Understanding if the contact of colonial bodies with bread that was white, in every sense, had an effect on French perceptions of baked goods would be useful in elucidating the processes of racialization within French colonial labour systems. The same French colonizers that balked at physical contact with the people they colonized seem to have eaten the bread which contained the sweat of the native or Chinese bakers who had kneaded it, yet these colonizers continued to see this bread as French, choosing not to address this inconsistency in colonial society.

Aside from government fears concerning adulteration, many French settlers in Indochina seemed to be blissfully unaware, or more realistically, nonchalant about who made their bread. Though some purportedly French bakeries such as that of a Mr. Clément stressed the importance of French bread, expressing its supposed superiority over the bread made in Chinese bakeries, it is difficult to know what percentage of French bread made in supposedly European bakeries was actually made by French bakers (Peters 2012: 159). Most colonial marketing, at least early on, focused on the food’s supposed “Frenchness”, even though in many cases there was indeed very little that was French about it (Gazette d’Haiphong 1893). As such, it seems that the techniques used to create French-styled loaves became the carriers of “Frenchness”. This, compounded by the lack of a widely consumed native wheat bread in Indochina, likely made a possible Indochinese adoption of French baking less frightening in the context of hybridity. In future work I
intend to place this in a comparative framework alongside Algeria where wheat was an essential feature of the foodscape prior to French colonialism.

**Edible colonialism**

The lack of a native Indochinese wheat bread and of willing French labour partially justifies why in a society where even directories were separated by ethnicity, there was such common acceptance of native labour in food. This acceptance was no doubt enhanced by the colonial habit of having domestics of varying ethnicities prepare ersatz European foods. In addition to this, perhaps the desire for comforting bread outweighed any racial prejudice that might impede access to this staple. As early as 1899 another French writer in a guide to the colonization of Tonkin advised that, should one be stationed in the bush, native cooks, if taught well by the colonizer’s wife, were liable to surprise their master by learning the art of baking quickly (Joleaud-Barral 1899: 60). This leads me to suspect that the integration of French baking into Indochinese culture was understood as one of the successes of French colonialism. I believe it to be the case that the various offshoot bakeries formed by indigenous bakers who opened their own European-style shops producing French baked goods were taken as evidence of cultural assimilation. My belief is based in part on the lack of a significant outcry against indigenous and Chinese bakers, though allusions to the superiority of French bakers were present as seen in the aforementioned case of Mr. Clément (Peters 2012: 159). Assimilation through bread baking and consumption was not an uncommon concept among colonizers, some of whom assumed that their perceived superiority was a product of their diet (Janes 2016: 63). However, it must be mentioned that while it became acceptable for non-French people to become bakers, they were still viewed with suspicion. Newspaper advertisements for French bakeries implied lack of hygiene in competing Chinese bakeries, while the aforementioned government inquiries into food adulteration in Cambodia featured chemical testing of breads made by Chinese bakers and their Vietnamese staff in Phnom Penh (Répression des Fraudes, Procès: 8427, 8428, 8429, 3773 RSC 17855 1917).

The wide array of bakeries compiled in the joint directories sported a variety of names, both French and indigenous. Some clearly took names which were not French, while others made use of designations reminiscent of France. The French names of bakeries did not, as aforementioned, imply a French baker or apprentices. The *Pâtisserie Dauphinoise*, a pastry shop in Dalat, sought to evoke France with its name even though its baker, Ban Thaï, sported a name that did not (Jennings 2011: 84). Though we might assume that the bakery’s name was meant to provide an illusion of Frenchness, to mask the baker’s identity, it seems equally likely that the owner simply wished to attract a wealthy French clientele while exploiting the cachet attributed internationally to French baking, which took on additional value among potential French clients in the colonies. Indeed, a quick look at restaurants and bakeries across the world today reveals that the appropriation of French cachet to sell foods remains very much en vogue.

While there were also bakeries which operated under local names such as the Van-Lan bakery in Hanoi, information about these businesses is sadly lacking in colonial sources (Lacroix-Sommé, Dickson and Burtschy 1933: 107, 121). Though it may not be possible to unearth what exact types of bread such bakeries sold and to whom, it is not preposterous to hypothesize that they produced bread in some approximation of the French tradition. French baker Bernard Ganachaud once stated that if there are 38,000 bakers in France, then there are 38,000 ways to make bread (Kaplan 2006: 94). This was doubtless also the case in Indochina. Much as bread baking was individualized and ever changing in France, it certainly went through a variety of permutations within the colonies, yet it still maintained French affiliations in the eyes of those eating it and to an extent still does.
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Conclusion

The use of Indochinese workers as labourers in French bakeries, workers who in turn seem to have opened their own bakeries, casts a different light on bread than on other foods identified as French. The difficulties of growing certain European fruits and vegetables, except in microclimates such as that of Dalat, allowed these foods to be prized as status symbols shoring up ideological walls which could defend colonizers from the fears of cultural hybridity. With these symbols secured in the lofty ideals surrounding French food, bread could instead be perceived of as a colonizing tool or be interpreted as evidence of colonial success. For indigenous bakers, however, creating bread identified as French when French bakers backed away from the trade provided an important venue for economic success even though some local bakers chose to adopt French names for their businesses. Even in distant Indochina bread remained a central part of French culture, present in day-to-day expressions, even when the expressions themselves seemed out of place in the colonial context. Habits of consumption and preference led to French attempts to maintain wheat bread’s central dietary role despite the considerable expenses undertaken to do so. While French attempts to maintain the staple persisted, the colonial context gave new meanings to bread as the supply chain and process necessary to produce it shifted. Bread continued to be a basic staple to the French and was consumed by locals, providing Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese bakers with an important means through which to make a living in a heavily hierarchical and racist system. The global expansion of the wheat market has allowed bread to become common on the streets of the countries which once formed French Indochina. More recently bread’s integration into local foodways as bánh mì, khao jee and num pang has led to it taking on entirely new meanings yet again. That these breads and the sandwiches named for them have become national symbols in countries proud of their anticolonial histories, all the while continuing to be marketed as French influenced, provokes a whole new array of questions about the meaning of bread in these countries today.

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