

# Vietnamese Summer Rolls

The best summer roll is a fresh summer roll, and the freshest summer roll is one you make yourself. Here's how.

BY ANDREA GEARY

A Vietnamese summer roll is the epitome of cool elegance: an exquisitely balanced salad of fragrant herbs, crisp lettuce, springy noodles, and a modest amount of protein neatly bundled into a stretchy, translucent rice paper wrapper. The eating experience, on the other hand, is gloriously unrefined. You grab a roll and dunk one end into a creamy peanut-hoisin sauce or a thinner, tangier mixture of fish sauce and lime juice or vinegar. Then you take a bite, and the flavors and textures burst across your palate. Dunk, bite, dunk, bite . . . Summer rolls are so light and refreshing that I can contentedly carry on this way for quite a while. But a word of caution: A summer roll is best eaten within moments of being made, before the wrapper dries out and becomes unpleasantly chewy or the moist fillings weaken it and cause the roll to rupture.

## Easy-Cook Proteins

You can roll almost anything in a rice paper wrapper, but the fillings of a traditional Vietnamese summer roll are quite specific: rice vermicelli, boiled and rinsed to bouncy perfection; crisp lettuce; lots of fresh, leafy herbs; shrimp; and pork. I wanted my summer rolls to be as authentic as possible, so for the protein component, I knew I would need to use both shrimp and pork and cook them just right.

Pork belly is the preferred cut for use in summer rolls, so I started there. Following tradition, I simmered the meat in salted water until tender and then sliced it thin. The simplicity of the cooking method makes sense here: Summer rolls are all about balance, and though I love both grilled and roasted pork belly, their strong flavors would overwhelm those of the more delicate fillings in the roll.

But it took a good 40 minutes of simmering for the pork belly to become tender, so I was relieved to learn that pork shoulder is also sometimes used. It would require less cooking time, and like pork belly, it is a meaty-tasting cut that retains good flavor after simmering. I opted for boneless country-style ribs, which are cut from the shoulder and sold in the shape of a stick of butter—perfect for slicing and placing into summer rolls. Two 5-ounce ribs



Arranging the shrimp so that they are at the surface of the roll makes for an elegant presentation, and it's surprisingly easy to do. Our tips on page 14 will show you how.

took only about 10 minutes of simmering to cook through and turn tender. I pulled them out of the water to cool and then sliced them thin.

Traditionally, the shrimp are poached in the water that's left over from cooking the pork.

I appreciate that kind of efficiency; after all, the water's already hot, and it's been seasoned by the pork and with salt. I brought the water to a boil, added a couple of handfuls of medium-large shrimp, covered the pot, and removed it from the

## Anatomy of a Great Summer Roll

Each component of a summer roll offers subtle yet important flavors and textures that are complemented by bold dipping sauces.

**LETTUCE**  
Crispness, moisture, structure

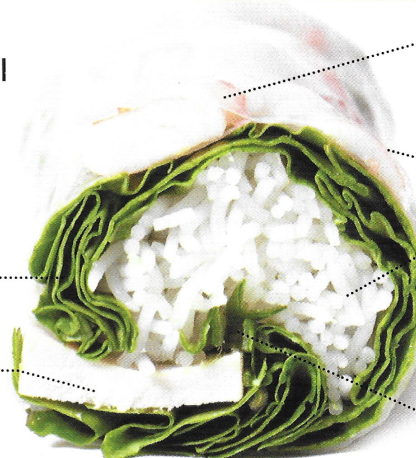
**PORK**  
Meaty substance, mild savoriness

**SHRIMP**  
Color, delicate seafood flavor, tender yet snappy texture

**WRAPPER**  
Clean taste, lightly chewy texture

**NOODLES**  
Clean backdrop for other flavors; compress during rolling but expand to create a taut roll

**HERBS**  
Fresh, heady fragrance



STEP-BY-STEP VIDEO AND NUTRITION INFORMATION  
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heat. Using residual rather than direct heat reduced the risk of overcooking and produced plump and juicy shrimp. After just 3 minutes in the water, the shrimp were opaque, so I rinsed them in cold water to cool them down quickly, sliced them lengthwise, and placed them next to the pork on a plate. On to the noodles.

### Building Structure

The frugal side of me was tempted to use the cooking water a third time to boil the noodles. But because the noodles are meant to provide a neutral background for the other ingredients, I decided against it. I boiled some fresh water and added a block of dried rice vermicelli. Three minutes later, I drained the noodles, rinsed them with cool water to halt the cooking and remove the sticky surface starch, and spread them on a plate to dry just a bit.

Summer rolls are sometimes called “salad rolls,” and rightly so. The lettuce and herbs contribute appealing crunch, moisture, and freshness. I quickly learned that lettuces such as stiff-leafed iceberg and wide-ribbed romaine were not very cooperative when it came to rolling, so I opted for green leaf lettuce, which was more pliable.

Here’s the most important thing to know about the herbs: You’re going to use loads of them. In Vietnam, most meals are accompanied by a large plate of leafy herbs and lettuce that diners are encouraged to add liberally to their plates or bowls. Some herbs that are popular in Vietnamese cuisine aren’t widely available in the United States, but mint, cilantro, and Thai basil are. I went with 1 cup of each. Rather than add each herb to the rolls individually, I tore them all into 1-inch pieces and combined them in a bowl. When the time came, I’d simply add a handful of the mix to each roll. I also sliced some scallions thin so I could sprinkle them in. They’re not as charming as the Chinese chives that poke out of the summer rolls you see in Vietnam or in the homes of cooks with access to great Asian markets, but they’d add comparable freshness.

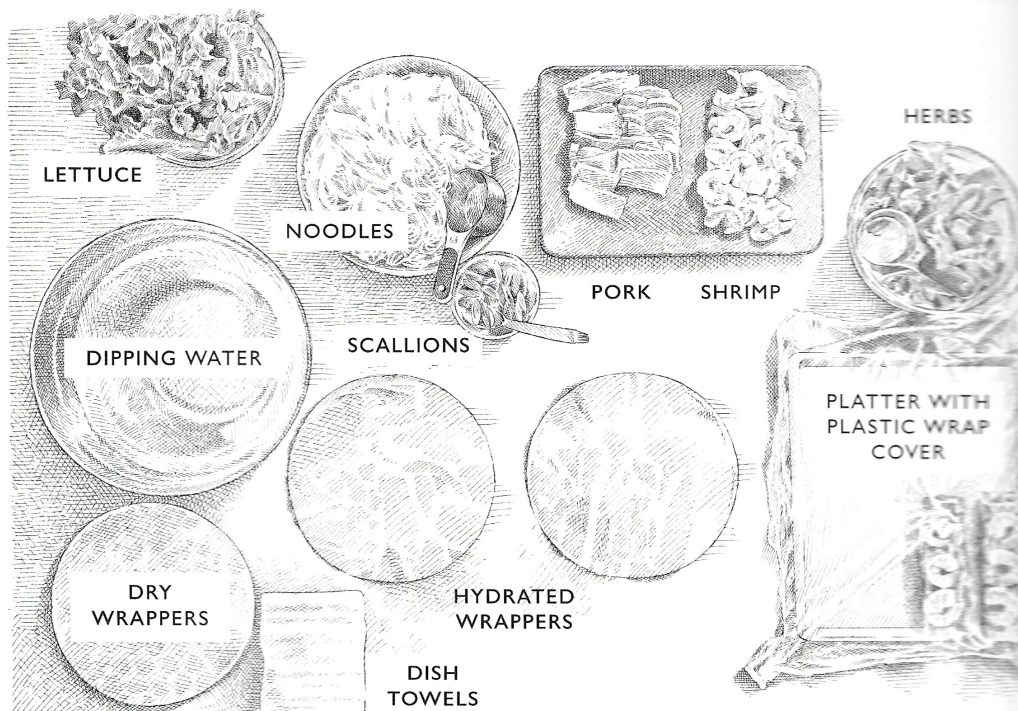
### Wrapping Up

Now I was ready for the wrappers themselves. In their dried state, the thin rice flour disks are opaque and brittle, with one smooth side and one side patterned by the bamboo mat the wrapper is dried on. After a dip in water, however, the wrappers become soft, pliable, and translucent.

But how long was I supposed to dip them, and in what temperature water? The information I found in recipes was all over the place. After much testing, I landed on dunking the wrapper briefly in cold water before transferring it—still stiff—to the counter, where it continued to soften as I piled on the fillings.

### Time to Get Rolling

Constructing the perfect summer roll is an acquired skill. First, fold a lettuce leaf (remove the rib if it’s large) and place it on the lower third of the moistened



### Ready to Roll

We like to moisten two wrappers at a time and place them on the counter below the other components, organized from left to right. It’s essential to have all your ingredients prepped and your equipment ready to go before you start the assembly process.

wrapper. Spread some noodles over the lettuce (I like to use  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup per roll), and then top them with sliced scallions. Place two slices of pork over the scallions and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of herb mix on top of that.

At this point, the wrapper will be fully hydrated and flexible and should feel tacky (which will help it stick to itself when rolled). Lift the bottom edge of the wrapper up and over the herbs and roll snugly but gently to enclose the filling in a tube. Then fold each side in to enclose the ends. Lastly, place three shrimp halves, pink side down for maximum visual appeal, on the remaining section of the wrapper and roll the wrapper up the rest of the way to form a neat cylinder.

To preserve the rolls’ texture, transfer them to a platter, not touching each other, and cover them with plastic wrap. The rolls can also be constructed family style; place all the fixings and a few bowls of water in the middle of the table and let each diner roll their own. But either way, you’ll need a sauce or two.

Just as you would never eat a salad without dressing, a summer roll without a dipping sauce is unthinkable: A peanut-based hoisin sauce and tangy, savory *nuoc cham* are both easy to mix up and are perfect accompaniments to cool, mild summer rolls. I like to alternate between the two as I eat, switching after every bite. After all, summer rolls may be elegant, but eating them doesn’t have to be.

### The Importance of Proper Hydration

**Water Temperature:** After dunking wrappers into hot, warm, and cold water, we found that the hotter the water, the faster the wrapper hydrated and turned sodden and sticky. Cold water moistens the wrapper more slowly, which gives you more time to work.

**Dipping Time:** Soaking the wrappers for too long causes them to become oversaturated, so a 2-second dip is all that’s needed. The wrapper will continue to soften as you work; once you add the fillings, it will be stretchy enough to roll but not so fragile that it tears.\*



**GOOD**

A quick dip in cold water yields a stiff yet pliable wrapper that softens as you roll.



**BAD**

A longer or hotter soak yields a sodden, fragile wrapper.

## VIETNAMESE SUMMER ROLLS (GOI CUON)

SERVES 4

TOTAL TIME: 1 ¼ HOURS

If desired, omit the pork, double the amount of shrimp (use the same timing and amounts of water and salt), and place three shrimp halves on top of the scallions. If Thai basil is unavailable, increase the mint and cilantro to 1½ cups each. A wooden surface will draw moisture away from the wrappers, so assemble the rolls directly on your counter or on a plastic cutting board. If part of the wrapper starts to dry out while you are forming the rolls, moisten it with your dampened fingers. One serving (three rolls) makes a light meal, but these rolls can also be halved crosswise using a sharp, wet knife and served as an appetizer. These rolls are best served immediately. If you like, serve Vietnamese Dipping Sauce (Nuoc Cham) along with the Peanut-Hoisin Sauce.

### Peanut-Hoisin Sauce

- 1 Thai chile, stemmed and sliced thin
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¾ cup water
- ½ cup creamy peanut butter
- 3 tablespoons hoisin sauce
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar

### Summer Rolls

- 6 ounces rice vermicelli
- 10 ounces boneless country-style pork ribs, trimmed
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 18 medium-large shrimp (31 to 40 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 1 cup fresh mint leaves
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and thin stems
- 1 cup Thai basil leaves
- 12 (8½-inch) round rice paper wrappers
- 12 leaves red or green leaf lettuce, thick ribs removed
- 2 scallions, sliced thin on bias

### 1. FOR THE PEANUT-HOISIN SAUCE:

Using mortar and pestle (or on cutting board using flat side of chef's knife), mash Thai chile, garlic, and salt to fine paste. Transfer to medium bowl. Add water, peanut butter, hoisin, tomato paste, and vinegar and whisk until smooth.

**2. FOR THE SUMMER ROLLS:** Bring 2 quarts water to boil in medium saucepan. Stir in noodles. Cook until noodles are tender but not mushy, 3 to 4 minutes. Drain noodles and rinse with cold water until cool. Drain noodles again, then spread on large plate to dry.

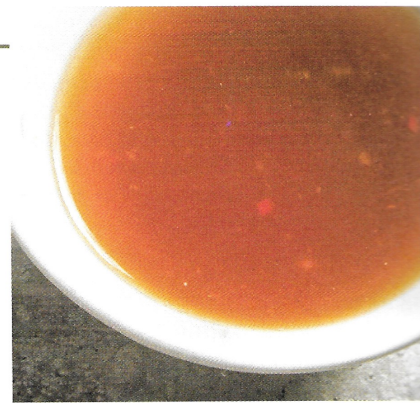
3. Bring 2 quarts water to boil in now-empty saucepan. Add pork and salt. Reduce heat, cover, and simmer until thickest part of pork registers 150 degrees, 8 to 12 minutes. Transfer pork to cutting board, reserving water.

4. Return water to boil. Add shrimp and cover. Let stand off heat until shrimp are opaque throughout, about 3 minutes. Drain shrimp and rinse with cold water until cool. Transfer to cutting board. Pat shrimp dry and halve lengthwise. Transfer to second plate.

5. When pork is cool enough to handle, cut each rib crosswise into 2-inch lengths. Slice each 2-inch piece lengthwise ⅛ inch thick (you should have at least 24 slices) and transfer to plate with shrimp. Tear mint, cilantro, and Thai basil into 1-inch pieces and combine in bowl.

6. Fill large bowl with cold water. Submerge 1 wrapper in water until wet on both sides, no longer than 2 seconds. Shake gently over bowl to remove excess water, then lay wrapper flat on counter (wrapper will be fairly stiff but will continue to soften as you assemble roll). Repeat with second wrapper and place next to first wrapper. Fold 1 lettuce leaf and place on lower third of first wrapper, leaving about ½-inch margin on each side. Spread ⅓ cup noodles on top of lettuce, then sprinkle with 1 teaspoon scallions. Top scallions with 2 slices pork. Spread ¼ cup herb mixture over pork.

7. Bring lower edge of wrapper up and over herbs. Roll snugly but gently until long sides of greens and noodles are enclosed. Fold in sides to enclose ends. Arrange 3 shrimp halves, cut side up, on remaining



### VIETNAMESE DIPPING SAUCE (NUOC CHAM)

SERVES 4 (MAKES 1 CUP)

TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES

Hot water helps the sugar dissolve into the sauce.

- 3 tablespoons sugar, divided
- 1 small Thai chile, stemmed and minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¾ cup hot water
- 5 tablespoons fish sauce
- ¼ cup lime juice (2 limes)

Using mortar and pestle (or on cutting board using flat side of chef's knife), mash 1 tablespoon sugar, Thai chile, and garlic to fine paste. Transfer to medium bowl and add hot water and remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Stir in fish sauce and lime juice.

section of wrapper. Continue to roll until filling is completely enclosed in neat cylinder. Transfer roll to serving platter, shrimp side up, and cover with plastic wrap. Repeat with second moistened wrapper. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling, keeping completed rolls covered with plastic. Uncover and serve with sauce. (Leftovers can be wrapped tightly and refrigerated for up to 24 hours, but wrappers will become chewier and may break in places.)

## STEP BY STEP | HOW TO ROLL A SUMMER ROLL

A wooden surface will draw moisture away from the rice paper wrapper, so work directly on the counter or on a plastic cutting board.



1. Bring lower edge of wrapper up and over herbs.



2. Roll snugly but gently until greens and noodles are enclosed.



3. Fold in sides to enclose ends.



4. Arrange 3 shrimp halves, cut side up, on remaining wrapper.



5. Continue to roll until filling is completely enclosed in neat cylinder.