

THE SWEETEST THING

There are two staple ingredients in every Vietnamese kitchen — MSG and condensed milk. Giselle Whiteaker finds out why we're so addicted to the latter. Photos by Khoa Tran



WHETHER YOU EAT IT BY THE SPOONFUL, sip from the tin, or go for a tinge of aluminium by sucking it from the tube, there's no denying the distinctive flavour of those sticky, sickly sweet spoonfuls of caramel goodness in every oozing mouthful of condensed milk.

This staple of the dessert world was invented in the early 1820s as a way of extending the life of milk. It was initially used purely as a beverage. Canned condensed milk has a long shelf life, lasting up to two years unopened. This beats pre-refrigeration times, when milk could only be kept fresh for a few hours. A can of condensed milk is a lot easier to store nearby than a cow.

Condensed milk (or *sua dac* in Vietnamese) is made from regular cow's milk. The milk is pasteurised to remove bacteria, then subjected to low pressure in an evaporator to lower the boiling point. Low heat is applied to remove as much as 60 percent of the water content and then it's just a matter of adding sugar. Lots of it. Apart from making it sweet, the sugar performs the useful function of fighting bacteria. This is what makes it long lasting. It's also what turns it into a multi-purpose syrup with all kinds of cooking uses.

The first thing that springs to mind when someone says condensed milk is *café sua da*. Few can resist the moderating effect of lashings of condensed milk coating the bottom of an ice-filled glass of bitter Vietnamese coffee. *Café sua da* has the power to convert non-coffee drinkers into addicts within just a few sips.

Across the world condensed milk is used as the basis for some of the most popular regional desserts. "Vietnamese have a sweet tooth but not many use condensed milk unless it's in tea or coffee," says Jim Patrick Tawa, food and beverage southern manager for Al Fresco's group. "Westerners have known it for years and usually keep some in the cupboard if they run out of milk."

◦ The White Stuff

In the western world, lightly boiled condensed milk is the main ingredient in Banoffee Pie, a shockingly sweet and undeniably delicious combination of biscuit crust, bananas and condensed milk caramel, with a creamy topping. For the caramel fans out there, replace the cream with a scoop of ice cream on the side for a better caramel hit. The caramel slice is also a prime user of condensed milk, with a layer of caramel sandwiched between a biscuit base and a thick chocolate icing layer. North Americans use it in Key Lime Pie, another biscuit-based flan. The creamy centre consists of a can of condensed milk whisked with lime