



The Creative Independent is a vast resource of emotional and practical guidance. We publish Guides, Focuses, Tips, Interviews, and more to help you thrive as a creative person. Explore our website to find wisdom that speaks to you and your practice..

May 30, 2024 -

As told to Jun Chou, 2392 words.

Tags: Food, Art, Process, Identity, Education, Beginnings.

# On how culture fuels our creativity

Food stylist Thu Buser discusses how her Vietnamese heritage inspires her work, how she got her start, and how she became comfortable with the idea of being an artist.

**Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Ho Chi Minh City and how that sort of impacted your life now and your creative practice?**

I think my styling career now really began with my mom because I grew up in a restaurant built into the side of my house in Saigon. So I was always finding a way to stick my nose into everything being cooked, despite my parents trying to lock me out. I just found that the energy in preparation is so fascinating. My mom just kind of has this natural sense of how to pick the right ingredients that will look beautiful on a plate, how to carve the cheese into gorgeous shapes for parties or for when guests come over, and that really just stuck with me for years. Her dad was a poet and an author, and then her mom paints and draws and cooks and sews and embroiders, so I guess it kind of runs in the family, in a way.

Later on I went on work in marketing because my mom never wanted me to be in the kitchen. She was like, "That's just so much hard work and effort," and she didn't want to see her daughter going back into the kitchen, so she sent me to school, and then wanted me to have an office job. Later on, when I was doing those marketing jobs, I realized all I wanted was the food as jobs, and what I wanted was just actually making the food myself. So I ended up at Le Cordon Bleu in Madrid, where I learned all the traditional techniques for cooking. It was brutal but really it gave me the training I think I needed to bring my version of Vietnamese food to life.



Photographer Isa Zapata

**So, you went from marketing specialist to Cordon Bleu... Where did you go from there?**

From Spain, I moved to New York City, and then began shadowing established stylists. I was totally shocked that someone could do this for a living and get away with it.

I never just wanted to cook food—I always wanted to make it look beautiful, too. I took pictures for my blog, I arranged spices into a map of Vietnam or whatever. And so, I always had that sense of artistry in me, even before I knew styling was a thing.

So I started looking up a lot of magazines, because it's not a thing in Vietnam, we don't have food magazines in Vietnam. We also don't have recipes because people are just like, "Okay, just a bowl of soy sauce in that, a splash of something."

So I start looking up a lot of magazines, and then I think on Bon Appétit or New York Times I saw beautiful food, and I was like, "Oh my gosh. Who are those people making those foods?" I saw the credits below that said, "Food styling by..." I was like, "Food styling, what is it?" So I looked up food styling, and then it opened up a whole universe, and then there's no looking back.

There are not many stylists and the industry is so small where everyone knows everyone. There's just so much that could scare people away, like the long physical hours on set, being at the whim of the clients, huge amount of hours spent on the business side, or just sourcing out-of-season ingredients. You're kind of one person doing it all, from getting the ingredients, cooking it, to working with clients, photographers, prop stylists, recipe developers, art directors, brand directors.



Photographer Jessica Marx, prop stylist Adri Suarez

**When you first started and you were reaching out and shadowing these stylists, how did you get in touch with them?**

I literally started on LinkedIn, reached out, and sent hundreds of messages. And hundreds of emails—literally every day—to everyone. I just looked up all food photographers in New York, all food stylists in New York, all prop stylists in New York, and I just reached out to so many of them. I think all of the people I work with now probably got one of my emails back then.

I was just like, "Hey, I really want to do this. If you have a chance, I would love to assist you or have a chat and coffee, just want to learn more about the industry and how to get into this thing." And then, I think every 50 emails, I might get one back. That's how it goes.

I'm grateful for those few people that responded back and took me into their wings. I'm forever grateful for those people.

**It sounds like you've dabbled in a lot: Food styling, photography, art direction, cooking... I saw you made puppets out of vegetables recently. Where do you find the most joy? Where are your passions and do you feel burnt out?**

I would do anything where food is involved because that's where I feel the most joy. I don't care if it's a puppet made out of food, I don't care if it's a dinner party, I don't care if it's just feeding people on the street, whatever. If it's food involved and feeding people and making people full and happy and see the joy on their face, that gives me the most joy. And do I feel burn out? Not yet. For me, the harder I

work, the more excited I feel.

I try to take a break between each project and I have felt so bored. After one day I was like, "Okay, what's next? What's next? I'm dying here." So I don't know, I think it depends on the personality, it depends on each person, but I also think that if I'm not totally insane, I would not be here. There are so many times where it was like 3:00 am, and then I still had like 10 other things to do. Let's say that batch of gelatin art that I was making for the dinner was just a little cloudy, and so I asked my husband and friends, "Is this okay to serve?" And they were all like, "Yes, of course it's okay. Just get it done, because you have to do other things, too. The most important thing is to get it done."

And I asked myself, "Would I be proud to serve this?" And I was like, "No," so I threw it back into the pot and started all over at 3:00 am. There were a lot of tears along the process but it was necessary for me to restart. So I think, a lot of times, it boils down to those moments where things are good enough, but just not enough to make you proud. Do you have the insanity to start all over? For me, the most important thing is not to get it done, but to get it done right.



Photographer Henry Hargreaves

**How do you come up with the concepts for your dinners?**

Every time I start with the menu. Because Vietnamese cuisine is so diverse, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, all of these dishes, if you go from the north to the south, the number of dishes that, let's say you can eat three times a day, three meals a day, every day for three months, you would never repeat a dish." I'm like, "All of these dishes and all people know is pho and banh mi and spring rolls. I'm like, "Those are really delicious and amazing but let's do something else."

I actually start with the region: What are the dishes, the delicacy from that region, that province? And then, come up with the concept: What's special about that? So last time, we brought the people to the Highlands of Vietnam, so we have 54 ethnic groups, but people only know the Vietnamese Vietnamese, which is my ethnic group, so there are many other ethnicities, and they all have their own different cuisines and cooking techniques that people just don't know about. So I wanted to highlight and give the spotlight to those ethnicities, so also educate people about Vietnamese history and cuisines.

And this last concept was the coastal cuisine because Vietnam, the coastal line stretches for so long all over Vietnam, so if you count the distance it's from New York to Colombia.

**How did you find your team? Did people reach out to you or was it just you and your husband in the beginning, and then it grew?**

We're a group of friends. We've been hanging out for a couple years, and we started to get really, really close during the pandemic. In Vietnamese culture, cooking is our love language, so I always have them over and cook a feast for everyone. I just love feeding people.

And then, we all were talking about, "Let's do a pop-up, because these things that we cook at home people just don't know." Or sometimes we crave some regional dishes from a region in Vietnam, and then we just make it here, and then it's like, "It's possible to make it here, so why don't we do a pop-up and scale it and see what happens?"

My team, they're all non-professionals, in a way, not kitchen people, but all from different backgrounds.

So in my team I have a designer, a coder, a photographer, an architect, a stylist, and my husband, a consultant.

We all believe in the mission, and we all come together and we want to bring Vietnamese food out to the world. And I think what's interesting is we all come from different backgrounds, so we all bring different aspects and different expertise to the table. I think that's part of the success.



Photographer Isa Zapata

**That's awesome. I feel like what I'm hearing from you, too, is a lot of learning from building on your skills and learning, and because you have new knowledge, that makes the next project more exciting, because you're like, "Now I know more of what I doing," and the possibilities become a lot clearer once you have the skills and stuff.**

I think the skills are important but what I've realized and what I've learned is the most important thing is the message. What do you want to convey to the world? Because I always start with the message. Back then, I cared so much about skills and techniques and composition and all those fine arts things that people told me before I started this career and this journey like, "Oh, if you want to become an artist, you don't have to go to art school, but you have to kind of lean into fine arts or those things, to be considered a real artist."

And then, to be honest, I never considered myself an artist until recently, when I started picking beautiful slices of my culture and history and use food as the canvas to convey a message that I want to tell the world. So, to be honest, if there's one thing that I wish people told me before I started this journey, was anything can be a canvas and anything can be a medium to convey a message, and as long as you have a strong message that you want to say and you find a canvas to express and a medium to express your message, that's art. And that's what artists are doing day in, day out.

I feel like the world has conspired to arrange things in a beautiful way naturally, and somehow you just need the eyes to see it. And there's just so much hidden potential art everywhere, with the right framing and color it can jump to life. Not everything has to be painstakingly created from scratch. You can use a lot that exists. So in my mind, I kind of give everything sort of a personality. For example, if I find lettuce, right? I would look for lettuce with attitude or grace or the ones that are crooked, because I know those give me the personality that I need to convey the message that I want, not the perfect one.



Photographer Maria Be, Prop Stylist Tim Ferro

Yeah, I love that. A lot of people think about food as utilitarian but there's so much artistry in just the creation of it, too. You think about music, you think about paintings, things that you can see with your eyes or hear with your ears, but with food it's smell and taste. There's also such an ephemeral quality to it. It's the experience of being there and eating it and smelling it, but it lasts forever. A smell or a taste can take you back to childhood.

Right, exactly. I think food triggers something really deep within us that we connect to more than many other things, and that's why I'm obsessed with it.

I have one last question for you, a fun one. If you were a fruit, what fruit would you be?

Oh my gosh. I think I would be a durian.

Why?

Because the outside and the inside of it are totally different. I think a lot of people, when they first meet me, they said that I have a fierce face, so they feel scared or intimidated by me. And also, when I work or when I focus on something or when I make art, I put on this fierce, do not bother me face.

But then, on the inside, I just feel like I'm very playful and I want everything to be exciting and fun and interesting and unexpected. So I feel like a lot of my work is, if you keep peeling, there are so many layers that you can keep exploring, and I think it's like a durian.

Thu Buser Recommends:

Coffee mixed with Coca-Cola for hectic mornings (double the power!!)

Tbilisi, Georgia in the springtime

Try every cuisine on earth at least once

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong

Farmer's markets

Name

Thu Buser

Vocation

food stylist, chef, recipe developer

Fact

---

Related to Food stylist Thu Buser on how culture fuels our creativity:

■ Artist and chef Amanny Ahmad on the politics of working with food

■ Author Ocean Vuong on being generous in your work

■ Musician Bolis Pupul on being inspired by your environment

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



1