

# Anatomy of a Springroll

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED  
BY PAUL KWAN

PRODUCED BY ARNOLD IGER  
CO-PRODUCER, PAUL LUNDAHL

PERSONAL GRATE PRODUCTIONS

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1992, 56 minutes.



Paul Kwan and his mother cooking (Preparing springrolls?) in his home in San Francisco.

*"Food is everyone's first language."*

Paul Kwan

The winner of a Special Jury Award in the National Education Film and Video Festival of 1993, Paul Kwan's *Anatomy of a Springroll* is a collage of images of food linking him with his Vietnamese homeland. Kwan blends reminiscences of his boyhood Saigon home with his perpetuation of it through its food in his northern California home. There is much of the surreal and comical here as Kwan interposes elements such as an Asian puppet drama depicting a cook preparing 100 dishes for a tyrant, and an animated dream sequence where the narrator, as a child, shares a Lucullan feast with the Moon Goddess. This is juxtaposed with intense feelings for family, the personal ravages brought on by the Vietnam war, and Kwan's own Proustian madeleine, the springroll.

We see springrolls wrapped, springrolls eaten, springrolls spat from a fanciful semi-human springroll-making machine, springrolls compared to bagels and Big Macs. The scenes are shot in California as well as in Saigon, where Kwan returns upon the death of his father after years' absence from Vietnam. Their family home is empty, and he cannot recover any sense of family, but the food he finds there is a comfort and a bond with not only his departed father but also with the fellow Vietnamese he encounters on his trip.

Evoked throughout the movie are childhood memories, as in the opening shot of a boy with a hula hoop, and, later in the film, children in Saigon at an amusement park. We learn that the narrator is one of

twenty-four children in his family, that he came to the U.S. as a teenager during the war, and that Vietnamese food is the adhesive holding together many aspects of a life that was splintered by that war. The kitchen, where his mother teaches him cooking and which provides the setting for a number of the scenes, is one of the focal points of the movie.

Alternately puckishly humorous and poignant, this film is a loving depiction of family, of the Vietnamese diaspora, and of a traditional cuisine. The narrative is sometimes almost overly poetic, but we are also served up insightful doses of reality, as when the narrator pays for a meal in Saigon with over ninety (and they are counted out one by one) 2,000-dong bills. The high-impact emotional scenes are often played out in slow motion. The interspersed black-and-white wartime newsclips and Kwan's disquieting departure from Vietnam as a teen (when Immigration refused to stamp his passport) offer glimpses in stark contrast to the homely yet lyrical scenes of buying ingredients and preparing the rolls, or even of Kwan and his mother bowling together.

Mime figures dressed in black catsuits decorated with a white grid pattern pop up like punctuation marks in different parts of the film. They begin and end the film, writing out its name and Kwan's name. In addition, they populate Dream on Springroll, Inc., the imaginary food producer who rates springrolls on a Crunch-o-meter and tests microwaveable instant spring-rolls.

*Springroll* is suitable for

classroom instruction from middle school through university levels. It may be used as a basis for discussion on a wide range of topics, including food as a definition of culture, the pull of the fatherland on immigrants, life of immigrants in the contemporary United States, the Asian-American family, and effects of the Vietnam War on the people of that country. The soundtrack, in particular the Vietnamese music at the beginning of the film, prepares the viewer for a step into another culture, even while the screen is showing the familiar and prosaic image of a boy spinning a hula hoop.

The obvious follow-up activity to this film is a meal in a Vietnamese restaurant or a springroll cooking class, where the students can judge the results on their own "crunchiness scale." Such a field trip to a restaurant or kitchen would add flavor and scent to the other senses already presented so vividly in the film.

D. E. Perushek

**D. E. PERUSHEK** is Associate Dean for Library Collection Development at Northwestern University.

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