



A At Khmer Touch Cuisine, chef Somontha Oeng's take on lotus salad is almost too pretty to eat.

SIEM REAP

by

MOUTH

Travellers often grab a quick bite in between temple-hopping in the Cambodian city. But Siem Reap's emerging food scene is now a draw in its own right.

STORY Robyn Eckhardt

PHOTOS David Hagerman

I sit in an open-air shack about 20 minutes outside Siem Reap devouring num banh chok, toothsome thread-thin rice noodles doused with lush coconut-milk fish curry. On the table next to me is a metal can filled with an edible bouquet of fresh herbs and crisp lotus stems. They're there for you to forage, coriander and laksa leaves to tear over noodles to add crunch and freshness.

These noodles taste all the better for having watched them made by hand in the garden of a house just up the road – an experience I wouldn't have had without Siem Reap Food Tours (siemreapfoodtours.com). The venture was founded in late 2014 by two food-loving expats determined to lift the lid on South-east Asia's least understood street-food culture.

Before my tutorial in num banh chok-making, the group's co-founder and Khmer-speaking Scottish chef Steven Halcrow leads me through the city's sprawling Phsar Leu market (7 Makara Street, Krong Preah



B Num banh chok noodles in coconut curry.

C Phsar Chas (Old Market) is a source of ingredients for chefs in the city.

D Villagers in a field outside Siem Reap.

E Cuisine Wat Damnak's fine creations are made of local, and often rare, ingredients.

Sihanouk). "There is great street food here, but it's mostly inside morning markets, especially those most tourists don't go to," says Halcrow, as he weaves between stalls displaying bundles of salted and smoked fish. Vendors erupt in peals of laughter as Halcrow jokes with them in Khmer while ordering my multiple breakfasts: jujube (a berry-like fruit) stewed to stickiness in ginger-infused palm sugar, an impossibly rich pumpkin-soy milk smoothie and bobor (rice porridge). Then there are tart-sweet-salty pickles called j'ruah, which Halcrow wraps burrito style in prahet (fishcakes).

Not so long ago, visitors to Siem Reap had little opportunity to explore Cambodian food beyond buffets served up before cultural performances. That's no longer the case. It's fair to say the town Angkor Wat built is now a destination in its own right for food obsessives looking to deep-dive into the cuisine.

That was my mission, anyway, on a recent visit. I started at Cuisine Wat Damnak (cuisinewatdamnak.com).

"Real Cambodian cuisine is something most average tourists, who see the same five dishes again and again, rarely experience," says French chef Joannes Riviere. When he launched Cuisine Wat Damnak in 2011 with his wife Carole Salmon, Riviere was the only foreign chef in town using local ingredients like frogs, young green jackfruit, wild mango kernels and prahok (salted fermented fish boiled to make stock) to prepare dishes with authentic flavours, undiluted for foreign





E Pola Siv's elegant interpretation of beef laab.

G Mie Cafe, set in a traditional wooden house, also has an extensive kitchen garden.

palates. A fair number of his customers are locals because, says Riviere, "My food is really Cambodian. I simply take local dishes apart and put them back together."

Cambodian food is "foremost a cuisine of place", he explains. It's rooted in indigenous ingredients such as freshwater fish from the Tonle Sap, palm sugar, coconut milk, black pepper and foraged vegetables. On his weekly set menus, Riviere highlights seasonal items like mushrooms (poached with frog meat in a beer reduction) and croaker fish (pan-fried and served with spicy pounded wild eggplant). He also features true Cambodian flavours in dishes such as crispy beef tongue with fermented tomato sauce, house-made oyster sauce and baby cress, and black rice creme brulee. Last spring, Cuisine Wat Damnak was placed on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list.

Riviere's success has precipitated a flowering of finer dining venues with locally inspired menus. One afternoon, I venture to a residential neighbourhood 15 minutes beyond the centre of town, where Mie Cafe (miecafe-siemreap.com) occupies a traditional wooden house separated from the street by an expansive kitchen garden. With a long a la carte section and two set meals, the menu covers a lot of ground – much like its charismatic Cambodian chef-owner Pola Siv, who toiled as a restaurant server in Bahrain and the Cayman Islands before attending culinary

school in Switzerland. Post-graduation, he worked at Michelin-star Domaine de Chateauvieux. After returning to Siem Reap at the end of 2012, Siv opened Mie Cafe as a noodle shop (mie is Khmer for noodles), then converted it to a restaurant after he'd saved enough money to renovate the building and equip the kitchen.

The chef considers Riviere his friend and mentor, but goes his own way, both in presentation and sourcing ingredients – some of which are imported. "Occasionally you want a different taste," he says, citing his use of fresh tuna.

Some of Siv's dishes are joyfully extravagant inversions of Cambodian classics. Take, for instance, his laab (raw meat salad), which arrives as a disc of beef tartare crowned with a luxuriant lawn of wakame, delicate young herbs and violet pea flowers. Others, like a sour-salty Tonle Sap chllay fish garnished with ginger strips and delicate slices of green tamarind, are straightforward expressions of his talent for creatively riffing with local ingredients. Sticky glace barbecued pork ribs served with killer French fries fall into neither category. But they're on the menu "because I love barbecue and fries", says Siv.

Chef Somontha Oeng, who worked her way up from dining-room steward to head chef at the luxury Amansara resort (aman.com/resorts/amansara), opened Khmer ➔

ART BEAT

The social enterprise Phare The Cambodian Circus (pharecircus.org) stages lively shows incorporating elements of dance and theatre. **CRAIG DODGE**, its director of sales and marketing, shares his top places to see local arts and culture in Siem Reap.

PUPPETS ON PARADE

Every February, more than 500 disadvantaged children and landmine victims build puppets ranging in height from 10m to 30m for the Giant Puppet Project (giantpuppetproject.com). It culminates in a fantastic parade that winds through Siem Reap. Head to the riverfront to take it all in with the locals.

NATIONAL DANCE

Recognised by UNESCO, Apsara dance expresses Cambodian spirituality, traditions and history in a way no other art form does. The show at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor (raffles.com/siem-reap) is worthwhile, and the Sacred Dancers of Angkor in Banteay Srei – funded by NGO Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (nkfc.org) – has toured the USA.

MASTER OF ARTS

Cambodian Living Arts (cambodianlivingarts.org) does amazing work supporting old masters of traditional art forms by matching them with youth interested in learning. They also have scholarships for local artists. Sign up for workshops in shadow puppetry or Cambodian dance. They're offered every day at Wat Bo temple.



Touch Cuisine (khmertouchcuisine.com) in late 2014. She has peppered her menu with what she describes as refined versions of Cambodian street food. Unlike Riviere and Siv, she admits to toning down what may be considered, by some foreign diners, challenging ingredients, like prahok.

Still, I enjoy her take on rice cake with coconut sauce, a morning market classic comprising golden orbs of crisp batter enclosing rich coconut cream that walk an intriguing line between sweet and savoury. Lotus salad is a tourist-friendly Cambodian restaurant standard, but Oeng's take is stunning. Unlike the traditional version that only uses the flower's stem, it also uses the root, seeds and blush pink petals. The kicky astringency of the flower balances the lightly sweet dressing of the chicken and basil.

I learn the hard way that dinner at Khmer Touch is not ideal, only because of the live band that performs nightly – and loudly – across the street at Angkor Night Market. Instead, go for lunch, when tables on the open-air ground floor, which smells appetisingly of wet herbs, lemongrass and shallots, are the best seats in the house.

STREET EATS

After three days of Siem Reap's finer dining side, I start to wonder where these chefs eat Cambodian food on their days off. Riviere sends me to Chanrea Dom Makara (*Sivutha Boulevard*), a local joint whose open front faces busy, dusty Sivutha Road. No frills best describes the ambience at

H Expect fire and acrobatic flair from Phare The Cambodian Circus.

! Chanrea Dom Makara is a favourite among chefs and locals.

! Marum's cheerful and unpretentious dining room.



Chanrea, whose fan-cooled dining room could do with a lick of paint. Tables are clad in vinyl and orders, served on melamine, are plonked unceremoniously in front of diners. Chanrea serves everyday fare for the average Cambodian, but there's a deft hand in the grease-coated kitchen.

Think prahok ktis (spicy pork dip), and a green mango and smoked fish salad in which shreds of fish, lime juice and fish sauce come together in a sort of creamy dressing. If Cambodia has a famous dish, it's amok (steamed coconut curry). Chanrea's superior version mingles slices of fish or chicken with neu (noni) leaves, whose big flavour and heft hold their own in the spicy turmeric coconut sauce. "If there's no neu, it's not amok," Riviere later tells me.

Another chef's favourite is Rohatt (rohattcafe.com), a tranquil restaurant steps from Siem Reap's Pub Street. When I arrive, Rohatt's tastefully furnished dining rooms, tree-shaded balconies overlooking the river, hand-thrown crockery and bakery counter displaying muffins and croissants set off made-for-tourists red flags. But the fare it serves is the real thing. "It reminds me of food I've eaten in the homes of Cambodian friends," says Riviere.

Co-owner Phyreak Hang sought help from relatives in Siem Reap when he and Rohatt's chef designed the menu. "We wanted to make the food as authentic as ➔



K Rohatt's version of prahok ktis, served with fresh vegetables.

L The kitchen at Chanrea Dom Makara churns out superior local fare.

M Rohatt's glutinous rice-flour dumplings filled with palm sugar and topped with fresh coconut.



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possible, even if foreigners wouldn't eat it," says the Phnom Penh-based architect. It explains dishes like pan-fried duck eggs with prama (fish fermented beyond the point of rot), listed alongside foreigner-friendly standards such as fresh spring rolls.

On my last night in town, I make my way to Marum (tree-alliance.org), a hospitality training restaurant for disadvantaged Cambodian youth run by Friends International, which operates similar restaurants in Phnom Penh and Laos. Marum occupies a lovely teak mansion, whose tables spill into a large garden shaded by trees strung with fairy lights. Its menu includes small plates of creatively Cambodian (lotus seed, jackfruit and coriander hummus with toasted baguette) and more authentic fare.

Marum chef Toun Saren favours refined presentation but "true taste", which he pushes by using ingredients like silk worms (fried and tossed in a spicy green mango salad) and red tree ants, which sour the silky sauce cloaking slices of stir-fried beef served over crunchy water spinach leaves. I leave Marum feeling like I've had a tiny peek at a whole new facet of Cambodia's underappreciated cuisine – all the reason to return to Siem Reap soon for further exploration. ■

Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Cambodian Riel
US\$1 = 4,021KHR

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit evisa.gov.kh for more details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
The months right after rainy season – November to January – bring cooler temperatures and less humidity, but more visitors. In June and September, the city is blissfully quiet, but rainy (though not all day) and humid.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines' subsidiary SilkAir flies 11 times weekly to Siem Reap.

MORE INFORMATION
tourismcambodia.com