

Food for Thought: Phnom Penh Rising --- Long Overshadowed by Neighboring Cuisines, Cambodian Food Finally Gets an Audience

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Like most Southeast Asian foods, it's a mix of everything from Indian and Chinese, to French and Portuguese. But Cambodian food has come together in a way that defies description without the inevitable references to other countries. Certainly Cambodian food has much in common with that of Thailand. The essential flavors are the same -- ginger, galangal, kaffir lime leaves and herbs like basil, mint, cilantro and eryngo (saw tooth herb). Fish sauces and fermented pastes are ubiquitous, as they are across Southeast Asia.

It's a cuisine of rice and fish mostly with leafy vegetables and soupy curries. But it is not as sweet as Thai food, which is often loaded with cane sugar, according to Nyep de Monteiro, owner of the Elephant Walk Cambodian restaurants in Boston. It's more influenced by Indian food than Vietnamese, and more subtle. After years in Thai refugee camps, many Cambodians adopted the slightly stronger tastes -- more lemongrass and chilies -- from Thai food while the large number of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have brought their influences. Alongside those were the influences of many returning ethnic Chinese who have opened restaurants in Phnom Penh.

FULL TEXT

Cambodian food always has the misfortune to be described in terms of the cuisines of its better-known neighbors. Not as spicy as Thai but has more of a kick than Vietnamese food is a common sketch of a cuisine that is only now starting to make a slight mark around the world.

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Strangely, Cambodian food is almost non-existent in Asia outside Cambodia. A search of several guides and Web sites didn't turn up a single listing of a restaurant in any major Asian city (although I did stumble across some very frightening recipes for horse sausages made by nomads in Kazakhstan that I hope to share with readers in the future). But it has become increasingly popular in the United States, particularly cities with large Cambodian

populations: San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Boston. Mrs. de Monteiro's three restaurants in Boston have drawn rave reviews, and she has published a book of recipes.

The Elephant Walk Cookbook is a rare repository of old Cambodian recipes favored by the country's deeply Francophile upper classes, who in the early part of the century were renowned for their elaborate meals. Mrs. de Monteiro grew up in a wealthy family in Phnom Penh with a father who preferred French food and a mother who struggled to make it. Her formative experiences were in the kitchen, learning French techniques and sharing dishes of uncooked prahok, or fermented fish paste, with the servants. It was an education that would serve her well.

In the book, Mrs. de Monteiro writes of discovering Cambodia's range of foods: "When we visited the coast, for example, I was struck by the prevalence of sea fish and the influence of Chinese taste; along the country's borders I learned to recognize the distinctive flavors of Thai, Vietnamese and Lao cuisines; in the cities, I saw the country's elite dine on French and aristocratic Thai food."

Most people were eating a much simpler diet, essentially rice and various forms of preserved fish. The Tonle Sap lake in the middle of Cambodia is the most abundant preserve of fresh water fish in the world and each year provides a vast harvest. Most of the fish are turned into prahok, which is dry and salty and has chunks of whole fish. It's rich in amino acids and the perfect complement to rice. There is also Pha-ak, a looser sauce of fish preserved in brine with black or red rice.

Most meals consisted of grilled fish, rice and some vegetables although there are distinctive ceremonial dishes like ansam chrouk, a stuffed rice cake filled with haricot beans and pork and wrapped in a banana leaf. Another popular dish for special occasions is kralan, glutinous rice cooked with shredded coconut and coconut milk inside the hollow parts of bamboo stems.

The Elephant Walk Cookbook has a range of dishes from spicy grilled chicken wings found on street corners to such aristocratic fare as "Royal Catfish Enrobed with Coconut Milk and Lemongrass," from salads dressed with fish sauce to slow-cooked sweet beef stews made with green coconut juice.

Mrs. de Monteiro's husband, whose name came from his Portuguese ancestors, was Cambodian ambassador to Taiwan when the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. The couple ended up in France, hocking jewelry and wondering how they could survive when, in April 1980, they opened a restaurant in southwestern France called Amrita, a Sanskrit word for the elixir of eternal life. Her husband ran the front of house while she cooked.

After a decade, they moved to the United States and opened the first of the Elephant Walk restaurants in Somerville, one town over from Cambridge. This time the name came from the Elizabeth Taylor movie. The mix of French and Cambodian cuisine was a hit, gaining national attention and sparking a growing interest in Cambodian food. They later opened Carambola, a more traditionally Cambodian restaurant where Mrs. de Monteiro's daughter Nadsa cooks.

Restaurateurs like Mrs. de Monteiro have kept alive something of Cambodian haute cuisine that otherwise would have been extinct by now.

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DETAILS

Business indexing term:	Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places
Subject:	Restaurants; Rice; Recipes; Cookbooks
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	P5
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	May 19, 2000
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315459697
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-phnom-penh-rising-long-overshadowed/docview/315459697/se-2?accountid=11311
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Last updated:	2022-11-08
Database:	ProQuest One Business,ProQuest Central

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