

Food for Thought: Cambodian in Le Cirque's Kitchen

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

New York's Le Cirque 2000 is, along with The Four Seasons, the company cafeteria of the bold-faced set, where on any given day you might encounter Henry Kissinger, a bevy of supermodels, half the CEOs in Manhattan and the lacquered and surgically enhanced elite of the city. This is the place from where Pope John Paul II ordered takeout for 46 people last time he was in the city. As home away from home for people with thousand-megaton egos it would be fitting for Le Cirque to have a chef to match.

There is little shouting in Le Cirque's kitchen when Mr. [Sottha] Khunn is at work. Indeed, he is so soft-spoken that junior chefs, who mostly tower over him, bend forward like Buddhist supplicants when getting his whispered instructions. Most restaurant kitchens feel like an inner wheel of hell, fiery places where tempers often get as overheated as the air. At Le Cirque, the kitchen seems airy and calm, the atmosphere brisk but consummately professional.

Much of the attention has gone to Sirio Maccioni, the storied Italian restaurateur who entertained the rich and famous for 22 years at Le Cirque before it moved in May 1997 to the New York Palace Hotel. But it's Mr. Khunn who has sustained the restaurant with his low-key, intelligent cooking. Born in 1951, Mr. Khunn grew up in Siem Riep, near the temple complex of Angkor Wat, before Cambodia descended into war and chaos. His family were traders who were drawn to France, where they sent their children to be educated. "It was the French who taught us how to live in those days," Mr. Khunn said. Each Sunday his family would go to the Grand Hotel in Siem Riep for lunch and over the years it was classic French dishes like Chateaubriand and canard a l'orange that inspired Mr. Khunn's love of food.

FULL TEXT

New York's Le Cirque 2000 is, along with The Four Seasons, the company cafeteria of the bold-faced set, where on any given day you might encounter Henry Kissinger, a bevy of supermodels, half the CEOs in Manhattan and the lacquered and surgically enhanced elite of the city. This is the place from where Pope John Paul II ordered takeout for 46 people last time he was in the city. As home away from home for people with thousand-megaton egos it would be fitting for Le Cirque to have a chef to match.

But far from being a tortured artist in a toque or a histrionic prima donna with a pan, Sottha Khunn, the Cambodian-born executive chef, is perhaps the most unassuming of all those who have reached the top culinary rung in this most competitive of cities.

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It is a large space designed with input from Mr. Khunn and built at a cost of \$3 million. The walls are decorated with mosaics made from broken plates from the restaurant's earlier incarnation. (They were patterned with monkeys, a creature judged to bring bad luck by the new investors -- the royal family of Brunei. New plates were made with lions on them). Ingredients are arranged around the kitchen like pristine Dutch still-lives. Pineapples are piled high in copper buckets on a counter. In the corner is a glassed-in area with a table and banquette where visitors to the kitchen can eat. It has become one of the most sought-after tables in the restaurant.

Mr. Khunn's crew of cooks -- many of them young Irish men, who he feels are some of the hardest workers around -- juggle pans and whip dishes from blue enamel ovens with seamless grace as they cook up as many as 1,200 plates a day. Out of this tightly choreographed routine of 50 staff comes food that has won the restaurant an extraordinary following and widespread critical acclaim.

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He left Cambodia in 1974 to study economics in Paris but when the Khmer Rouge took over, he could no longer go back home. Cut off from his family and without money, he dropped his studies and began working as a chef. He worked in some of the top Michelin-starred restaurants in France, including Les Freres Troisgros, where Jean and Pierre Troisgros pioneered nouvelle cuisine in the 1970s. It was under Jean Troisgros that he mastered his ability to turn even the simplest ingredients into something special.

In 1983 he moved to the United States working at the Plaza Athenee Hotel with Daniel Boulud, a top chef who went on to win enormous success with his eponymous restaurant. Two years later, Mr. Khunn joined Le Cirque, eventually becoming head chef when Mr. Boulud went out on his own. Unusually for a chef of his caliber, Mr. Khunn has kept a low profile. Mr. Maccioni once said of him that unlike other chefs in New York, he wants to cook, "not be a movie star." In fact he also cooks almost every day. "It's like playing a musical instrument, you have to practice all the time to keep your skills."

Despite his Asian background, Mr. Khunn is a distinctly French chef and the menu at Le Cirque resembles the sort of haute cuisine served in very expensive Parisian hotels. The list of appetizers is dense with foie gras, caviar and lobster, along with simple seasonal dishes like asparagus and artichokes. The main courses have kept the famous standards of Le Cirque such as black sea bass encased in potatoes and served with braised leeks and a sauce made from Barolo wine.

Asian touches include red snapper roasted with a mild curry sauce and saffron basmati rice. Mr. Khunn has brought in ingredients such as Sichuan pepper, lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, coriander and ginger, but they are used with utmost restraint and always in the context of French technique. It is certainly a long way from any real fusion of East and West.

Risotto with lobster with rosemary has the rich but clean taste of extraordinary cooking. Each ingredient holds its own and the rice is cooked perfectly. A young chef patiently stirs a pot of risotto until Mr. Khunn comes over, tastes it

and murmurs that it's not right. The chef throws it out and calmly starts again. Mr. Khunn's aim is to get the best out of each ingredient. And indeed everything from a rack of lamb with a dense spicy crust to the wild mushrooms that accompany another dish have an intensity that speaks of years of training and remarkable skills.

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Le Cirque is at 455 Madison Avenue. Tel: (212) 303-7788. Fax: (212)
303-7712.
Reservations are not easy to come by but don't be put off. It's
possible to get in, particularly in the summer when there is seating
in the courtyard as well. The restaurant is open from 11:45 a.m. to
2:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Monday to Saturday. On Sunday, it's
open from 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

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