

food corner

Food Talk: Chow down

Patrick Uoung of the FCC Group's Chow speaks with Liz Ledden about returning to his native Cambodia and his ultimate passion – wine.



An ever stylish wine enthusiast

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“I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN involved with food,” says Patrick Uoung, front man at sleek bar and eatery Chow.

His foray into the hospitality world came around age 10 when he began helping out his entrepreneurial mother in her California-based bakeries and coffee houses.

He discovered a passion for wine during a trip to California's Sonoma Valley wine region, when 19. “I realised there was a huge world of wine out there that was very daunting, and I didn't want it to be daunting for me,” he says. So, he set out to learn all he could about wine – reading books, attending wine tastings and brushing up on the all-important wine vocabulary.

“I found it was very easy for me to sell wine,” he says. This resulted in the San Francisco-based French eatery where he was then working, entrusting him to be their wine buyer.

“My whole world expanded,” he says. “I found that wine was such an integral part to eating.”

Patrick moved on to working for a larger restaurant featuring grilled foods and a raw seafood bar, with 450 wines gracing the menu. His wine expertise continued to expand, from an in-depth knowledge of western European and Californian wines, to those from New Zealand and Australia. “I'm now starting to learn more about Argentinean and South African wines too,” he adds.

■ BACK TO HIS ROOTS

Born in Phnom Penh, Patrick moved to the U.S. at the age of three, just before the Khmer Rouge evacuated the city. He made the move back to Cambodia seven years ago, primarily to reconnect with his one living grandmother – a Buddhist devotee who resides in one of the capital's wats.

"I was awestruck by the conditions in Cambodia, and the conditions my family was living under," he says of his return trip to Cambodia in 2001. He wanted to learn more about Khmer culture. This further fuelled his desire to return 'home'.

Embarking on a new life in Phnom Penh unleashed Patrick's creativity. He took up some diverse and unusual job positions away from the hospitality world, from yoga teacher to photographer's assistant to hair, make-up and clothing stylist for television productions and advertising campaigns. He also made furniture and leather goods, and even had a brief stint as a tour leader for a Swedish company.

A chance meeting with Andres of Spanish tapas bar Pacharan reignited his passion for food and wine.

"I was at an Indian-themed dinner party at my friend Bronwyn's, and Andres and Steve from the FCC Group were there," he explains. He began discussing wine with Andres over dinner. "It was a bonding point for us, and we became friends."

This led Andres to ask Patrick to move to Saigon to help open Pacharan there. "I thought I'd never work in a restaurant again as I wanted to pursue other creative things," says Patrick. He soon realised he could combine his knowledge and love of food and wine, with his creative skills in a hospitality environment.

The two months he was supposed to spend helping open Saigon's Pacharan turned into eight months.

■ CIAO, CHOW

When the FCC Group embarked on another venture, opening boutique riverfront hotel The Quay earlier this year, Patrick was offered the position of managing its bar and restaurant, Chow. Serving innovative cocktails, fine wines and pan-Asian cuisine, Chow has made a splash on Phnom Penh's drinking and dining scene with its cosmopolitan vibe and trendy white interior.

Chow is "chic, modern, and serves Asian food," explains Patrick. With his well-honed sense of style and Khmer background, Patrick seemed the obvious choice for the job.

He oversees the front of house staff and the bar, as well as the food service. Executive chef Clinton Webber is the man behind the menu and overlooks the kitchen. "Once the food hits the table it's in my domain," Patrick explains.

Sharing some of his wine pairing knowledge, Patrick says that "whites with residual sugar" go best with Chow's culinary offerings. "A more fruity, medium to fuller bodied white goes with our food," he explains. "Ones that help quell the fire and tame the spices – sugar in the wine does this."

"You want to avoid oaky wines like chardonnay – about the only thing it goes with is a Caesar salad," he claims. German wine varieties such as riesling and its counterparts are suitable choices, with Austrian and Alsatian wines also good.

Other options are "lighter reds with finesse" he adds., According to him French and New Zealand pinot noirs, cabernet franc from the Loire Valley, and some merlots are best suited to Asian cuisines. "Beer goes well too, particularly Asian beers and some of the Belgian varieties like Hoegaarden and Duvel, as they have some honey content."

■ THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT

As for what's next on Chow's radar, Patrick says an invigorated menu with more tapas-like bites and some cheaper noodle dishes for lunch should be introduced by the time this article goes to press. He hopes this will attract a bigger lunchtime crowd. He would also like to see the bar's juice selection grow to offer even more healthy drink alternatives.

While he wants to expand the cocktail menu, he plans the reverse for the wines. "I see the wine list becoming more focused, featuring some more esoteric wines that pair well with the food," he says.

He'd also like to see more events held in the space, and for travellers to try southeast Asian food rather than opting only for western cuisines.

"This area of the world has such great food, and we have the talent and ability to market it well," Patrick says of Chow and the FCC Group. "I strongly believe in our concept." ■

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