



Food for Thought

Phnom Penh – food-lover central or culinary backwater? Opinions are divided on whether Phnom Penh has what it takes to be the next regional dining hotspot, but one thing's for sure – those who eat out here are definitely spoiled for choice. Words by **Liz Ledden**. Photos by **Nathan Horton**.

A MERE FLIP THROUGH ANY OF THE city's publications featuring restaurant listings gives the impression that Phnom Penh has a lot of dining options on offer. All the usual suspects are well represented – there are plenty of Indian, Japanese, French, Italian, Chinese, Tex-Mex, and Thai establishments, as well as a recent spate of Korean. Many bars and cafés feature all manner of general western fare, from healthy salads and sandwiches to traditional pub grub. And that's before going into the multitude of Khmer restaurants throughout Phnom Penh, from simple establishments right through to upmarket Malis.

■ CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

A recent influx of new restaurants and cafés suggests Phnom Penh is undergoing a restaurant renaissance. High-end options in the form of new restaurants La Residence and Van's suggest there's a growing market for fine food in the city. More affordable offerings like Huxleys and Sarika will encourage repeat visits.

The expanding Khmer middle class are gaining more exposure to western

and high-end dining with new restaurants springing up to accommodate them. One such example is Open Wine's new Wine Restaurant, a high-end, indoor, air-conditioned restaurant with gourmet French cuisine designed to appeal to the Khmer nouveau riche.

Some unique establishments have also just opened their doors, such as the city's first Moroccan restaurant – Driss'. There's also a new French patisserie with a hint of Middle Eastern influence – La Gourmandise Bleue. The sheer volume of restaurants in Phnom Penh, the variety on offer and the increasing rate of new openings suggest the city's food scene is most definitely on the up.

Delving further into the food on offer, some slightly more obscure cuisines can be unearthed – there's Lebanese restaurant Le Cedre, North Korean fare at Pyongyang and Russian at Irina's. And the Pakistani food at Monsoon and sister restaurant Saffron, plus the Spanish fare at Pacharan remain without direct competition.

But does all this variety mean restaurant-going Phnom Penh residents really have it all?



Clinton Phnom Penh is catching-up on its neighbours **Richard** Recent boom in restaurants

■ **VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF...PHNOM PENH?**

Despite its diversity Phnom Penh's dining scene is not without its faults, according to a range of expats, both industry professionals and diners, interviewed for this article.

"The menus here are often a book – they all have the same stuff," comments Clinton Webber, Executive Chef at the FCC Group. When it comes to menus, he believes "everyone here is a follower."

A similar sentiment is echoed by Christian Rose, Raffles Hotel Le Royal's Executive Chef. "There is a lack of concept restaurants here," he says.

"In Hong Kong and Singapore there are great restaurants with a limited menu, high turnover and great food." He cites Asian restaurant chain Crystal Jade as an example. "They do four or five dim sum, but do them really well. Here the menus are often too extensive."

Other comments relate to consistency and customer service. One expat, who wished to remain anonymous, said that "some places have really gone downhill with their levels of service. Only a certain few places have good, reliable people working there, and the best places are poaching the best staff."

The dreaded massive menu that attempts to include every possible cuisine is a unanimous gripe. Restaurants should stick

to what they know and what they do well, rather than churn out a whole lot of mediocre dishes.

The general consensus, though, is that dining options in Phnom Penh are continually improving.

■ **CHANGING FOR THE BETTER**

"In the last two years Phnom Penh has come a long way," says Christian. "New high-end restaurants have opened such as La Residence, which has a Japanese chef who has worked in Michelin star restaurants in France and Switzerland." He also praises Le Cedre. "The new Lebanese restaurant was a very good addition."

Pop Cafe's owner Giorgio Arcasi first came to Phnom Penh in 2001 and believes the restaurant scene has since developed beyond recognition.

"It's changed dramatically," he says.

“The menus here are often a book – they all have the same stuff”

"Back then there were only a couple of western restaurants with good quality food, now it's improved so much. There's good quality food from everywhere in the world." He adds, "it's great for the expat community – now there's so much choice."

Richard Bias, Sous Chef at the Hotel InterContinental, agrees that the scene is changing, and for the better.

"It's growing very fast," he says, referring to the recent restaurant boom. "There are lots of really good restaurants here, lots of French places, and there's even Arabic food now," he adds.

As with most cities, Phnom Penh is not without its food trends. The current one appears to be tapas. From Spanish tapas at Pacharan, to pan-asian tapas at Metro, to the Moroccan Driss' offering its own version of the small snack, it seems the tapas concept is on every restaurateur's radar.

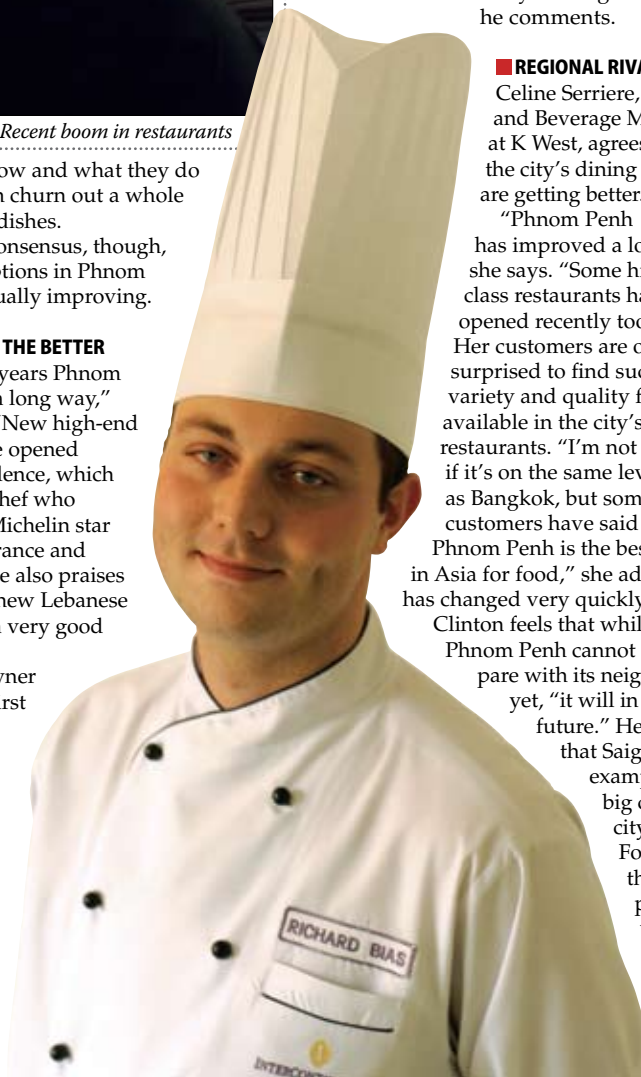
Middle Eastern influence is another fad that can be found in some of the latest establishments, filling a gap in the market. While Clinton believes that the western café is another noticeable trend. "The café scene here is really coming along," he comments.

■ **REGIONAL RIVALRY**

Celine Serriere, Food and Beverage Manager at K West, agrees that the city's dining options are getting better.

"Phnom Penh has improved a lot," she says. "Some high class restaurants have opened recently too." Her customers are often surprised to find such variety and quality food available in the city's restaurants. "I'm not sure if it's on the same level as Bangkok, but some customers have said that Phnom Penh is the best place in Asia for food," she adds. "It has changed very quickly."

Clinton feels that while Phnom Penh cannot compare with its neighbours yet, "it will in the future." He says that Saigon, for example, "is a big city with city trends. Food is the emphasis, whereas here





Freebird Consistent and efficient service from excellent staff

it's often about the price." He maintains that many expats make dining choices based on the cost of a meal, rather than focusing on the actual food. "But it's getting there," he says.

Richard adds that other cities in the region such as Bangkok and Saigon are "twenty years ahead, but Phnom Penh is catching up fast."

But if the quality of the food is catching up with other regional centres, what about the service?

“There's good quality food from everywhere in the world. It's great for the expat community – now there's so much choice”

■ SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Recognising that good service cannot be found everywhere, Christian feels that "the kind character of Cambodians covers up a lot of other things." For some, genuine warmth and friendliness can compensate for other things that may go wrong.

"In Hong Kong for example, people don't have time to be friendly," he says. "You miss the smile. But people here take the time to be nice."

Celine believes service in Phnom Penh's restaurants could be improved, but adds that "it's a very sensitive point in some places." She says customers can complain, but sometimes it's a language issue that's the problem rather than the service itself. "It needs more time to improve, it's just the beginning," she adds.

Other expats returning from visits home to the west complain of the often arrogant or

abrupt service received back in their home city. They find a sense of relief returning to their welcoming favourite establishments in Phnom Penh. Says one expat recently returned from Australia, "in Sydney, everyone was kind of rude!"

■ GETTING IT RIGHT

Metro stands out for its combination of excellent food and service, according to Clinton. "It does everything well," he says.

A new favourite he's discovered is Street 278 bar Liquid, which Clinton says is "a cool, cosy place for a Sunday night – a good place to be."

Giorgio is another Metro fan. "Before, there was a problem getting good steaks - now Metro has solved that," he says. He also says that he heads to the city's Japanese restaurants for fish, and believes that good French and Indian restaurants abound. "I can't really think of anything missing," he adds.

Meanwhile, Christian believes that Giorgio's riverfront Italian eatery Pop Café offers some of the best service in the city.

"I take a cigarette out, an ashtray appears. I finish my water, new water comes out," he says. "They're very switched on." Freebird, Café Fresco and The Shop are other places mentioned by expats interviewed as establishments offering consistent and efficient service from excellent staff.

■ KHMER CHEFS

Service aside, it's also those behind the scenes that contribute to the success of our favourite restaurants. The city is blessed with some excellent Khmer chefs who are not only masters of Khmer cooking, but have managed to learn the nuances of cuisines other than their own. Some have undergone official training, often at Friends, while others have learnt from experience alongside chefs from around the world living and working in the city. That authentic Italian pizza or gourmet French meal you consume

in a Phnom Penh restaurant has most likely been whipped up by a Cambodian chef well versed in European ingredients and cooking methods. (See page 29 for profiles of some of the chefs).

The chef's dedication and ability does not go unnoticed, at least with their employers.

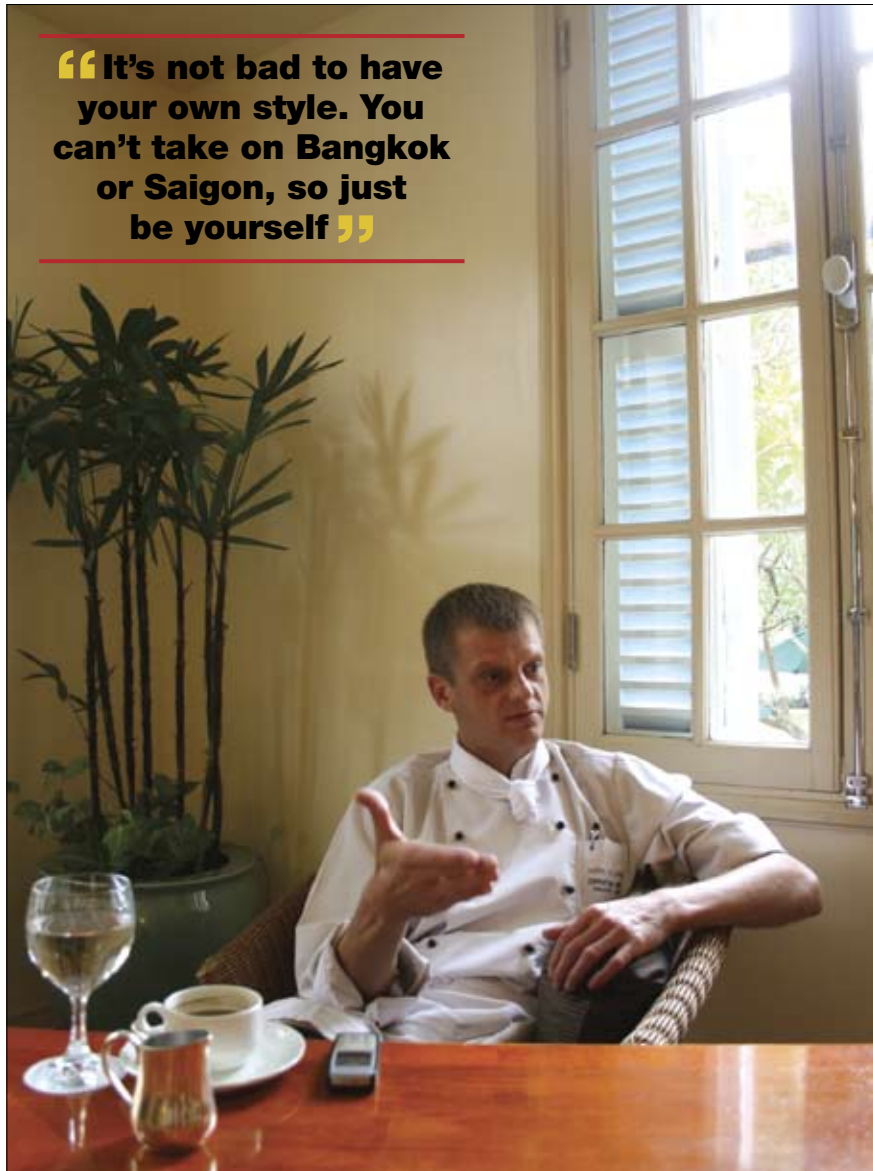
"She understands that you must love what you are doing," says Giorgio of Ratana, his chef at Pop Café. Giorgio says she has what it takes to inject passion into her cooking, explaining that this is an important attribute for a chef to be successful.

Clinton can't speak highly enough of the FCC Group's head chefs. "They're all highly driven and motivated," he says. Other restaurateurs speak with equal pride of their Cambodian kitchen stars. They are especially thrilled to see them take the reins and come



Metro Getting the details right

“It’s not bad to have your own style. You can’t take on Bangkok or Saigon, so just be yourself”



Christian Wants to see more exciting Khmer restaurants

into their own – not only replicating dishes but using their creativity and culinary skills to come up with their own unique dishes.

■ FILLING THE GAPS

In terms of what’s lacking in the city’s food scene, most people struggle to pinpoint a specific cuisine that’s not yet represented. Rather, it’s certain types of restaurants that are on people’s wish lists.

Celine says more quality mid-range eateries are needed, believing that the high-end scene and cheap dining are both well represented already. No doubt she will be pleased by the arrival of Huxleys and Sarika. She also feels more restaurants should offer delivery service.

Clinton claims that while most cuisines are here, they aren’t always done well. “They’re all pretty much covered,” he says of the different types of food in the city. “It’s just about getting people to enjoy them.”

International brand names like McDonalds and Starbucks are yet to arrive although

Although, he adds, “it makes it unique to be here without them.”

What he does wish for is “more exciting Khmer restaurants”. He sees a market for restaurants offering good local food that’s not tourist-oriented. Currently the same dishes are offered, often indistinguishable from other Asian cuisines such as Thai.

“Across the bridge [Japanese Bridge] there’s good food,” he muses. “But you face the language issue.”

■ FUTURE TRENDS

Richard Bias believes that while almost every kind of restaurant is here already, prices should be higher across the bar. At the lower end of the restaurant spectrum, prices are so cheap that “good restaurants become visited only as destination or celebration restaurants.” He also says that the better restaurants are sometimes “strangled by overheads,” so should be more suitably priced.

As for what’s next for the city, Christian believes that more restaurants will open as business develops and the Khmer middle class continues to grow. Celine thinks 2008 is looking up. “This year will be very special for the dining scene,” she says. Those eager to see what other culinary delights await in Phnom Penh will be hoping her claim proves true.

Phnom Penh is an excellent ‘food’ city, if not quite up to the reaches of other cities in the region – yet. What it does have is a plethora of talented Khmer chefs, friendly if not always on-the-ball service, and a certain unique charm mixing Khmer hospitality with international flavour.

Another intriguing element to the Phnom Penh dining scene is the sometimes quirky restaurants found here. One such place is North Korean restaurant Pyongyang that offers a cultural floorshow to entertain its diners. “I love it,” says Christian, claiming it’s something other cities in the region don’t have. “Look at Hong Kong and Bangkok, do they have something like this?”

“It’s not bad to have your own style,” he adds. “You can’t take on Bangkok or Saigon, so just be yourself.” **■**

KFC is on its way. “I don’t necessarily like these things, but their presence does make you feel a connection with a city,” says Christian. “They make you feel at home.”



Pyongyang’s cultural floorshow Unique to Phnom Penh?

If the Hat Fits

Behind the western manager fronting popular Phnom Penh dining haunts is a team of loyal staff preparing the dishes that we love so much. Many of these have mastered cuisines other than their own. **Liz Ledden** meets the Khmers who are really wearing the chef's hat in the kitchen. Photos by **Kate Burbidge**.

KUNTHEA CHHOM

Kitchen:
The Shop

Age: 24

Has worked at The Shop for: the last 6 years.

Position: Head Chef (based at The Shop's main kitchen at Northbridge School).

Responsible for: Cooking all the food that ends up as ingredients to be put together at The Shop, also develops new recipes – some from The Shop's owner Griet, some from the internet and some his own inventions.

Background: Trained at Friends International.

Can cook: Many cuisines including Belgian, French, and Khmer food.

Prefers to eat: Anything that he cooks.

What's next: To keep learning new things – the more the better.



Mai Sary

Kitchen:
FCC Phnom Penh

Age: 30

Has worked at FCC for: 12 years.

Position: Head Chef.

Background: First learnt to cook at Raffles Hotel Le Royal.

Can cook: Asian and western cuisines including Italian food.

Prefers to eat: Most western and Asian food, in particular pizza.

Favourite dishes he makes: The hot mains.

What's next: Would like to open his own business with his family.



Chan Narong

Kitchen:
Café Fresco

Age: 20

Position: Senior Chef de Partie/Supervisor.

Background: Came from Friends International, then worked as a trainee in the kitchen at FCC before moving to Café Fresco.

Can cook: Gourmet western café food.

Favourite dishes she makes: All of them.

Prefers to eat: Khmer food.

What's next: Aims to be the best cook in the kitchen!



Ratana Sim

Kitchen:
Pop Café

Age: 34

Has worked at Pop Café for: 7 years (since it first opened).

Position: Chef.

Responsible for: Cooking, managing the staff in the kitchen, shopping for ingredients.

Learnt Italian cooking: At Pop Café.

Found it: Easy!

Favourite dishes to cook: All.

Prefers to eat: Mainly Khmer food, and some Italian.

Favourite Italian dish: Spaghetti carbonara.

What's next: Continuing to cook, and learning more if there's time.



Van Sokchan

Kitchen:
Raffles Hotel Le Royal

Age: 37

Has worked at Raffles Hotel Le Royal for: the last 10 years.

Position: Banquet Sous Chef (and right hand man to Executive Chef Christian Rose).

Responsible for: The Café Monivong buffet, inside and outside catering including events at the Royal Palace, developing special menus for functions such as heads of state dinners.

Background: Learnt to cook from a Thai chef at the now closed Landmark Hotel.

Can cook: Khmer, Chinese, Italian, French and much more.

What he cooks best: All equally good.

Prefers to eat: Asian food, particularly Khmer and Vietnamese.

What's next: With an upcoming visit from some Indian chefs for a food promotion, would like to expand his Indian food repertoire.



Him Lianghour

Kitchen:
K West

Age: 35

Has worked at K West for: the last 5 years.

Position: Head Chef.

Responsible for: Managing the kitchen, developing new dishes for the menu (a recent creation – grilled sea bass fillet with balsamic salt).

Background: Worked as an Assistant Chef for UNTAC, at an Indonesian restaurant, the Holiday Hotel, Raffles Hotel Le Royal, studied for a culinary certificate then worked at Topaz before joining K West.

Prefers to eat: Nearly everything except certain spices used in Chinese cooking, such as star anise.

Enjoys: Reading books and magazines about cuisines from around the world.



Oy Ly

Kitchen:
Pacharan

Age: 37

Has worked at Pacharan for: 2 years (since it first opened).

Position: Head Chef.

Background: Used to work as a chef at various hotels, learnt to cook Spanish cuisine at Pacharan.

Describes learning to cook Spanish food as: Easy.

Prefers to eat: Khmer food and Spanish food.

Favourite dish he makes: Paella.

What's next: Would like to learn to cook Chinese food.



Vang

Kitchen:
The Rising Sun

Age: 43

Has worked The Rising Sun for: 8 years

Position: In charge of the kitchen / head chef

Responsible for: Buying ingredients, food preparation, cooking, overseeing the rest of the kitchen staff.

Background: Learnt to cook from various previous bosses, at the Rising Sun and other establishments.

Can cook: Mostly English pub-style cuisine, a few Asian dishes.

What she cooks best: Everything equally well.

Prefers to eat: Any seafood! (Eyes lit up, big smile!)

What's next: Would like to expand her repertoire with more English recipes – always keen to learn new dishes.

