

Food Talk: *Metro* – One year on and going strong

With his restaurant just over a year old, Metro's co-owner **Tom O'Connor** talks with **Liz Ledden** about what has surprised him the most over the past year.



Metro's fries *Best in Southeast Asia?*

"THE BEST FRIES IN TOWN," AsiaLIFE declared in a review of Metro in our inaugural issue. Aside from a rapturous description of this hot fried delight, our reviewer Thin Lei Win also observed that the restaurant's trendy décor and fusion menu were equally impressive. But have these elements led the restaurant and bar to stand the test of time, in a city where a mere one year of operation can indicate a success? Or is there more to Metro's x-factor than good food and a funky interior?

"Some people thought we were crazy," says Australian Tom O'Connor on the community's reaction to the opening of Metro in late 2006. Believing the restaurant and bar to be too ahead of its time for Phnom Penh, the doubters have been proven wrong with the establishment's steady crowds and the copycat businesses it has inspired.

Along with American business partner Paul Tripp, Tom has experienced a few surprises along the way.

■ LARGE KHMER CLIENTELE

"The market mix is the biggest thing," says Tom when asked

“It's better to focus on what you do well than to try and be everything to everyone”

what was his greatest surprise. Originally, he envisaged that Metro's riverfront location would attract a largely tourist-based clientele, while the opposite trend has resulted. "Tourists make up less than 1 percent of our business," says Tom.

Instead, the restaurant and bar has found a strong following among the young, middle class Khmer set, "especially those who have lived or studied abroad and are looking for something different or western," says Tom.

While the cool Khmer crowd forms around 65 percent of Metro's customers, the rest come from the western expat community. This was another thing he did not anticipate, having observed that expats tend to



The popular steaks *Offer excellent value for money*

avoid dining on the riverfront due to its touristy vibe and the hassle it can entail.

■ SECRETS OF METRO'S SUCCESS

Metro's success to date can be attributed to its consistency, according to Tom. Staff loyalty has contributed to this consistency, with Metro having a much lower turnover rate than most places.

Another contributing factor is Metro's originality. Many Phnom Penh restaurants, particularly those along the riverfront, stick to ubiquitous rattan furniture and have a huge menu featuring every cuisine under the sun. Metro is an urban chic outpost with a refreshingly concise and specialised menu.

"It's better to focus on what you do well than to try and be everything to everyone," says Tom, citing their Sunday brunch menu focusing purely on eggs benedict as an example.

The menu's mix of small plates and main dishes has proved popular with customers.

"The tapas is more of a social thing," Tom says, commenting that it's an informal way for people to share food over drinks,

while the steaks have been the most popular main.

"We've built up a reputation for having the best value steaks," he says.

Of the drinks, Metro's martinis are also reputed as being some of the best in town.

■ KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM

Some changes to the menu, due to take place over the next month, are "about keeping the momentum going." This is the third element that Tom believes Metro has got right.

"A lot of people can copy our furniture and décor, but can they keep the momentum going?" he challenges.

As for our original observation that the restaurant's fries were the best in town – and in fact in all of South East Asia – Tom has since received feedback from customers similarly enamoured with his chunky, spicy Metro fries.

"It's been haunting me ever since!" he jokes of our year old comment. "I've been a chef for 18 years and now I'm known for my fries!"

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