

## Food Talk: *The evolution of Open Wine*

The recently expanded Open Wine complex keeps changing to fit with the times. **Liz Ledden** meets co-owners **Philippe Veeckmans** and **Frank Samperp** to get the story behind the food and wine mecca.



**Philippe Veeckmans** Happy with Cambodia's changes

**BELGIAN PHILIPPE** Veeckmans, general manager of Open Wine, first visited Phnom Penh back in 2000. "I didn't like it then, and vowed I'd never come back," says Philippe. He was living in Vietnam at the time, where he worked for 11 years, always in the hospitality industry – first in restaurants, then hotels and finally in the wine business.

After a few more visits to Cambodia's capital, one at the invitation of a friend who opened the Italian restaurant Luna d'Autunno, he slowly warmed to the city he initially dismissed.

"I began to smell something," Philippe says, not referring to the offensive odours you often get around town, but to a whiff of opportunity in the air.

"The Phnom Penh of 2005 was so different to what I saw before," he says. The changes he saw in the city sparked an idea that he may just be able to give business here a go.

### ■ SCOPING OUT THE COMPETITION

With his self-declared favourite hobby of "going to restaurants",

he indulged in this pastime to the full – all in the name of market research, of course.

"I wanted to see what people were eating and drinking here, and what they were spending," he explains. He liked what he saw. Riding in a taxi back to the airport he decided to open a wine business in Phnom Penh – "just like that".

"My boss didn't believe that I would leave," says Philippe. Two months later, he was being bid farewell at a party with his 200 nearest and dearest, and then it was off to Phnom Penh to embark on his dream.

A major hurdle was property – finding the right place at the right price. With a small shop with room for storage in mind, Philippe was taken aback when a real estate agent took him to the space where Open Wine now sits.

"When I saw the large land surrounded by a high fence, I thought it was a joke," he says. "The building was terrible and the surrounds were really, really bad, but I saw potential." The

wine shop opened its doors on Dec. 6, 2005.

He found a business partner in Frank Samperp, originally from the south west of France. Frank's passion for food and wine, studying these subjects for seven years at a catering school, made him a natural partner. "It took 15 minutes to accept and two years to regret!" Frank jokes.

### ■ THE NEW FACE OF OPEN WINE

With the opening of Butcher & Co., run by French butcher Dominic – a friend of Philippe's from Hanoi – and the selling of coffee and fruit sourced from Vietnam, it can truly be said that Open Wine has moved from a wine store to becoming a fully-fledged one-stop deli.

The restaurant has changed too, responding to the needs of a growth market in the city – wealthy Khmers.

"Khmer customers came for wine but didn't like the restaurant as it had no air-con," says Philippe. This proved the catalyst for building an indoor, air-conditioned dining room.

"We have just opened, but the first week has been surprising in a positive way," he says. The concept behind his new Wine Restaurant is not to compete with other French restaurants in town, but to act as a showcase for Open Wine's meat and wine. For Philippe, it's all about the quality of their products. "I hope customers will focus on what we are selling, not on who we are," he adds.

The butchery, too, is already going well. "It's huge, I never expected it to work like that in four weeks," says Philippe. He plans to use as much local meat as possible, but prepared with French know-how.

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Certainly the changes he sees around him have had a positive impact on his attitude towards the city. "I'm very happy to be in Cambodia and see it change," he says. "Tomorrow is better than yesterday."

Open Wine, 219 Street 19 Tel: 023 223 527, open 11am to 11pm.

