

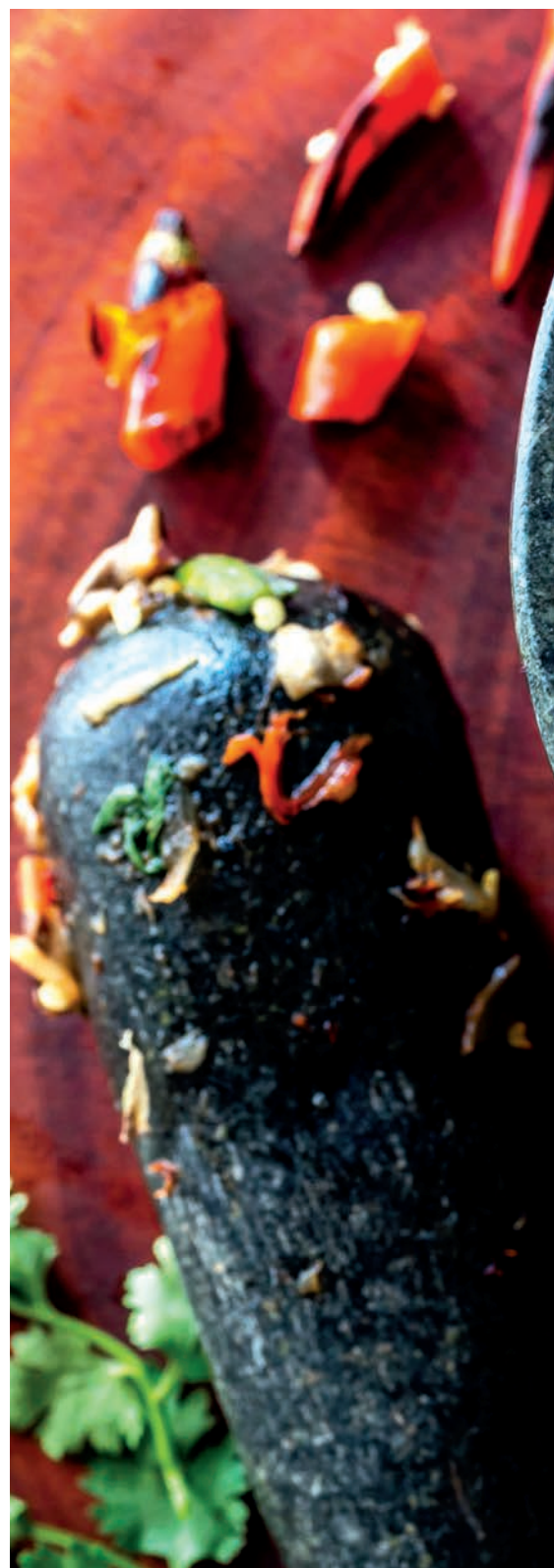
Reclaiming the cuisine

Laos brings its food from out of its neighbours' shadow to the delicious delight of visitors. Mark Andrews reports



It's just past six and the morning light is struggling to make headway. Resplendent in saffron coloured robes, young monks stream slowly out of Luang Prabang's temples. Devotees crouch as they put parcels of food into the monks' bowls. The morning almsgiving is an important ritual in this UNESCO World Heritage City and has become a major tourist attraction. Less seen, though, is another ritual connected to food that happens around the same time. Farmers come from the countryside to sell their produce from old tarpaulins spread on the streets by the Royal Palace Museum leading down to the Mekong river. A woman picks out limes from a selection of snake beans, eggplants and dill, and a grandmother stooped on a stool is busy deep-frying corn cakes.

Later in the day at the main Phosi market, Caroline Gaylard, an Australian, explains some of the more obscure produce. "Local produce is of utmost importance to the Lao people, and you'll find a lot of foraged food like rice field crabs and insects," she says as we look at a basket full of stink bugs. Caroline and her Lao husband Joy Ngeuamboupha run the Tamarind restaurant and cooking school (tamarindlaos.com)



Below, from left: A monk returning to a Luang Prabang temple after the morning almsgiving ritual; mushroom and chilli jeow – pounding the ingredients with a pestle and mortar gives the dip its chunky texture



Clockwise from top left:

Ubiquitous in Lao cuisine are sticky rice and the accompanying *jeow* – dips and relishes made of ingredients such as eggplant, chilli and lemongrass; the idyllic landscape of UNESCO World Heritage City Luang Prabang; *tom kai si khai* – traditional chicken soup – at the 3 Nagas Restaurant; stuffed lemongrass served with chilli *jeow*

in a rural area that was at one time an opium plantation – but the herbs used today are purely for blowing your taste buds.

I've already been in Laos a few weeks, but at the cooking class, a revelation comes to me. One of the first things we do is make *jeow*, a kind of dip, and to do this we roast eggplant, garlic, and red and green chillies on the fire. I discover that Lao people mainly use terracotta cooking braziers known as *taoloh*. "These days, in any restaurant that's bigger than a small family outfit, they probably use gas to cook on," explains Joy. "In our restaurant we use both. The *taoloh* themselves are a huge difficulty – smelly, smoky, dangerous, dirty and extremely hot in the confined space of our kitchen. But there's no question that the difference in taste is huge."

Also steaming over a *taoloh* in a woven bamboo basket is the ubiquitous sticky rice. Lao people often refer to themselves as *luk khao niaow* – 'children of sticky rice' – and sticky rice forms the central focus of every meal in the country. As Joy later instructs us, locals eat it with their hands by kneading small balls of rice to dip with *jeow* or other food morsels.

Next up is an *orlarm*, a traditional Luang Prabang stew. I use buffalo meat – quite a common ingredient in the region – but when Joy was growing up, they would catch rats or squirrels and sometimes the odd forest chicken. One special ingredient here is pepperwood, which imparts a smoky, slightly numbing taste to the dish similar to Sichuan peppercorns. As with most Lao dishes, *orlarm* is packed with fresh herbs. These usually consist of Lao basil (lemon basil) – which has a slight aniseed taste but not as strong as Thai basil – dill and coriander along with spring onions and





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lemongrass. These days, *nam pla* (fish sauce) is often substituted for the traditional *paadaek*, which is made from fermented fish and has a more astringent taste. When the cooking is nearly done, the eggplant, burnt sticky rice and lemongrass that have been boiling away with the buffalo meat are removed and pounded with a mortar and pestle into a paste before being added back to thicken the stew.

Food has always been important to Joy and cooking runs in the family. When he moved from the countryside to a temple in Luang Prabang as a boy, the morning alms weren’t sufficient, and so he and his friends would cook. It soon becomes apparent that Joy knows a thing or two about flavours as we eat under the covered dining area amongst the ponds and tamarind trees. He also taught us to make chicken-stuffed lemongrass. The chicken is deep fried with a subtle lemon flavour, making the tricky preparation – creating a ‘basket’ in the lemongrass stalk to stuff the chicken filling in – deliciously worthwhile.

I head to the Landmark Mekong Riverside Hotel (landmarkmekongriversidehotel.com) in Vientiane to visit executive chef Sebastien Rubis. The French native has been championing Lao food for over a decade after falling in love with the country in 2002. “I remember that Laotian cuisine looked crude to me at first, very deeply rooted in countryside style. But when I tasted it, there were so many fresh flavours and all in equilibrium, not too spicy or fatty. Without any MSG, it was very healthy,” he enthuses.

One thing Rubis found he needed to change was his temperament in the kitchen: Lao chefs do not respond to shouting, and he had to become like a brother or father to them. →





Left: Fresh and colourful produce at Phosi market. **Right:** Lao *laap*, minced chicken salad

However, taste is one thing he has been firm on not changing. “I’ve worked on the presentation of Lao cuisine, but it’s important to keep the taste as close to the original as possible.” At the Landmark, he has experimented with fusion food. He serves me *mok pa*, a classic Lao dish of fish with herbs steamed in a banana leaf, that has been transformed with a French *je ne sais quoi*. Rubis has replaced the river fish with sea fish but keeps all the herbs the same. Sautéed mushrooms flambéed with cognac give it a French touch. Instead of the traditional *jeow* on the side, it comes with a Nantaise sauce – a creamy reduction of shallots, white wine and vinegar combined with fish stock and butter. In lieu of sticky rice, the dish is served with ginger-infused steamed rice. Even with these twists on the traditional *mok pa*, the flavours are still distinctly Lao. With cuisines as diverse as French and Indian available around town and Thailand just across the river, it is only natural that the Lao capital is where experimentation with food should start.

Back in Luang Prabang, I stop for dinner at the restaurant of the 3 Nagas MGallery by Sofitel boutique hotel (sofitel.com). Whereas restaurants like Tamarind serve food similar to what’s eaten in Lao homes, albeit with better cuts of meat, 3 Nagas’ chef Chanpheng Sengakhom – or Pheng as he’s known – prides himself on cooking dishes derived from recipes of the royal Lao household. I start with fried riverweed sprinkled with sesame seeds, which gives a satisfying crunch offset by spicy buffalo skin *jeow*. As I dig into one of chef Pheng’s signature dishes, *khua kai sai jeow bong* – a light tasting dish of stir-fried chicken brought alive by the



flavours of *jeow*, lemongrass and kaffir lime leaves – he joins me. I ask him for his take on Lao cuisine. “Lao food is fresh and uses only products that can be found locally like buffalo and Mekong fish,” he says.

The northeast of Thailand was once part of Laos, and what is known as Isan food is in fact similar to Lao food, and both cuisines share many dishes. Earlier, Joy explained there is still a difference. “For example, when they make *laap* (minced meat salad seasoned with lime, garlic and roasted, powdered sticky rice), Thai chefs use more onion and carrot. Plus instead of *paadaek* (Lao fish sauce made from pickled or fermented fish), they use small shrimps. The overall texture is very similar but the taste is different.”

Speaking to chefs such as Joy and Pheng, it’s obvious they take great pride in their country’s food. They seem determined to set the record straight about the origin of Lao dishes, while passionately sharing Laotian cuisine with the rest of the world. ■

SilkAir will fly to Luang Prabang three times weekly from 31 October 2016.

Lao cuisine goes global

New York

Khe-Yo

Executive chef Soulayphet Schwader brings Lao-inspired food to Tribeca. Designed for sharing, the menu showcases Laotian techniques and flavours – try the lemongrass chicken sausage or whole red snapper with tamarind peanut sauce. kheyo.com

Paris

Lao Lane Xang

Located on Avenue d'Ivry in Chinatown, Lao Lane Xang is best known for its Lao dishes, although it does serve food from other Southeast Asian countries as well. +33 1 58 89 00 00

Sydney

Papaya Grill

Two brothers of Lao heritage rediscover their roots at this restaurant located in the inner west suburb of Marrickville. Expect largely authentic dishes inspired by traditional recipes and Lao home cooking. papayagrill.com.au