A Frenchman in Cambodia

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I was introduced to the particular ingredients and cooking techniques of Cambodian cooking by two very different chefs in three very distinct locations.

The first was the petite, charming and memorably named Vandy Van, who is in charge of the cookery school attached to the Amansara hotel at Siem Reap, close to the extraordinary temples of Angkor.

The kitchen is located on the first floor of an atmospheric old wooden Khmer village house naturally cooled by the wind that comes off the lake nearby. Here for two hours in heat exacerbated by the fact that we were cooking over traditional charcoal I chopped and chopped – garlic, turmeric, galangal, chilies big and small and kaffir lime leaves - eventually finely enough to meet Van's approval. Soft and refreshing spring rolls; chicken curry with potato and pumpkin; a salad of banana blossom, chicken and roasted peanuts; and stir-fried water spinach with garlic were the fruits of our joint labours.

Van is today such an exemplary and patient teacher because she came from the countryside to be a student at the Sali Baï Hotel School set up in 2002 by the French NGO Agir Pour Le Cambodge, which has so far trained over 600 disadvantaged Cambodians to work in their burgeoning hospitality industry. And here her teacher was the far fuller figure of Joannès Rivière, a Frenchman who has cooking and restaurants in his blood.

Rivière, 32, hails from Roanne, south-east France, where his parents used to supply the renowned Troisgros restaurant with vegetables. Although he came to Cambodia to train cooks, he switched roles to cook at the Hotel de la Paix. During this time he met Carole Salmon from Brittany, then the director of the local French Cultural Centre. (Photo of Johannès and Carole by Jessica Lim.)

They married and earlier this year embarked on two time-consuming adventures: as parents of a baby son and as proprietors of their own restaurant, Cuisine Wat Damnak. 'We took it as a lucky omen that our son decided to sleep through for the first time straight after our opening night', Carole explained with a smile.

Their restaurant takes its name from a temple located 500 metres away and is no more than a five-minute tuk-tuk ride from the town centre. Its physical charms emanate from the fact that it was formerly a private home which now provides three distinct eating areas: outdoor seating in the garden; upstairs for those who enjoy eating while sitting on the floor; and a much cooler ground floor where a vase of unopened lotus flowers stands by the door.

An understated elegance underpinned our three hours at Cuisine Wat Damnak. The most obvious manifestation of this were the paper place mats and menu which bear a rice pattern, and Cambodian rice is particularly good; a turmeric margarita and a pomelo and fresh ginger martini that got the evening off to great start; and two menus, one four course at US$17 and the other US24 for five courses, under the heading Cambodian cuisine but each demonstrating top-quality French classic technique.

But what was perhaps even more exciting was the balance and acidity that Rivière is achieving with so many exciting local ingredients. Slices of water lily alongside grilled pieces of frog meat; rice flakes, the produce of the rice crop before it is milled, formed into a pancake with thin slices of the local sausage and a tamarind sauce; tiny prawns in a fish consommé with slices of ultra-tart star fruit; and a fillet of freshwater croacker fish, skewered and quickly grilled on a plate of edible flowers. With coffee came glasses of thin slices of pomelo, banana and tamarind dried and then coated in sugar. Dinner for three with a bottle of French wine (naturally) – a Côtes du Rhône 2009 from Gabriel Liogier – came to US$100 excluding service.

Rivière subsequently explained that his mission was to stay as close as possible to the French practice of shopping in the market for that night's menu and that his son's arrival had rendered his former electric alarm clock redundant. Two mornings later we set off on his motorbike for his favourite market, Psaa Cha, one of the oldest in Siem Reap.

Before we plunged into its narrow, bustling byways, Rivière laid down a few guidelines. That Cambodians don't really like the flavour of saltwater fish, much preferring the freshwater fish and prawns that come from Tonlé Sap, the huge lake and river system nearby, and that the country has over 1,000 different species of freshwater fish, of which 500 are commercially available, the second biggest variety of freshwater fish in the world after the Amazon basin. That because

the local fishing season is seasonal, entirely dependent on the flooding of the Mekong river, Cambodians have mastered every method of preserving fish, including the pungent fish paste that is so widely used. And that wherever there were those staples of French cooking – carrots, garlic, onions and potatoes – these would be imported as they do not grow in Cambodia at all. Instead he would be looking out for gourds, water-lily stems, green tamarind, lemon grass and pumpkin.

What Rivière had not revealed, however, was quite how effectively he has mastered the Cambodian language, complete with its 42 vowels, and how fondly he was welcomed by the women who sat cross-legged by their stalls. There was a continual stream of banter and smiles all round as Rivière poked his way round their goods, offering me pieces of salads and fruits I had not eaten before and prefacing each introduction with whether this one was, or was not, one of his chosen suppliers and why.

Proof, if any were needed, that the chef may choose to leave France but a strong element of France will always reside within him.

Amansara, www.amanresorts.com
Sala Baï Hotel School, www.salabai.com
Cuisine Wat Damnak, www.cuisinewatdamnak.com