

Cambodian Americans Are Ready to Share Their Cuisine, On Their Terms

by Maryam Jillani

5 *A new wave of Cambodian American chefs are sharing the cuisine's bright, umami-rich flavors in pop ups and restaurants throughout the country.*

The word “funky” frequently comes up when you talk about Cambodian food.

10 It is often traced to prahok, fermented fish paste, an ingredient so widely used that there’s a Cambodian phrase, ‘No prahok, no salt!’ It is incorporated in soups, such as samlor korko, a rustic vegetable and green fruit stew, as well as dips, like teuk kreung, a fish-based sauce served with raw vegetables. Its taste is considered an acquired one for those new to the cuisine.

15 But first generation Cambodian American chefs are not afraid to use it. In a new crop of eateries, they are embracing the full breadth of Cambodian flavors, while integrating their American upbringings.

“Cambodian food is a balance of salt, sugar, and acid,” says Ethan Lim, Cambodian American founder and chef at Hermosa in Chicago, a sandwich shop-cum-Cambodian dinner series. He adds that it’s this balance that makes the cuisine distinct from Thai food, for example, which has a higher peak in acidity and heat.

20 Yet while Cambodian cuisine may be quieter, that subtlety should not be confused for lack of flavor. The country’s rich history (which ties it to China, France, India, Thailand, and Vietnam) and an inextricable relationship with fish infuse the food with a deep, complex taste. It draws brightness from the generous use of aromatics and herbs, with an umami depth from fermented ingredients like prahok.

25 The nuances of the cuisine, alongside the unique Cambodian American experience, can partially help explain why Cambodian cuisine has lacked visibility in the States.

30 The Cambodian American diaspora began taking shape in 1975, when the first wave of Cambodian refugees came to the States to escape the brutal Khmer Rouge regime that left two million dead. At that time, many were not thinking of how to integrate Cambodian food into the American mainstream. It was simply meant to be enjoyed within the sanctity of their own homes.

“I think revisiting the cuisine requires revisiting certain traumas, and I don’t think a lot of people were ready for that yet,” says Lim.

5 A generation removed, Lim feels he and his peers are now ready to share the cuisine with the rest of the country. Some have started with classic American mediums, such as the sandwich, to introduce Cambodian flavors to their clientele. Hermosa’s best-selling item is their fried chicken version, inspired by flavors Lim grew up eating, with tangy papaya salad tucked into a brioche bun. He marinates the chicken in kroeung, Cambodia’s foundational lemongrass paste, and uses an abundance of fresh herbs, such as Thai basil, cilantro, cilantro, and mint, to ensure that it’s a true
10 representation of a Cambodian cultural dish—in sandwich form.

In Los Angeles, at cafe and deli, Gamboge, founder and chef Hak Lonh also started with baguette sandwiches—the Cambodian num pang. Lonh uses kroeung as a foundational marinade, taking it in various directions —sweet, sour, spicy—
15 throughout his menu. The restaurant has a playful wine selection that highlights the natural “funkiness” of the food, as Lonh puts it; as well as fusion dishes, such as the short rib bowl with Korean short ribs marinated in kroeung. Lonh started Gamboge as an homage to his parents, but he also wants it to represent what Cambodian food in Los Angeles in 2021 can look like.

Pop-ups have been another way for chefs to introduce Cambodian food to diners.
20 Kreung is a popular dinner series launched by chef Chinchakriya Un in New York. During the summer, it was part of a critically-acclaimed but short-lived joint residency with Ha’s Đặc Biệt at the Brooklyn restaurant, Outerspace. In Los Angeles, chef Phert Em started Khemla in 2019 as a monthly pop-up dinner that she has now moved to a primarily delivery service featuring Cambodian classics, such as prahok
25 ktiss—ground pork belly dip with fresh vegetables—and lort cha, stir-fried short rice noodles with shiitake and oyster mushrooms.

It has taken Cambodian cuisine over 40 years to reach this level of increased visibility, no doubt a result of the circumstances that brought many Cambodians to the U.S. in the first place, with many coming from agrarian backgrounds or lacking
30 formal education. The household income of Cambodian Americans continues to be less than the Asian-American average, with 13 percent living in poverty.

“They are really sad numbers, and that’s because the social capital has been destroyed,” says Dr. Sophal Ear, Cambodian American Associate Dean in the Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University, in reference
35 to the Khmer Rouge’s impact on Cambodians. “Culturally speaking, the identity of Cambodians has been damaged.” Dr. Ear points to how many Cambodian Americans,

including himself, grew up in single parent households where mothers split their time between raising children and working low-paying jobs.

One of the more common Cambodian transferable skills was cooking, and many arrivals, such as Lim's parents, set up Chinese—not Cambodian—restaurants.

5 Meanwhile, the Cambodian government, following 1993, was focused on rebuilding. Until recently, there has been little focus on culinary diplomacy, unlike neighboring Thailand. "Thai authorities have awarded certificates to Thai restaurants that use Thai ingredients and promote the export of Thai foods," says Dr. Ear "There's a whole export strategy."

10 There are a small number of longstanding Cambodian restaurants in the States. Sophy's Restaurant, now Cambodia Town Food and Music, in Long Beach, California, is one of them. Founder Sophy Khut escaped from Cambodia with her family in 1975. Coming from a long line of chefs, it was only natural for her to open her first restaurant at the age of 22 in Beaver, Oregon. After encouragement from
15 friends in Long Beach, which is home to the country's largest Cambodian community, she relocated and opened Sophy's in 2000. The restaurant is a beloved Long Beach institution, and not only among Cambodians. "I got a lot of support from the Cambodian community, but also from a mix of all kinds of ethnic groups," Khut says. It was important for Khut to introduce Cambodian food to Americans, and it
20 remains her primary motivation.

Phnom Penh Noodle House in Seattle is another community institution. Established in 1987 by a Chinese-Cambodian refugee, Sam Ung, the restaurant became a second home for multiple generations of patrons. Like Sophy's, its clientele spans beyond Cambodians. Ung's commitment to serving the entire Seattle Chinatown community
25 is reflected in the fact that he started with a menu in five languages. Ung's daughter, Diane Le, laughs that she still sees customers from 30 years ago coming in to order the exact same dish. When the restaurant closed in 2018 due to a family emergency, the community successfully rallied behind the family to reopen it.

The Cambodian American culinary landscape is evolving alongside a new food
30 movement in Cambodia itself. Siem-Reap based food writer, Lara Dunston, calls it the "New Cambodian Cuisine Movement." She points to chefs like Sothea Seng of Lum Orng, Pola Siv of Banlle Cafe, Mengly Mork of the now-closed Pou Restaurant, who are "consciously experimenting and endeavoring to create a new kind of cuisine." Dunston emphasizes that there is a deep respect for traditional Cambodian
35 dishes and cooking techniques, but chefs also want to draw on their heritage to move the cuisine forward. "They each of the chefs had their own style and were doing something different to the others," says Dunston. Outside of restaurants, Cambodian chef, Rotanak Nak, and Cambodian-Australian photographer and stylist Nataly Lee's

cookbook, “Nhum,” published in 2019, has also expanded the reach of Cambodian cooking, thanks in part to Nak’s savvy social media strategy.

5 The pandemic has slowed this momentum. In Cambodia, the shutdown of tourism upended the dining industry, especially in Siem Reap. “It decimated its dining scene, and almost all the city’s restaurants closed,” Dunston tells me. According to a recent Asia Foundation report, nearly 47 percent of tourism-related enterprises, including restaurants, shut due to the pandemic. Cambodian American chefs, meanwhile put their plans on hold or switched their business models. Le and her sisters postponed plans to host pop-ups at Phnom Penh Noodle House’s new space . At Gamboge, Lonh
10 delayed opening a sit-down restaurant, and pivoted to a takeout friendly menu. (As of October 28, he has finally launched dinner service two days a week, more than a year after the restaurant’s opening.)

15 Lim, however, seized the opportunity to launch an intimate dinner series, where he walks his customers through a coursed Cambodian meal. The format aligns with customers’ needs for a safer dining experience, and gives Lim creative space to carefully explain the nuances of the Cambodian way of dining, that, for example, include the importance of eating with your hands, as well as the specifics of each dish. Lim’s dinner series is sold out until summer 2022, which indicates that while the pandemic may have slowed things down, Cambodian American food is here to stay.