Preserving Cambodian Flavors:
Recipes and Memories
from Cuisine Wat Damnak



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Introduction

At Cuisine Wat Damnak, everything begins with the food; a fish from the Tonle Sap, a young leaf gathered from the forest, a fruit that appears in the market for only a few weeks. From these ingredients, Joannès has developed a cuisine guided by the seasons and grounded in a deep curiosity about Cambodia.

This idea has shaped the restaurant from the beginning. It remains at the heart of what we do because of the people that work hard to keep it alive. It needs farmers, fishermen, foragers and market sellers who understand the ingredients. It needs cooks who can develop knowledge and judgement of their own. It needs a service team able to engage with guests with confidence and care. It needs an environment in which the cuisine has room to breathe, expand and continue evolving.

This book tells that larger story.

I first met Joannès in 2005, when we were both working at a hotel in Siem Reap. He was a young French chef beginning to discover Cambodia, while I was a young Cambodian beginning my career in hospitality. Neither of us could have imagined that we would one day become partners.

Our lives took us in different directions before we worked together again. Joannès remained in Cambodia, exploring its markets, learning from Cambodian cooks and building relationships with farmers and suppliers. Ingredients familiar in Cambodian homes, but rarely given sustained attention in restaurants, became the foundation of his work. In 2011, he opened Cuisine Wat Damnak in Siem Reap, creating seasonal tasting menus shaped entirely by Cambodian produce.

My own journey took me away from Cambodia. I spent more than a decade working in Singapore, Fiji and Macau, moving between cultures and increasingly complex hotel and restaurant operations. I learned how to manage pressure, make decisions and understand the expectations of guests from many backgrounds. More importantly, I came to understand hospitality not simply as good service, but as a way of making people feel cared for.

Working abroad also taught me how much confidence matters in the hospitality industry. I remember being a young employee with limited English, often facing situations for which I did not feel prepared. Those experiences shaped the kind of leader I wanted to become.

When I returned to Cambodia, I wanted what I had learned overseas to have a purpose at home. I wanted younger staff to be trusted with responsibility, supported as they learned and given the opportunity to discover their own abilities. I reconnected with Joannès and, in 2019, joined Cuisine Wat Damnak as a partner.

I entered a restaurant that already had a clear culinary identity, an experienced team and an international reputation. Joannès had spent years developing its philosophy through close attention to Cambodia's ingredients, seasons and food culture. My responsibility was to understand what it would take to keep the restaurant experience evolving and reaching new customers.

That became especially important as we navigated the dramatic ebbs and flows of tourism during a difficult period. Through these years of uncertainty and recovery, one of our greatest concerns was keeping the team together.

The knowledge of a restaurant does not live in its recipes alone. It lives in the judgement of the cook who knows when an ingredient is at its best, in the organisation of the kitchen, in the confidence of the service team and in the countless decisions made during every service. Our staff carried years of experience and trust. If the team scattered, much of that knowledge would disappear with them.

Opening Cuisine Wat Damnak in Phnom Penh gave us a way forward. It allowed us to preserve the core of the team while introducing the cuisine to a different city, with different guests and new possibilities. It also asked us to place greater trust in the people around us.

Joannès could no longer be present in every kitchen or oversee every decision. Cambodian chefs stepped forward, proposing dishes, developing menus and taking



greater responsibility. Managers and service staff also found more space to lead. The culinary philosophy remained strong, but more people became capable of interpreting, supporting and carrying it forward.

Today, Cuisine Wat Damnak has two homes. Siem Reap remains the original home of the restaurant, close to the landscapes, markets and relationships that first shaped the cuisine. Phnom Penh has brought a different energy and extended its possibilities. Together, the two restaurants have created more room for the food, the team and the ideas behind them to grow.

Joannès and I came to this work from different directions. He came to Cambodia and found a home through its people and food. I left Cambodia, learned from other cultures and returned with a deeper understanding of what hospitality and leadership could be.

Our responsibilities remain different, but they serve the same purpose. Joannès continues to lead the cuisine, giving his attention to ingredients, seasons, recipes and their constant development. I focus on the people, hospitality and structures that allow this work to flourish. Around us is a team whose knowledge and confidence continue to deepen.

We want our cooks to understand ingredients rather than simply follow instructions. We want them to question what they know, make choices and think as chefs. We want our managers and service teams to trust their judgement and recognise how much they contribute to the experience. We want young staff to imagine a meaningful future for themselves within Cambodian hospitality.

The restaurant also depends upon a community that reaches far beyond its walls. Farmers, fishermen, foragers, producers and market sellers share not only their ingredients but their knowledge. Many of these relationships have developed over years. They help the kitchen understand when something is available, where it comes from and how its character changes with the season. They are not simply business arrangements. They are part of the cuisine itself.

This is why we have made this book.

The recipes in these pages are the result of many years of cooking, tasting, questioning and learning. They express Joannès's deep engagement with Cambodian ingredients and food culture. Around them are the landscapes that produce the food, the people whose knowledge sustains it, the cooks who prepare it and the guests who complete the experience.

Restaurants are always changing. Menus follow the seasons, teams develop and people move on. Knowledge that appears secure can easily be lost. We wanted to record what has been learned while the memories, relationships and experience remain close to us. But we do not want to fix that knowledge in place. Like the cuisine, it should remain alive and open to further exploration.

This book does not attempt to define Cambodian food. Cambodian cuisine belongs to families, villages, markets, street vendors, farmers and cooks throughout the country. It carries a long history, but it continues to adapt and grow. Cuisine Wat Damnak is one expression within that much larger story.

We hope these pages give proper value to Cambodia's ingredients and to the people who understand them. We hope they encourage young Cambodian chefs to trust what they know, remain curious and find their own ways to create.

Above all, we hope this book allows the ideas at the heart of Cuisine Wat Damnak to travel further: grounded in Cambodia's ingredients, strengthened by the people around them and open to everything they may yet become.

Nguon Vengchhay, July 2026



The Experience





The Restaurants

Siem Reap

On any evening in Siem Reap, Cuisine Wat Damnak brings together an unusual mix of guests. Travellers arrive having followed the restaurant's work from afar, while local diners return to discover a new menu or introduce it to friends. For some, the meal will be their first encounter with Cambodian cuisine in this form.

Today, it has the confidence of a place that has grown slowly into its identity. The service is warm and attentive, the kitchen works with the ease of long experience, and the tasting menu unfolds without unnecessary explanation or ceremony. Behind that apparent simplicity are fifteen years of experimentation, learning and refinement.

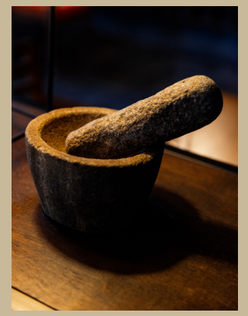
When Joannès opened Cuisine Wat Damnak in 2011, Wat Damnak was still a quiet residential neighbourhood, away from the routes followed by most visitors. The restaurant occupied a traditional wooden house with a garden and a modest dining room. It felt closely connected to the neighbourhood around it, welcoming guests into a Cambodian home rather than separating them from the city outside.

From the beginning, however, the culinary idea was ambitious. Joannès built the restaurant around seasonal tasting menus made from Cambodian ingredients. Instead of starting with imported luxury products or established European dishes, he began by exploring markets, speaking with vendors and learning from Cambodian cooks. He developed relationships with farmers, fishermen and foragers, while investigating ingredients that were common in Cambodian homes but rarely treated with the same curiosity or attention in restaurants. Freshwater fish, wild leaves, fermented products, forest mushrooms and short-season fruits became the basis of a cuisine that could only have developed here.

The availability of these ingredients determined the rhythm of the restaurant. There was no fixed menu that could be repeated throughout the year. Dishes changed as ingredients appeared and disappeared, sometimes remaining available for only a few weeks. Guests placed themselves in the hands of the kitchen and experienced a menu shaped by that particular moment in the Cambodian season.







This approach gave Cuisine Wat Damnak its identity, but the restaurant did not arrive fully formed. Techniques were refined, menus became more assured and the team learned how to deliver an ambitious experience within the intimate setting of the wooden house.

The restaurant also had to find its audience. Siem Reap's dining scene was largely shaped by the expectations of international visitors, and Cambodian food was rarely presented through a tasting menu. Cuisine Wat Damnak asked international guests to trust unfamiliar ingredients and pay closer attention to the country around them. It also challenged Cambodian diners by presenting familiar ingredients and flavours in unexpected ways.

Recognition followed, including places on the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list in 2015 and 2016. Yet this success did not draw the restaurant away from its original purpose. Joannès continued to build the menus around Cambodian produce, guided by the seasons and by an enduring curiosity about the country's food culture.

Over time, the restaurant's knowledge deepened. Suppliers came to understand the quality, size and stage of ripeness the kitchen required. Long-serving staff developed an instinctive understanding of the food and the standards expected during service. Each new menu added to a body of experience shared across the kitchen, dining room and wider network surrounding the restaurant.

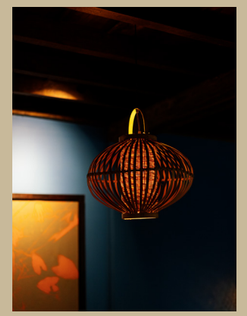
When Chhay joined as a partner in 2019, he entered a restaurant with an established culinary identity and an experienced team. He saw that the philosophy Joannès had spent years developing could reach further, supported by stronger systems, more confident service and greater opportunities for staff to take responsibility. Plans were made to extend the restaurant's capacity and allow the experience around the food to continue maturing.

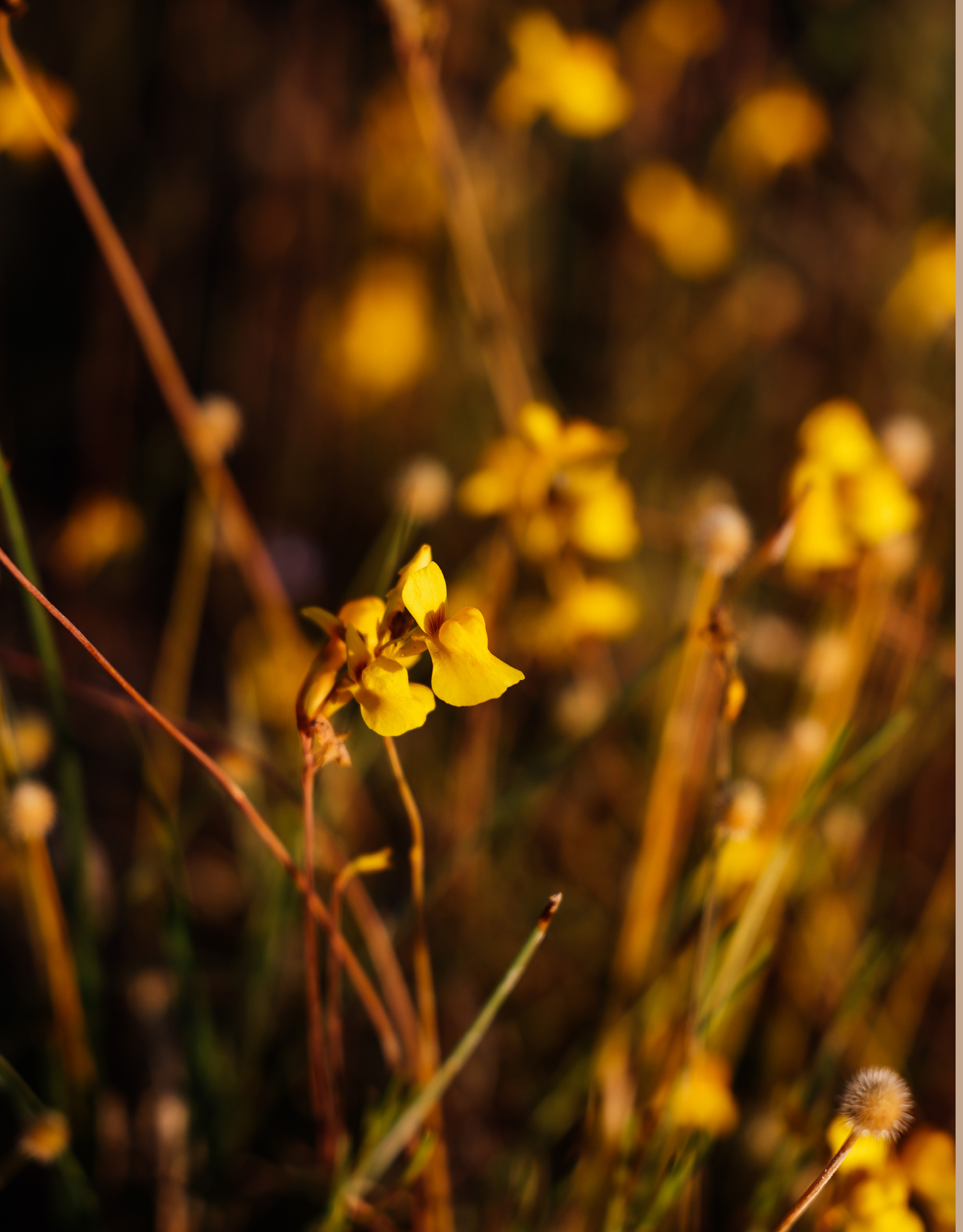
That development was interrupted by Covid. The Siem Reap restaurant closed as international travel stopped, and Cuisine Wat Damnak continued its work in Phnom Penh. When the original restaurant reopened in 2023, it returned with much of its character intact, but also with a clearer understanding of what it had become.

The plans made before the closure could now be completed. Additional space gave the team greater freedom and allowed more guests to experience the restaurant, but the purpose was never simply to become larger. It was to support a philosophy that had already matured, and to offer a level of service equal to the confidence and refinement of the cuisine.

That evolution is now felt throughout the restaurant. Joannès remains its culinary force, continuing to question, explore and respond to Cambodia's seasons. Chhay has helped create the conditions in which that work can flourish, strengthening the service and giving the team greater confidence and responsibility. Around them, experienced staff carry forward knowledge accumulated through years of practice.

Cuisine Wat Damnak is no longer the restaurant that opened in 2011, but neither has it left those beginnings behind. Its humility remains part of its character, evident in the ingredients it values, the warmth of its welcome and its connection to the neighbourhood around it.





The Recipes

Hot & Dry

Mid March to Mid June

The hot and dry season is a season of concentration. The rivers are low, fruits become sweeter, herbs more aromatic and fermented ingredients continue to mature. It is also the season of “black” fish, species that thrive in muddy water and develop strong flavours that reward careful cooking.

Khmer New Year falls at the height of this season, a celebration of renewal before the monsoon transforms the landscape. The markets are full of ingredients that will soon disappear. Mangoes, malabar plums and santol reach their peak, while bamboo shoots, water hyacinth and young leaves signal the final weeks before the rains.

At Cuisine Wat Damnak, this is where our culinary year begins. Every menu starts with what the season gives us, embracing both its abundance and its limits. We never wait for ingredients that are out of season, and we never try to force the menu to stay the same. A few weeks later, the first rains will refill the rivers, awaken the fields and reshape the menu. Until then, we celebrate the concentrated flavours of Cambodia’s hot and dry season.

Rice Wine-Cured Spanish Mackerel | Santol Fruits | Cosmos Sprouts | Long Pepper Pearls | Santol Jam

Prawn and Ansom Cake | Basil | Caramelised Palm Sugar | Minced Pork | Tamariand Dressing

Candied Pomelo Rind-Cured Free-Range Chicken Breast | Waterlily Stems | Pomelo, Deep-Fried Shallots | Lemon Basil

Maam And Pork Belly Grilled in a Galangal Leaf | Rice Paddy Herb | Fresh Green Peppercorn | Herbs | Flowers | Local Crudités

Beef Cheek Sour Soup with Oxtail Broth | Shiny Cresson | Charred Green Papaya | Bilimbi | Long Parsley | Chinese Celery

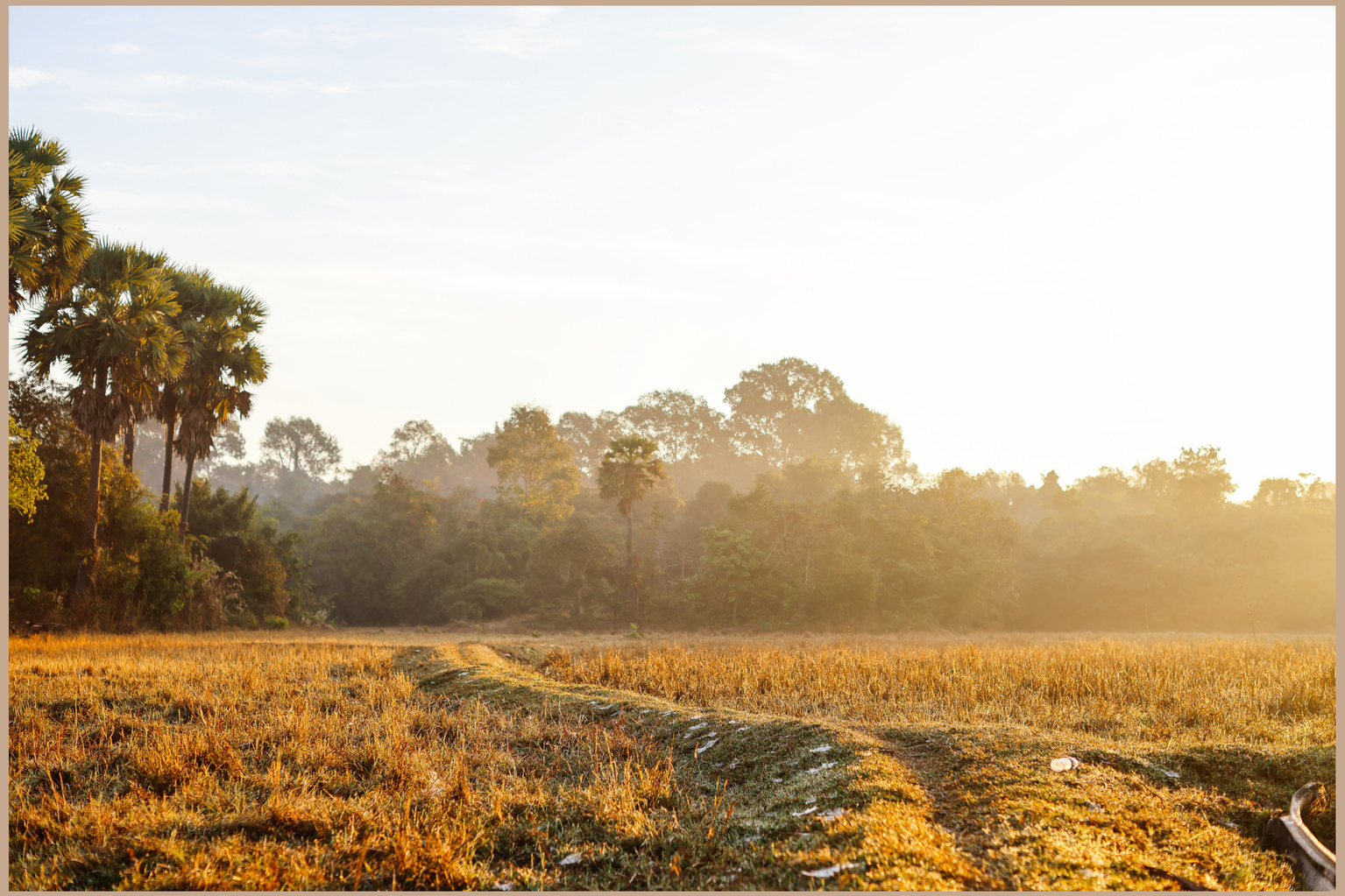
Chhlang Fish Fillet Sour Jungle Curry | Cambodian Green Giant Eggplant | Garcinia Leaves | Holy Basil, | Spicy Pounded Wild Eggplants

Malabar Plum Panna Cotta and Chocolate Light Ganache | Cocoa Meringue| Salted Peanut Crumble

Cuisine Wat Damnak Ripe and Green Mango Tart | Cambodian Vanilla Sour Cream

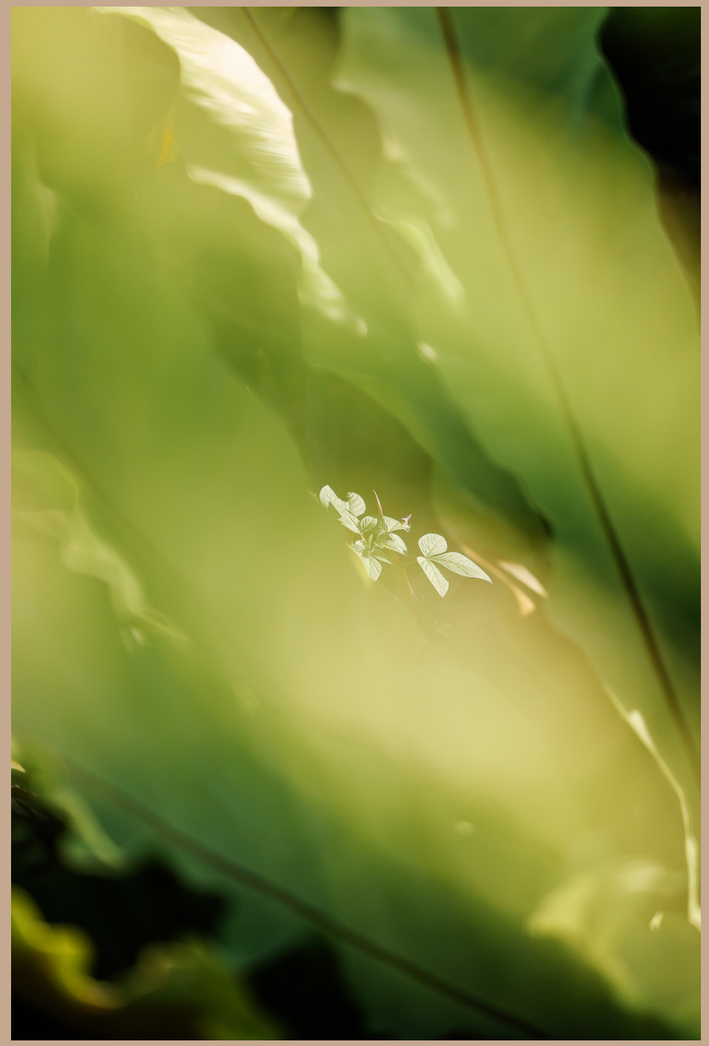








Rice Wine-Cured Spanish Mackerel | Santol Fruit | Cosmos Sprouts | Long Pepper Pearls | Santol Jam



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For a long time, I did not cook with saltwater fish at Cuisine Wat Damnak in Siem Reap. The coast is far away, and Cambodian diners generally prefer freshwater fish. That changed when we opened in Phnom Penh. Today, we ship seafood ourselves to ensure its quality, and it has become a regular ingredient in Siem Reap, particularly when large fish from the Tonle Sap become scarce.

Santol fruit remained mysterious to me for many years. I had a tree in my garden, but it was not a cultivated variety and its fruit was always dry and pasty. It truly deserved the name 'cotton fruit'. I ignored santol until someone persuaded me to try a good cultivated variety. It was a revelation. When the season arrives in April, I always find a place for it on the menu.

Ingredient Notes

Cosmos sprouts Cosmos sulphureus / Khmer name
Cosmos sprouts are a popular Cambodian crudité with a strong, distinctive flavour. If they are unavailable, use another small green leaf, such as mâche or arugula.

Long pepper pearls Piper longum / Khmer name
Large green eggplants with dense, meaty flesh. If unavailable, substitute round green eggplants or small purple Asian eggplants.

Santol fruit Sandoricum koetjape / Khmer name
Native to Southeast Asia, santol has no widely established English name. It is eaten fresh in Cambodia with salt and chilli. Green mango makes a useful substitute.

For the cured Spanish mackerel (makes about 800 g)

2 pieces Spanish mackerel fillet, without skin, 500 g each

50 g salt

50 g white sugar

20 ml strong rice wine, known in Cambodia as the "head" at around about 40% alcohol. Good vodka is an alternative.

30 g galangal, peeled

1 tbsp whole black peppercorns

For the santol jam

1 large santol fruit

1 tbsp white sugar

½ tsp of salt

For the salad

12 slices cured Spanish mackerel, 5 mm thick

1 large santol fruit

1 tbsp crushed toasted rice

12 mint leaves

2 tbsp salad dressing

12 cosmos sprouts

A large pinch of long pepper pearls

Prepared santol jam

Lemon basil oil (see Kitchen Fundamentals, p. XX)

To prepare the broth

Pound the black peppercorns and galangal separately. Combine them with the salt and sugar.

Line a tray with a large sheet of cling film. Sprinkle over one-quarter of the seasoning, then lay the first piece of fish on top, skin-side down. Cover with half the seasoning and add the second piece of fish, skin-side up. Cover with the final quarter of seasoning. Lift the edges of the film, pour in the rice wine and wrap the fish tightly. Add a second layer of cling film.

Refrigerate the wrapped fish on a tray under a light weight, such as a packet of butter. After 12 hours, drain away the liquid, turn the fish and replace the weight. Turn it again after another 12 hours, then repeat once more.

After 48 hours, unwrap the fish, scrape away the remaining seasoning and pat dry with kitchen paper. Cut each fillet in half, wrap securely and refrigerate. The cured fish may also be frozen.

To prepare the spicy pounded wild eggplant

Peel the santol and remove the seeds. Keep the flesh in water to limit oxidation.

Combine the santol, salt, sugar and a small amount of water in a saucepan. Cover and simmer gently until the fruit becomes dry
and tender.

Blend until smooth, then refrigerate until needed.

To finish

Finely slice the mint.

At the last moment, peel and deseed the santol, then cut the flesh into a fine julienne. Work quickly to prevent discolouration. You should have about 4 tbsp.

Immediately combine the santol with the fish, mint, toasted rice and dressing. Arrange on one side of each plate and top with the cosmos sprouts. Drizzle with lemon basil oil.

Add a quenelle of santol jam and sprinkle with the long pepper pearls.





Chhlang Fish Sour Jungle Curry | Cambodian Green Giant Eggplant | Garcinia Leaves | Holy Basil | Spicy Pounded Wild Eggplant

Chhlang Fish Sour Jungle Curry | Cambodian Green Giant Eggplant | Garcinia Leaves | Holy Basil | Spicy Pounded Wild Eggplant

This is one of my favourite Cambodian curries. It is spicy, sour and generously seasoned, with the unmistakable flavour of charred galangal and lemongrass. Traditionally, it is a clever way to cook strongly flavoured meat, especially game. It is equally good with dark freshwater fish, particularly during the hot and dry season, when low water levels can give the fish a muddy taste.

The word “jungle” gives this dish a very particular image. In fact, the Khmer word it is translated from, prey, does not necessarily mean the jungle or forest. It refers more broadly to what is not cultivated or managed by people. In other words, this dish celebrates ingredients that belong outside the garden. Some are truly wild, like garcinia leaves. Others, such as holy basil and wild eggplants, simply grow spontaneously.

I distinctly remember seeing the name Cambodian giant eggplant as a child in a French seed catalogue from the 1980s belonging to my father. At that time, I would never have imagined that one day I would be living in Cambodia. Now I know them by their Khmer name, trop tkim, a reference to their round, potato-like shape. They are the firmest, meatiest and most flavourful eggplants I have ever cooked with.

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For the broth

½ tbsp prahok
1 tbsp lard or cooking oil
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 hot red chilli, halved
3 combava leaves
500 ml clear chicken stock
150 g fish bones
50 g black curry paste (see Kitchen Fundamentals, p. XX)
2 dried shiitake mushrooms (optional)
½ tbsp palm sugar powder
1 tsp salt

For the spicy pounded wild eggplant

2 tbsp lard or cooking oil
100 g wild eggplant
100 g long eggplant, roughly chopped
3 garlic cloves
1 large shallot, cut into pieces
½ hot red chilli
5 combava leaves, centre ribs removed
½ tbsp Kampot fish sauce
1 tbsp tamarind juice
½ tbsp palm sugar powder

For the curry

1 large chhlang fish, filleted and cut into 4 portions
2 Cambodian green giant eggplants
1 tbsp black curry paste (see Kitchen Fundamentals, p. XX)
1 small bunch garcinia leaves, about 5 stems
1 small bunch holy basil, about 8 stems
1 small bunch water celery, about 5 stems
3 ‘Korean style’ long red chillies, thinly sliced

For the black curry paste

See page XX

For the cured Spanish mackerel (makes about 800 g)

Pan-fry the fish bones in a non-stick pan over a medium heat with a little lard or cooking oil until golden and quite dry. Set aside.

In a saucepan, combine the prahok, lard and 3 tbsp of water. Fry over a medium heat until the prahok becomes fragrant and just starts to catch on the bottom of the pan.

Add the garlic, chilli and combava leaves. Cook for another minute.

Add the fish bones, chicken stock, black curry paste, dried shiitake mushrooms, palm sugar and salt. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a gentle simmer for 20 minutes.

Cover and leave to infuse for 30 minutes. Strain the broth and taste it. At this stage it should be slightly over-salted and a little too sweet. It will balance later once the garcinia leaves are added.

For the santol jam

If you cannot find wild eggplants, simply double the quantity of long eggplants.

Place the lard, both eggplants and all the spices in a wide frying pan. Cook over a low heat until lightly charred and fragrant.

Transfer to a mortar and pound into a coarse paste. Alternatively, use a food processor, but pulse gently. The paste should remain slightly rough.

Season with fish sauce, palm sugar and tamarind paste. It should be balanced, sweet, salty and tangy. Adjust the sugar and tamarind if necessary. If it needs more saltiness, add salt rather than more fish sauce, otherwise the flavour will become overpowering.

For the salad

Fillet the chhlang fish and cut into four portions.

Peel the Cambodian giant eggplants and steam until tender. Test them with a toothpick, just as you would a potato. Once cooked, leave to cool before cutting into generous bite-sized pieces.

Pick the holy basil leaves. You may deep-fry a few for garnish if you wish, although they do not add much to the dish.

Reserve a few water celery tips for garnish. Slice the remaining stems into 1 cm lengths.

Pick the garcinia leaves, reserving four young leaves for garnish. Remove the central rib from the rest and chop them finely by hand or in a food processor. They will not become a paste, only small flakes. You should have at least one generous tbsp.

Slice the long Korean red chilli and rinse it two or three times to remove as many seeds as possible.

To finish

Combine the eggplant, broth, black curry paste, sliced chilli and one tbsp of chopped garcinia leaves in a saucepan. Bring slowly to the boil and simmer gently for 5 minutes.

Taste and adjust the seasoning. If the curry needs more acidity, add more garcinia leaves. Balance with a little more salt or palm sugar if necessary.

Season the fish with salt and pepper. Pan-fry in lard or oil until just cooked.

Roughly slice the holy basil and stir it into the curry together with the water celery. Simmer for one final minute, just long enough to wilt the herbs and perfume the broth.

Spoon the curry into serving bowls and top with the fish. Finish with a generous quenelle of the spicy pounded eggplant. Garnish with the reserved young garcinia leaves, water celery tips and, if using, the fried holy basil.