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To Eat



BY THE MEKONG
Khantaly Misaphon, above, with the coconut and chicken soup she serves at her restaurant, Pak Houay Mixay. Left, grilled fish are basted at the night market in Luang Prabang.



In Laos

By AMANDA HESSER

FROM my seat at an outdoor table at the Café Ban Vat Sene I had a privileged view of the afternoon's civic unrest. The traffic on the main street of Luang Prabang, Laos's third-largest city (population 16,000 at its core), had come to a halt. Poised nose to nose in the avenue were a large dog and a bellicose lizard. Children gathered to watch. I clutched a glass of Lao beer as the dog growled and

lunged and the lizard leapt at the dog's snout. When the dog finally began to get the upper hand, the lizard wisely high-tailed it into a bush. The traffic resumed its customary slow pace and I resumed drinking my beer, which, like most food and drink in this town, tasted mighty fine.

Laotian food hasn't yet made it onto the world stage, and that may be because most people treat lush and tiny Laos like Luxembourg and Andorra — countries too small, too obscure, to bother with. Until I visited, the most elaborate description I had been given of the cul-

sine was that it was "like Vietnamese but with better sausage."

By now, the country is used to being slighted. When Alix de Fautereau, a French artist, was commissioned to paint murals in the royal palace in 1930, she painted the eyes of the Lao people blue (mostly they are brown). And even though the Pathet Lao, a violent regime, overthrew the monarchy in 1975, it barely registered with the rest of the world (it's hard to get your fair share of ink when you live next door to Pol Pot).

The city of Luang Prabang was once known through-

out Laos for its exceptional food because the royal family, who had the best cooks, resided there. After the Pathet Lao sent several members of the royal family to re-education camps (where it is presumed they died), people went back to cooking more simply, and the composed cuisine of the monarchy went into hibernation.

But lately Laos has made remarkable culinary strides, and in Luang Prabang, at least, much of the turnaround can be credited to Yannick Upravan and

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