



RIVERS RUN NEARBY Grilled fish and chicken at the night market in Luang Prabang, Laos. Top, papaya salad amid the vegetables at a market there.

To Eat In Laos: A Cuisine Uncovered



Photographs by Paula Brinkman/Corbis Images for The New York Times

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Gilles Vautrin, two business partners, Mr. Upravan, whose family fled to France in 1980, and his French partner, Mr. Vautrin, have opened three exceptional restaurants and a cafe within several hundred yards of each other. Their latest, 3 Nagas, is devoted to traditional Laotian cooking, where it is served in an open-air room with a floor the color of ox blood. If 3 Nagas were transported to New York, the lines would stretch out the door.

The night my husband, Tad, and I first dined there, it was the off-season and the restaurant was nearly empty. Soon we were eating kaipen — a rustic cousin of nori made from riverweeds that are cut into spongy squares and fried — spread with a roasted chili, garlic and buffalo-skin paste called jaew bong. For about three seconds, the paste was sweet and pungent, and then fire blazed through my mouth. We drank khao kam — a fizzy and delicate pink rice wine served in a stemmed glass with a slice of lime. This was followed by water buffalo stew, thickened with crushed eggplant and flavored with galangal, a spicy forest vine called sakhan, and tiny astringent eggplants the size of marbles; minced fish and banana leaf salad; pork sausage flush with lemon grass; and a dish of fried eggplant and minced pork.

Nothing we tasted reminded us of Thailand or of Vietnam. Every flavor vindicated the distance we had traveled; every sip of that rice wine told us we were in Laos. The restaurant 3 Nagas stands out not merely in Luang Prabang but in all of Southeast Asia, a region filled with sophisticated restaurants designed for Western tourists. Most of those places, like the Metropole in Hanoi and the Oriental in Bangkok, conform to Western tastes, toning down the heat in dishes — defanging them — and adding reassuring props like salads and fried rice.

At 3 Nagas, you get Western comforts — white tablecloths, professional service — but almost no Western concessions on the

menu. "The idea we have is we don't want to adapt," said Mr. Vautrin, 49, a tall and reserved man who rides his bicycle everywhere. Mr. Upravan added: "If they don't like it, it doesn't matter. They just have to try."

Traditional Laotian cooking involves a lot of game, wild boar and river fish, as well as the occasional bug and water monitor. Because Laos, which is wedged between Thailand and Vietnam, is landlocked, there are no ocean fish.

"If you give a Lao a fish from the ocean, they won't like it," Mr. Upravan said. "They'll say it doesn't smell of the earth."

Luang Prabang, which is in the north, is surrounded on three sides by river — the Mekong and Nam Khan rim the town, merging at the southern tip of the city before gliding on toward Vientiane in the south. River fish are on every menu.

Mr. Upravan, 35, a fit man who looks as if he belongs at an art gallery in SoHo, was born in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and lived there until he was 11 and his family escaped to France. He later graduated from Ecole Hôtelière de Thonon, the famous hotel school in southeast France, then worked for Télé-Restaurant, a large catering company in Geneva. On a visit he made to Luang Prabang in 1994, his grandmother asked him to come back and open a business in a building she owned.

Seeing that tourism was on the rise, he decided to open a guesthouse and asked Mr. Vautrin to be his business partner. As they renovated the place, they realized it was not large enough to be a guesthouse — but that it was perfectly suited for a restaurant.

And since they had been taking their meals at local restaurants, they saw that there was an empty niche in high-end dining. In 1999, they opened L'Éléphant, an open-air affair with twirling fans and rattan chairs straight out of "Casablanca." A great success, the restaurant serves pared-down and elegant food, blending French and Laotian cooking in such specialties as Mekong fish stew, river fish in a delicate mustard

and butter sauce.

Next, they opened the Cafe Ban Vat Sene, French Colonial down to the wicker chairs and croissants served with banana and pineapple jam.

the former king who is now 79, spends her days chewing betel and helping her son and daughter run a sausage company.

The success of L'Éléphant have stirred a culinary renaissance; there are now a number of boutique hotels that contain sophisticated restaurants.

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"In French, we say don't cannibalize, don't eat your own business," Mr. Vautrin said. So they gave Mango Tree an interpretive menu with dishes like sticky rice risotto, wild boar pite and kaipen pasta.

Mr. Upravan gets his cooking tips from his aunt, who lives next to L'Éléphant. "All day I can hear her," he said. "At 5 in the morning she is making steamed rice; at 9, I smell the chilies. She cooks all day." He brings her cake and she shares her secrets. There are still a number of other good cooks in town. Thongdy Pongsack, a chef of

These new restaurants have effectively resurrected the local cooking, which had been threatened by influences from Thailand and China, and oddly enough, by the country's increasing prosperity.

"Luang Prabang was preserved because there was no money to change," Mr. Upravan said. "People didn't have money to fix a door, so the door stayed the same." The city was named a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1995, so many of the doors will remain unchanged. But when the money from tourists did start coming in the late 1990's, Luang Prabang began struggling with the same issues of cultural integrity that many Southeast Asian cities now face. The new capitalism has brought with it silk shops and Internet cafes, in which you will find tourists and monks side by side, tapping away at the computers.

JoMa, an American-style coffee shop, recently opened, serving up lattes and coconut bars. The delicious ice creams at L'Éléphant and the Apsara, another boutique hotel with a good restaurant, come from Paradise, a company in Vientiane owned by a French immigrant.

Traditionally, Laos does have better sausage than Vietnam — everything from blood sausage to slender pork links to water buffalo patties flavored with kaffir lime leaf. Laotians also eat pbo, only it often contains more greens than its Vietnamese counterpart. Some of the most traditional foods found in Luang Prabang are bamboo salad; edible leaves filled with eggplant, rice noodles, lemon grass, ginger and coriander;

deep-fried eggs stuffed with pork; fish and meat salads called laap; sun-dried buffalo; and pork belly cured with vinegar and garlic and grilled on sticks.

Laos, like its neighbors, depends on rice as a staple. But Laotians eat sticky rice, which they crush into a ball with their fingers and use like a sponge to soak up sauces, instead of using chopsticks. They also eat a great deal of vegetables and herbs, with a preference for bitter, herbal and astringent flavors, the telltale characteristics of Laotian cooking. Mr. Upravan uses this as his authenticity test. "Everywhere I go I order fried vegetables with meat, and if it's sweet, I know it's not local," he said.

By catering to tourists, Mr. Upravan and Mr. Vautrin have carved out a fine living for themselves. But they struggle with what they've wrought. One evening, Mr. Upravan took me to the night market in town to show me some of the local foods. We were more than halfway through when Mr. Upravan stopped and pointed to a grilled banana leaf packet. "Look, this is knap," he said. Stuffed with fish and herbs, the packet is much like cooking en papillote, in which you preserve all the perfumes of the food inside the packet, and is a typical Laotian preparation. "All these stalls," Mr. Upravan added, "and this is the first knap we see. This is why I'm afraid for Lao food. If it's like this in 10 years, maybe you will find sushi and miso soup in town."

My husband and I later returned to the market and took the advice of Tim Kelley, who documented his own gastronomic tour of Laos on his Web log, runawaychef.com. As Mr. Kelley suggested at his site, we bought a plastic plate for 30 cents from one of the food vendors at the bottom of the hill and made our way to the top, where the best Laotian food is. We piled the plate with grilled sour pork, papaya salad and whatever else we could fit, and ate the food while sitting on the sidewalk.

The pork was succulent, its fat so rich you had to peel it from the wooden skewers. A local guide had told me earlier, "We say the way to keep your husband at home is by the taste of your tongue." I can't imagine there are too many husbands wandering off in Luang Prabang. Mine was busy devouring our dinner, and wasn't going anywhere.



LUNCH IN A LEAF

Leaves and rice paper are filled with eggplant, rice noodles, lemon grass, ginger and coriander at a market in Luang Prabang. Center above, JoMa is an American-style coffee bar.