

## FOOD &amp; DRINK

# Rendering Cambodia on the Plate

Born in France but Working in Siem Reap, Joannès Rivière Stays True to His Adopted Home

## [ Dish ]

By ROBYN ECKHARDT

Consider Joannès Rivière's Sanday fish dish as his version of Cambodia on a plate.

Though it appears borne out of a contemporary European kitchen, the French-born 32-year-old chef insists it's pure Cambodian, featuring fish from the Tonle Sap, the country's main waterway, and eggplant cooked in a traditional palm-sugar *khaw* braise.

Born in Roanne to a restaurateur and farmer who supplied fresh vegetables to Michelin-starred La Maison Troisgros, Mr. Rivière studied cooking in France and worked with pastry in the United States for three years before moving to Siem Reap in 2003 to teach cooking to underprivileged Cambodian youth.

In 2005, he became executive chef at Siem Reap's luxe Hotel de la Paix, a post he left in 2010 to open Cuisine Wat Damnak, an upscale restaurant with a relaxed vibe in a converted bungalow.

There, Mr. Rivière uses "98% local ingredients," offering two tasting menus that change weekly and cocktails with a regional flair, like his kaffir lime and lemon basil mojito.

He says his food is true to his adopted home. The locals agree. "They tell me that the taste is very Cambodian. I'm quite proud of that," he says.

Mr. Rivière tells us how his dish comes together:

**Sanday, the catfish:** Siem Reap is far inland, so its cooks rely on freshwater fish. The mild Sanday is a variety of catfish, but Mr. Rivière leaves this off the menu because catfish "are often associated with mud." For this dish, he uses a rectangular skin-on fillet, which he seasons with Cambodian black pepper and sears in lard, a common cooking fat.

**Tiger eggplant:** Nicknamed *trop tkim* (which means "molar eggplant," referring to the vegetable's square shape), the tiger eggplant is a Cambodian breed related to the long purple eggplants commonly found in the region. Mr. Rivière first prepares the vegetable by boiling it whole to render a velvety texture.

**Local braise:** *Khaw* is a method of braising fish, meat or vegetables in caramelized palm sugar, which is made of sap collected from the Palmyra palm tree. Mr. Rivière heats the sugar along with garlic until it turns from light brown to a dark mahogany color. After taking the resulting syrup off the stove he adds water, fish sauce and a pinch of black pepper. The eggplant then gets a 10-minute braise in the salty-sweet caramel-like liquid.

**Final touches:** Ready to serve, Mr. Rivière pools the braising liquid at the bottom of a shallow bowl, places a slice of eggplant in its center, and balances the fish on top. He garnishes the dish with Thai basil, chopped scallion, "really



Clockwise from left: the Sanday fish; Joannès Rivière; one of the restaurant's cocktails; the interior; vendors at a local market where Mr. Rivière buys ingredients; garlic waits to be added to the dish.



sour" shredded green mango and fried garlic. Unlike Thai cooks, "Cambodians don't balance flavors within the dish but by what they eat with it," he says. Whereas a local would follow a spoonful of sweet *khaw* fish or eggplant with a bite of green mango, the elements of Mr. Rivière's creation are meant to be eaten together. Sweet, sour and salty, with crunchy fruit play-

ing off silky eggplant, it's a heady mix of flavor and texture.

**Price:** The five-course degustation menu goes for US\$17; six-courses is priced at \$24.

*Cuisine Wat Damnak, between Psa Dey Hoy market and Angkor High School, Wat Damnak; Tel. +855 77 347 762; cuisinewatdamnak.com*

