



The signature duck curry at Paste Laos.

Royal Revival

Famous for dishing up award-winning Thai cuisine, the chef at the helm of Michelin-starred Paste Bangkok has ventured to the other side of the Mekong, offering reimagined takes on the traditional royal cuisine of her Lao heritage.

Claire Boobbyer finds past meets present on the menu at this elegant new outpost in Luang Prabang.

THOSE IN THE KNOW have always talked up Lao food for its marriage of balanced flavors—more savory than sweet, intense use of fragrant herbs, and unusual tastes such as moreish buffalo-skin paste and sundried river algae. Internationally, however, it simmers under the radar. Search for Lao cuisine on Amazon, say, and *Hawker Fare*, the book by Michelin two-starred Lao-American chef James Syhabout appears, but little else. Lower down the >>

COURTESY OF PASTE LAOS

FROM TOP: The Yum Yai salad, featuring pork belly, dried squid, crab, riverweed, and egg floss, was inspired by a Phia Sing recipe; Chef Bongkoch "Bee" Satongun; the restaurant's polished interior.



Despite her Lao heritage—her father is Hmong, her mother, from the Lao Wiang ethnic group—Bee had never set foot in Laos before this venture. Her great-grandparents had moved to Thailand fleeing tribal warfare, her parents had never been back, and she'd not considered a trip until Ivan invited her. "Lao food is still unknown," Bee says, "and many haven't heard of Phia Sing. We've updated his recipes for the modern palate keeping 80 percent of the original idea and ingredients."

Within the upscale, white-tablecloth Paste Laos dining room in the riverside Apsara Hotel, an exotic wallpaper adorned with mythical plumed birds and flowering trees looks over diners. Foodies familiar with traditional Lao cuisine must absorb the backstory to understand what underpins the restaurant's dishes. Diners may expect certain flavors or aesthetics, but Paste Laos introduces unexpected nuanced twists on common plates.

Take the conventional Luang Prabang salad, made of lettuce, tomato, cucumber, watercress, peanuts and hardboiled egg with a sweet-sour dressing featuring fish sauce. Here, the salad is significantly tweaked and textured with quail eggs, crunchy greens, lightly tart curry sauce and silken salmon roe. The sour river-fish soup is exquisite: wafer-thin slips of tender tilapia float in a soup packed with herbs and flavored with fermented Lao fish sauce (*pa dek*), and decorated with a pretty and peppery young tamarind leaf.

Bee reinterprets Sing's Lao duck curry by slow-cooking the succulent duck with young coconut, curry paste and shards of taro, adding dill, Chinese cabbage flower and pink hummingbird flower petals on top. The original curry paste and powder were short on ingredients. Bee adds garlic, lemongrass, galangal, fennel and nutmeg to the original recipe's dried chili and shallot for greater depth of flavor, plus fresh tomato puree (something Sing included in a second duck curry recipe marked "French-style"). Sing's recipe was most likely heavy with its featured 10 potatoes, but Bee swaps the tuber for taro, a different texture and a lighter, sweeter note.

Bee credits meticulous ingredient research—the perfectly aged coconut for cream; using Lao galangal and Lao sugar, both more intense in flavor than Thai versions; foraging for fragrant herbs and flowers—as the strength of her new culinary adventure. Laos is gifted with an abundant natural larder, and, like Sing before her, Bee is carrying on an ancient tradition—both of which couldn't be more of the moment in the food world. pastelaos.com; mains from LAK187,000; set menus from LAK385,000, two-person minimum. ☺

ranks, a title with a monotone jacket is listed. Unlike contemporary cookbooks with graphic covers so alluring they're good enough to eat, it's this, the unassuming *Traditional Recipes of Laos* by Phia Sing, that's behind the opening of Luang Prabang's new Paste Laos, the country's first restaurant with Michelin-starred chefs in the kitchen. Bongkoch "Bee" Satongun and her Australian chef husband Jason Bailey's Paste Bangkok has held a star since the Michelin Guide launched in Thailand in 2017; and Bee was voted Asia's Best Female Chef in 2018. It was time for a new challenge.

First published in 1981, *Traditional Recipes of Laos* features handwritten recipes by Sing, who was the former chef and master of ceremonies at the Royal Palace. When communist forces entered Vientiane in 1975, the British ambassador to Laos, Alan Davidson, photocopied the royal recipes, loaned to him by Crown Prince Vong Savang, and promised Sing's widow, then still living in Luang Prabang, he would publish a book.

Fast-forward two generations and enter British hotelier Ivan Scholte, who was so impressed with Paste Bangkok's Thai heritage and aristocratic-influenced menu he invited its chefs to take over the restaurant at his Apsara Hotel in Luang Prabang. After research and conversations with Ivan, Jason turfed up Sing's cookbook, which inspired Bee to continue Sing's culinary legacy, reimagining his traditional recipes for contemporary tastes.



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