

SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Pork, lemongrass – and the Laos factor

Fragrant, fiery food is the secret ingredient of this landlocked Asian country, says *Claire Boobbyer*



Luang Prabang, on a finger of land between the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

It was a bloodless strike. My knife drew down the stiff flesh. Again, I dug four long, precise slices through the body. This was no murder on the Mekong but “Operation Lemongrass”, a skilled manoeuvre to slice the aromatic stalk, expand its stretched sinews and stuff them with minced pork packed with herbs.

I’d enrolled at the Tamarind Cooking School in Luang Prabang, Laos, where, as well as fragrant pork-stuffed lemongrass, I prepared punchy buffalo-meat salad, spice-seasoned fish steamed in banana leaf, and tongue-tingling aubergine dip laced with Laos’s famous fermented fish sauce. Teacher Mr Sit was very patient as I plunged knives into his log piles of lemongrass while crafting *oua si khai*.

The dish of that name is so unknown to the rest of the world that the Slow Food Foundation in Turin assumed a printing error, correcting presentation notes (by the first and only Lao member of the group) from “pork-stuffed lemongrass” to “lemongrass-stuffed pork”.





Food at a noodle stand in the city

Credit: Getty Images/Aurora Open

Lao food, like the country itself, has struggled to define its identity. Slotted between Thailand and Vietnam, with the chocolatey Mekong river running along its length, Laos is rarely pushed in the holiday brochures – its cuisine even less so. In all of London, there is only one Lao restaurant – Lao Café, in Covent Garden.

Diners expect the sweet-sour taste combination that is found across south-east Asia, and confuse it with Thai. But Lao food, accompanied by sticky rice, is fragrant and fiery. It is much spicier than Thai, uses far more aromatic herbs, more bitter tastes, very little sugar, and is underpinned by intense umami flavours.

In autumn 2018, Bongkoch “Bee” Satongun, the chef at Michelin-star Paste Bangkok, opened Paste Laos in the sleepy mountain city of Luang Prabang. Then Gordon Ramsay went trekking in search of Lao ant eggs for the National Geographic series *Uncharted*. So when I heard about tour operator InsideAsia’s new Laos food journey, it was time to tuck in while exploring the sights of this landlocked country where the aura of the banished royal family lingers, and Buddhist beliefs and rituals dictate daily routine.

I started my culinary journey in the capital, Vientiane, which in contrast to high-rise Bangkok, is low-slung and stuffed with patisserie shops and hip cafés staffed by aproned baristas. Saffron-robed monks walk along its pavements, shaded by mahogany trees. The Siamese ransacked the “City of Sandalwood” in 1827 but left the scarlet-and-gold-tinged Sisaket Temple intact. Its stencilled stucco pillars shelter an ethereal collection of 10,000 centuries-old Buddhas in golden teak and bronze. Some display the “mudra” posture of calling for rain, unique to Laos.

Lao eat sticky rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner, so rain is vital for the staple dish of the country’s six million souls. And rice is so fundamental to Lao identity that locals call themselves “children of sticky rice”. Neighbours don’t greet each other with “Hi, how are you?” but with “Sabaidee, have you eaten yet?”



I hadn't when I sat down at Doi Ka Noi restaurant with Yorkshireman Mick Shippen and his wife, Noi Kaewduangdy. Doi Ka Noi is something of a secret among aficionados of Lao cuisine.

As her spread is crammed on to our table, Noi – the only Lao member of Slow Food – tells me how she uses no monosodium glutamate and doesn't cook food aimed at "farang [Western] taste buds". I dig my fingers into sticky rice, traditionally stuffed into a thip khao woven basket, knead a bite-sized ball and clasp it between the tips of my fingers.

Just as Lao do, I pick up fish salad dunked in jeow (spicy dipping sauces) and marinated in padaek, the country's fish sauce. Relishing the umami punch, I can't stop dipping. Noi's oua si khai, marrying pork, garlic, herbs, lemongrass and kaffir lime leaf flavours, is so delicious that I want more.

As I devour her light, herby dishes, Noi explains: "Lao food is fresh, very herbaceous, and uses lots of veg and grilled food. It is earthy and smoky, underrated and undiscovered."

Mick's spicy homemade ginger ice cream cooled my mouth, but I passed on a coffee scoop due to the late hour.

The French did very little in their smallest colony in Indo-China. The opium trade fuelled a dissolute life. However, those dispatched south – far from the northern poppy fields – cultivated coffee. The French legacy lives on in the boutique coffee roasters and the numerous cafés in Vientiane, rivalling Shoreditch for hipsters, sunglasses, wearable tech and coffee-perfumed air.

Under the parasols of Le Trio Coffee, I sipped their espresso, a blend of nutty robusta and sharp arabica beans. I swore I could taste the volcanic earth that nurtured those beans. I refused a second cup as I was flying south – direct to the plantations.

The Bolaven Plateau is a pancake-shaped cooled lava swelling, 4,000ft above the rest of Laos's mainly limestone bedrock, with thundering waterfalls, coffee, tea and strawberry farms. Mr Khamson, of Mystic Mountain Homestay, emerges from between the shiny leaves of his coffee bushes to greet me. Before my crack class in coffee roasting, we lunch on baguette (another French legacy), eggs, avocado, hyperlocal pale-gold acacia honey and a thimble of rice whiskey from the neighbours, so powerful it rearranged my rib cage.



Tamarind Cooking School
Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

While Mr Khamson's hard-working roaster – a jerry-rigged petrol cylinder, bicycle chain and kitchen stove – heats the beans, he corrects an assumption: “The dark roast the Italians like has less caffeine in it. A medium roast has more caffeine but is less strong in flavour. Not many people know that and they make a mistake.”

Mr Khamson prefers his medium, he says, as we're enveloped in a coffee sauna when the roaster billows smoke and beans pop. He wants to make me his favourite espresso but the wild

country electricity supply decides to bow out, so he packs me off with beans to grind at home. Spiritual enlightenment, not caffeine, fuelled the ancient Khmer who built one of south-east Asia's most enchanting temples, west of Mystic Mountain. The Unesco-protected ruins of Wat Phou are scattered around the face of a holy mountain crowned with a linga-shaped peak, symbolising the Hindu god Shiva.

The wonky main steps, decorated with white frangipani blossom, carry me up the mountain – mimicking a spiritual journey – taking me closer to the central sanctuary, a gorgeous riot of chiselled decoration, carved apsara, foliage and jumbled stone – totally crowd-free, unlike Angkor Wat in neighbouring Cambodia. Inside the inner chamber, huge Buddha statues are draped in golden cloth, evidence that the site is now as spiritually important to Buddhists as it once was to ancient Shiva worshippers.

Feeling more hungry than holy, I take a restaurant seat in nearby Champasak town to eat chicken soup with red ants and their eggs. Food miles? All of 10 feet. Bobby Saythong serves the speciality to hungry pilgrims but “Weaver ant egg soup” isn't written on her menu as she doesn't like to scare tourists away. The cream-white ant eggs, like mini pill capsules, popped hot sweet liquid, while coppery ants lent a sour twang to the warming savoury broth.

In 2018, Lao Brewery organised a “Beer Election” for drinkers to vote on a new craft beer range. It was the first democratic vote in Laos for more than 40 years. Before the monarchy was ousted by the Communists in 1975, Laos had been ruled by royals for centuries.



The temple of Wat Phou

Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

I fly to Luang Prabang, in the northern mountains, on a finger of land between the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, to see the legacy of the royal family that built one of south-east Asia's most gorgeous cities. Amid pink frangipani and betel palms, rosewood and teak Buddhist temples with roofs painted scarlet and gold hover like the wings of exotic birds.

It's what was intended – a symbolic flight of the spirit of the dead to paradise. Royal descendants may have missed out on this promising ticket. The last king was banished into exile

and never heard of again. At their rather more simple riverfront palace-turned-museum, royal ghosts linger amid outsized royal portraits. King Sisavang Vong had a voracious sexual appetite: his bedroom features 11 doors for his revolving concubines. The story of the other royal appetite is not told at the palace but at Paste Laos across town.

In contrast to traditional Lao recipes – the pork-stuffed lemongrass and fish steamed in banana leaf that I had created the previous day at Tamarind Cooking School – the dishes at Paste Laos are more complex with new modern touches.

Traditional recipes by Phia Sing, chef to the last king of Laos, have been revived and updated by Bee Satongun in a menu of avant-garde flavours fit for royalty. I settle in for the evening as the river begins to twinkle with lights blooming in the dusk. I taste the gamey, sweetened tang of roasted quail shavings and nutmeg on curry paste settled on crispy rice crackers, with a grand salad of pork belly bathed in an intense squid-and-crab sauce, decorated with egg floss and pretty flowers. It's followed by smoked coconut noodles with palm sugar sabayon, lemon basil seed and dried mango – the fabulously cool moreish sabayon tingling with smoky coconut shards.

Operation Lao Food Taste Journey? Satisfyingly and unashamedly accomplished.

Essentials

◆ InsideAsia (01172 443380; insideasiatours.com) specialises in tailor-made travel to Laos and south-east Asia. Its nine-night Flavours of Laos trip costs from £2,535pp including all accommodation, a night in a homestay, private transfers and transport across the country, private guiding and food experiences. International flights cost extra. Fly to Vientiane or Luang Prabang via Bangkok from London Heathrow with Thai Airways (thaiairways.com). Return fares cost from £552 per person.

Where to stay

Lao Poet Hotel (00856 20 98 426 806; laopoethotel.com) has doubles from \$76 (£58) per night.

River Resort (00856 20 56 880 198; theriverresortlaos.com) has doubles from \$78 (£61).

Apsara Rive Droite (00856 71 213 053; theapsara.com) has doubles from \$110. The Apsara Hotel, across the Nam Ou river, is home to Paste Laos (00 856 71 254 251; pastelaos.com).

Tamarind Cooking School (tamarindlaos.com/cooking-school) from \$33 per person.

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