



Cambodian custodian



Chef Nak is blazing a trail in researching and restoring Khmer cuisine, creating a stir at home and abroad, finds **JOEL PORTER**

MANY LONDONERS WOULD

struggle to give a solid answer if asked to define Cambodian food. We are enamoured with Vietnamese, passionate about Thai, and experts in the regional variations of Chinese, but beyond perhaps a hazy gap year memory of fish *amok* in Cambodia, most would come up short.

There's not much of it about, of course. In Soho, there's Mamapen, one of the city's only Cambodian restaurants, but that's about the extent of it. It's not just a London problem, though; in Cambodia itself, there can often be a disconnect between its people and their culinary history. This is partially due to the encroachment of Western tastes but also something much darker, since much of the population, and with it much of their food history, was wiped out during the brutal Khmer Rouge dictatorship in the 1970s.

Rotanak Ros (more popularly known as Chef Nak) is a Cambodian chef who's

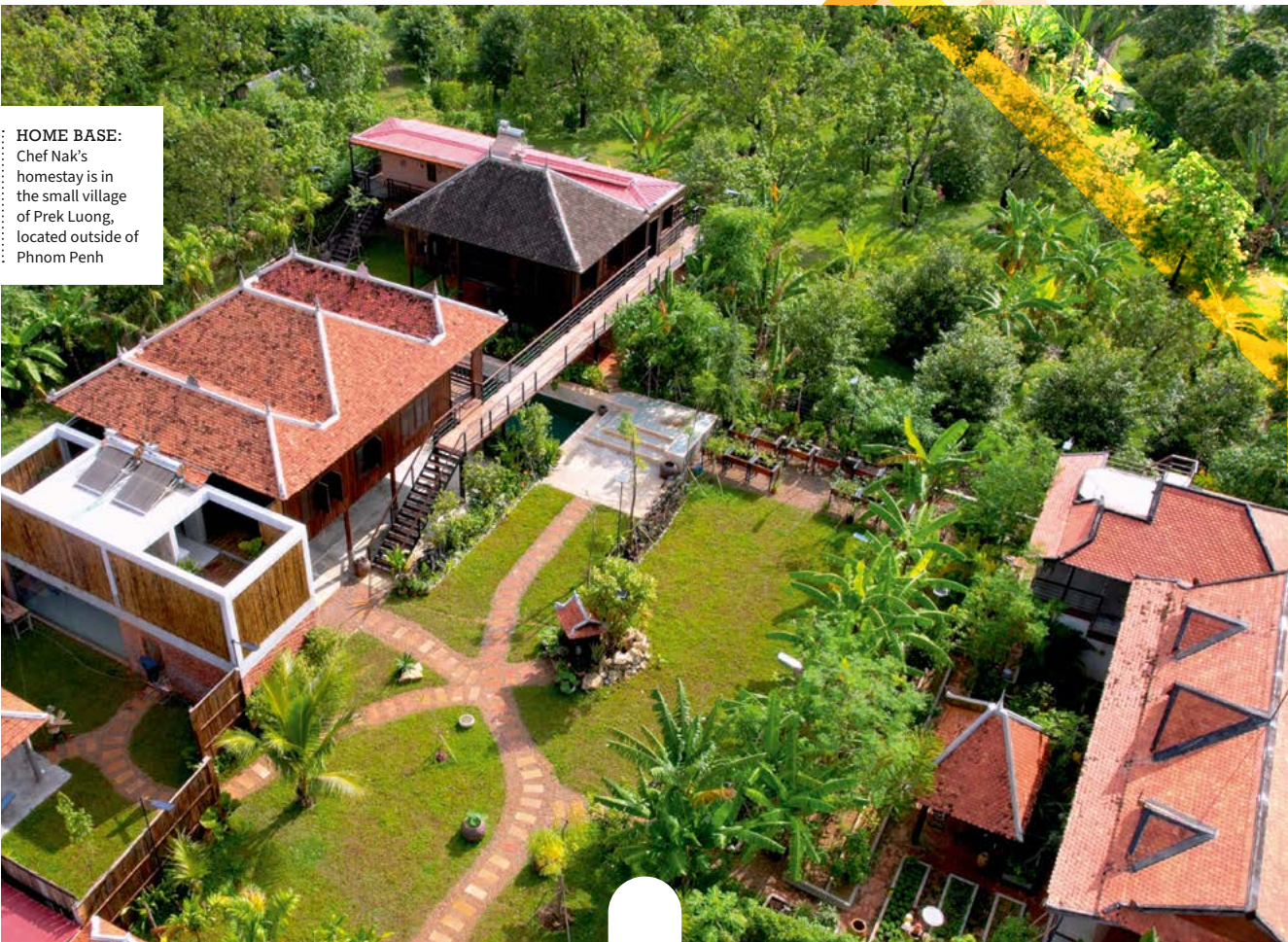
on a mission to change all that, however. With relentless energy, she has taken on a lifelong project of not only preserving traditional dishes and techniques but reconnecting her country with its past through food. She has published two award-winning cookbooks, posts recipe videos across social media, and has spent two decades travelling the country discovering the recipes and traditions of remote communities. Best of all is her homestay in the village of Prek Luong, just outside of Phnom Penh, where Nak and her husband Sarin painstakingly recreated two traditional Khmer wooden stilted houses, and where guests can now stay the night, take a cooking class, and immerse themselves in Cambodia's rich food history with an epic tasting menu hosted by Nak. Here she hosts groups from all over the world, bringing her food and knowledge to a wider audience, bite by bite.

Joel Porter took a car and a ferry over

the Mekong River from Phnom Penh to visit Chef Nak at her homestay and chat about her career in food, and her mission to take Cambodian cuisine onto the world stage.

FOODISM Chef Nak, this is obviously a question you get asked a lot, but given that Cambodian cuisine is still relatively unknown in London compared to Thai and Vietnamese food, how would you describe its unique flavours, ingredients, and style to someone trying it for the first time?

CHEF NAK I would say to expect lots of fresh, local ingredients like lemongrass, makrut lime leaves, galangal, turmeric, pepper, garlic, and even Cambodian cardamom, along with a big variety of herbs that give our dishes their unique aroma and depth. Its flavours are generally sweet, sour, salty, and umami, sometimes with a little touch of bitterness, which you will often find all within a single dish. Our dishes can



HOME BASE: Chef Nak's homestay is in the small village of Prek Luong, located outside of Phnom Penh

be complex, combining crisp herbs, earthy spices, and subtle fermentation – such as *prahok*, a Cambodian fermented fish – that create rich layers of flavour. It's also pretty diverse, so you get everything from sautéed green Kampot pepper with shrimp to smooth crayfish curry with Cambodian fresh rice noodles or the delicate white pearl soup.

F As someone who grew up in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, what are your earliest memories of food and community, and how did they inspire your journey as a chef?

CN Although I was born five years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the effects of that brutal time were still very present in Cambodia. My earliest memories are filled with stories from my family and community about the hardships they endured. Food, which had once been a source of joy and culture, was often scarce. I remember how my mother and grandmother worked

tirelessly to make every meal meaningful and nourishing, even when ingredients were very limited. Their love and care in the kitchen taught me that food is not just about sustenance but about healing and preserving identity.

I don't know if I ever really set out to become a chef, but I do know that I loved food and cooking from a very early age. My passion for food naturally deepened as I grew older and began to understand more about the history and cultural significance behind Cambodian cuisine, especially during my work with Cambodian Living Arts in 2005, which gave me the opportunity to travel and connect with diverse communities. It wasn't just about cooking anymore; it became about uncovering stories that had been buried – stories of resilience and survival shaped by centuries of history, including Cambodia's most difficult times. I realised that Cambodian cuisine is a living connection to our past and a vital part of our cultural heritage,

and it sparked a strong desire to find out as much as I could.

F What aspects of Cambodian culinary heritage were lost during the Khmer Rouge era?

CN Traditional recipes, cooking techniques, and knowledge passed down through generations were lost or forgotten

My earliest memories are filled with stories from my family and community

because families were separated, displaced, or perished. Many home cooks, farmers, and chefs either disappeared or were forced into labour camps where food was scarce, and survival became the only priority. Ingredients that were once staples became strictly prohibited to collect, and the communal rituals surrounding food preparation and sharing were broken. This disruption meant that after the regime fell, Cambodia faced the immense challenge of rebuilding not only the country but also reconnecting with its culinary roots, which is still ongoing today.

F That idea of reconnecting with Cambodia's culinary roots is central to what you do. How have you gone about actually doing that?

CN Yes exactly! Part of my mission is to help revive and preserve those lost recipes, techniques, and food traditions – because food is more than sustenance; it carries memory, identity, and the resilience of our people. At first, I started by inviting people to my home to experience my cooking, Cambodian cuisine, and our way of life. Finding reliable recipes was challenging, so I decided to write a cookbook. Then I began travelling to rural areas – visiting villages and markets, speaking with elder cooks, farmers, and food artisans to learn directly from them. I also shared these discoveries on social media. Because much of our culinary heritage is passed down orally, listening carefully and documenting their stories, recipes, and techniques in a sensitive way became essential. And of course, this work is ongoing; there are always new layers to explore, whether it's ingredients, cooking methods, or the cultural contexts behind each dish. For me, preserving Cambodian food culture is a lifelong mission.

F To my mind, there's no better place for people to immerse themselves in your mission than coming to your beautiful homestay. What can people expect to experience when they visit you and just how important has that been in promoting Cambodian cuisine to the world?

CN Our homestay is truly a labour of love – a place where guests can fully immerse themselves in Cambodian culture and cuisine. When people visit, they can expect an intimate, authentic experience

that's much more than just a place to stay or to eat. They connect with the stories behind our homes, local hospitality, the dishes, and cooking, gaining a deep understanding of the cultural significance of our community, ingredients, and recipes. Guests could do a hands-on private cooking class, visit local markets, or experience our full tasting menu and drinks crafted from local ingredients and spirits, while listening to traditional music be performed by talented young local artists.

This homestay has been essential in promoting Cambodian cuisine to the world because it allows visitors to experience the heart and soul of our food culture firsthand. It's one thing to read about or see pictures of Cambodian food, but to live it, smell it, and taste it in its authentic setting creates a lasting impression that I think inspires respect and appreciation.

F How are you innovating within Cambodian cuisine? Are there ways you're



CAMBODIAN CLASS: [clockwise from top left] The swimming pool at the homestay; welcoming ceremony; traditional num kroch; Chef Nak holding kampot pepper; welcoming items at the homestay; view of the jungle from the balcony

I believe the future of Cambodian cuisine depends on young people

blending tradition with modern techniques or global influences?

CN Yes, this is crucial as we can't only preserve; that alone won't work. That's why our mission is to develop and promote. Cambodian cuisine is deeply rooted in history and tradition, but it is also a living, evolving culinary art. My approach honours that balance. I am committed to preserving traditional recipes and techniques that have been passed down for thousands of years, while also embracing innovation and creativity.

I experiment by adapting recipes to modern tastes and available ingredients, introducing new presentations, and blending traditional methods with modern techniques. For example, I would reinterpret a classic dish using fresh, locally sourced produce or create new dishes inspired by Cambodian flavours



STRING THEORY: [above] Num banhchok or Khmer noodles is one of Cambodia's most loved dishes

but designed to appeal to a global palate. This approach means that I can keep the cuisine vibrant and relevant without losing its soul. Ultimately, my goal is to celebrate the past while inspiring future generations to appreciate and innovate within our rich heritage.

F In what ways are you working to inspire next-generation Cambodians to also fly the flag for your country's food culture?

CN Inspiring the next generation is very close to my heart because I believe the future of Cambodian cuisine depends on young people embracing and valuing our culinary culture. I work to inspire them in several ways. First, through education, we offer cooking demonstrations, classes, workshops, home dining, and culinary events that showcase our traditional recipes, techniques, and the stories behind them. I want young Cambodians to see that our food heritage is something to be proud of and excited about.

F You've hosted international pop-ups. How crucial are these events for raising global awareness, and are there plans for more, especially in cities like London?

CN We have done quite a bit of promoting our cuisine within Cambodia, so yes, international pop-ups are definitely an important part of our strategy to raise global awareness. They allow us to bring our culture directly to new audiences who have never visited Cambodia and create cultural exchanges beyond our borders. Our recent pop-up in India was a wonderful experience - it showed me how eager people are to learn about and taste Cambodian food.

Further ahead, we have plans for more pop-ups and international collaborations, alongside continuing to grow our cultural experiences, publish additional cookbooks, and host events here in Cambodia. I would love to come to London. Ultimately, our goal is to create a global conversation around Cambodian food that respects its roots while inspiring innovation and connection.

F You will soon open a second homestay in Siem Reap. How will this differ from the first and what will it allow you to do?

CN We're very excited about our new place



FOOD ARCHAEOLOGIST: [above] Chef Nak conducts interviews to recover lost Cambodian recipes

in Siem Reap. While it will carry the same spirit of authenticity as our first, this new location will allow us to expand and offer even more immersive experiences. Siem Reap is a gateway to Cambodia for many international visitors, and our new space is designed to accommodate more guests and offer more activities - from extended cooking courses and market tours to special events featuring local artists and producers. This expansion also gives us the chance to collaborate more closely with regional farmers and artisans, supporting local communities in meaningful ways.

F Looking ahead, how do you see Cambodian cuisine evolving in the next five to 10 years, and what role do you hope it will play on the world stage?

CN I really believe that Cambodian cuisine has incredible potential to be recognised and celebrated on the global stage. In the next five to 10 years, I hope to see Cambodian cuisine embraced not only internationally but also deeply cherished within Cambodia itself by both young people and the broader community. I envision a future where our traditional recipes and culinary techniques are preserved and taught widely while also being innovated upon by new generations of chefs and food lovers. Ultimately, I want Cambodian cuisine to become part of global conversations about food culture, health, and sustainability, offering not just delicious dishes but also stories of resilience, heritage, and community that inspire and connect people in places all around the world. **f**