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SEPTEMBER 2018



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Shaking up the scene

Inventive bars and
Cambodian flavours are
transforming Phnom Penh
into a cocktail capital

PHNOM PENH

Creating

a

Five bars with a distinctly Cambodian flavour are helping put Phnom Penh on the cocktail map

Words by Jamie Fullerton
Photography by Simon Toffanello

STIR





**CLOCKWISE FROM
BOTTOM LEFT**
SEIBUR ON BASSAC
LANE WAS ONE OF
THE PIONEERS OF
THE CITY'S
COCKTAIL SCENE;
ELBOW ROOM
WOULDN'T LOOK
OUT OF PLACE IN
BANGKOK OR
SINGAPORE; THE
TIKI-INSPIRED HUB
STREET COCKTAILS
IS ONE OF THE
LATEST IN THIS
NEW WAVE OF BARS

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omething good is stirring in Phnom Penh. While the Cambodian capital's nightlife has been dominated for decades by cheap beer boozers on the grimy Mekong riverside strip, an emerging trend is breathing new life into the after-dark scene of one of the fastest-changing urban hubs in Asia.

Crucially, this new scene looks to offer an intriguing Khmer-driven mix of Cambodian ingredients blended with local mixologists and design talent. As a result, Phnom Penh – always in the shadow of nearby cities such as Singapore and Bangkok in terms of cocktail clout – is quietly making up ground.

It all started around 2014 when a spate of small cocktail joints opened in the south-central area of the city, spurred by cheap rent and a rising spending power among Cambodia's thirsty young middle class.

Seibur was the first bar on the now bustling Bassac Lane. The breezy, open-fronted venue was the brainchild of New Zealand architect William Norbert-Munns, who – with brother George – sparked the lane's evolution into a cocktail hotspot.

Since then, the scene has quickly absorbed Cambodian elements: bitters infused with Kampot pepper, local liqueurs and palm wines with new twists and more. Moreover, young Khmer architects are designing sophisticated new venues, and Cambodian mixologists are moving from these pioneering bars to strike out on their own.

Each bar is distinct, from the motorbike grunge of Hangar 44 to the leafy charms of Yemaya. What they all have in common is great cocktails. Here are five of the scene's most vital venues, and the local elements that resonate with the soul of the city.

HUB STREET COCKTAILS

The street spirit

Try:
Batt Oun Srey

Vodka, pomegranate,
strawberry, lime, syrup

Sometimes, all you need to open one of the coolest bars in Phnom Penh is a tuk-tuk filled with spirits and a bunch of streetside low tables, ideally in the shadow of a temple. Well, that, and some cocktail-making know-how.

These were the ingredients Phnom Penh-born Dara Sok mixed together last summer to open the original Hub

Street Cocktails on Oknha Suor Srun Street. The permanently grinning 31-year-old, who almost never stops talking, learnt his craft at drinks supply company La Familia, owners of the Elbow Room's bar.

Utilising these skills, he'd serve pre-mixed cocktails until around 3am, when he'd pack everything into a tuk-tuk and scoot home. "People never believed I could fit it all in," he says with a chuckle.

Sok's street enterprise was sweet but short, forced to close in early 2018 when authorities clamped down on street vendors. However, having made a reputation as one of the city's most popular cocktail slingers, he opened a fixed bar in July. Adorned with bamboo, the new tiki-inspired Hub Street Cocktails still retains the tables and gaudy concoctions beloved by his fans.

Sok does serve classics such as the Old Fashioned, but his speciality – pitchers of pre-mixed cocktails – still dominate. Like Sok, they're perky-quirky, with the What's Up made with tequila, peach and passion fruit, while The Orkun Bong! (loosely translated to "Thank you, babe!") is a summery blend of gin, cucumber, mint and lime.

The really local touches, though, are found in the mysterious glass jars next to the bar. "They're my

personal spirits – I offer them to friends," says Sok, fondling a jar containing a cloudy liquid and unidentifiable lumps. "It's rice wine with local ingredients such as lemongrass, jackfruit and black sticky rice," he adds, reassuringly.

With its summer party vibe, Hub Street Cocktails certainly feels like one of the most lively and fun bars on the scene already. "I wanted to do something different from the nearby Bassac Lane bars," says Sok, as night falls and the bar starts to fill up with young locals.

No. 20, Street 21

fb.com/hubstreetcocktails



TOP
DARA SOK STARTED
OUT WITH A SIMPLE
POP UP BAR
RIGHT
THE TIKI-INSPIRED
HUB STREET
COCKTAILS IS
POPULAR WITH
LOCALS AND
TOURISTS ALIKE





HANGAR 44

The moto hub

Try:
Route 41

Samai rum,
aperitif wine,
lemon-orange
bitters

Hanging from the ceiling via chunky metal chains, Frankenscrambler dominates Hangar 44.

“It can bear a lot of weight,” says Patrick Uong, the bar’s co-owner. He’s standing under the scrambler motorcycle, so named because it was built – Frankenstein’s monster-style – from a mish-mash of 1970s parts. “My friend was riding it the other night, bucking like a rodeo star,” Uong adds. “It’s not really allowed, but...”

Uong, 46, was born in Cambodia but left aged three on April 16, 1975: the day before Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge forces stormed Phnom Penh. His father, a Royal Cambodian Air Force pilot, flew the family to Thailand before they emigrated to the US.

Having managed hospitality venues in the US, Uong spent time in Vietnam and Cambodia in the late noughties. In 2012 he decided to settle in Phnom Penh to form the Moto Cambodge custom motorcycle company. Deciding that a love of motorcycles and cocktails was the



TOP
CO-FOUNDER OF
HANGAR 44 PATRICK
UONG ON THE
FRANKENSCRAMBLER

perfect combination (perhaps not at the same time), in 2014, he and his buddy William Norbert-Munns (of Seibur fame) opened Hangar 44 as the company’s clubhouse. Adorned with gas canisters and mud-dashed biker gear, the bar wouldn’t look out of place in a *Mad Max* movie.

Beyond Uong, the local influences can be found in cocktails such as the Old Raoul and the Route 41. The former features Maraschino liqueur and chocolate bitters, the latter Cocchi Americano aperitif wine and lemon-orange bitters. Both use rum produced by Phnom Penh’s Samai brand, using the famous peppercorn from the Cambodian province of Kampot. The Route 41 in particular is a firecracker on the tongue. Uong pops the top off a bottle of Samai, releasing a nostril-zap of the distinctive peppery zing. The pepper’s use in rum works brilliantly – floral and citrus notes make it more than just a simple blast of peppery intensity.

Indeed, Samai is a rare example of a successful Cambodian-produced premium liqueur. The rum scooped a Double Gold Medal at the Madrid International Rum Conference last year.

“Samai can’t keep up with demand so we’re one of only a few bars they supply here,” Uong boasts, while showing photos of more rum-inspired friends riding the Frankenscrambler.

44 Bassac Lane; [instagram.com/hangar44pp](https://www.instagram.com/hangar44pp)



BOTTOM
LE BOUTIER'S
KAMPOT-BORN
BAR MANAGER
VISITH YIMMAY



LE BOUTIER

The temple to rock

Try:
Cambodian
Space cocktail

Rye, yellow chartreuse, mancino rosso, Kampot pepper tincture

Tonight, staff at the minimalist bar are in a sombre mood. They have just returned from parties celebrating the life of Kak Channthy, singer with psych-rock band Cambodian Space Project, who died aged 38 in March this year in a tragic traffic accident.

The Cambodian Space Cocktail – named after the charismatic Channthy when she was a regular – is a firm favourite. “She liked to drink,” says US-born Annemarie Sagoi, who

The rye-based Cambodian Space Cocktail features the French liqueur Yellow Chartreuse and Kampot pepper, reflecting the bold and spicy personality of the frontwoman, arguably Phnom Penh’s most prominent singer before her untimely death. Other signature drinks are similarly dedicated to makers of Cambodian music, which forms the soundtrack at Le Boutier. “We want to reflect the flavour of their souls,” says Kampot-born bar manager Visith Yimmay, 34.

Visith learnt the tricks of the trade from Sagoi, ensuring that Le Boutier remains among the city’s most respected cocktail joints despite Sagoi’s return to Chicago.

Proof of this arrives with a La Vie En Ros Sereysothea, a cocktail dedicated to legendary pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian singer Ros Sereysothea. Powerful pineapple and grapefruit flavours plus a jasmine tea tincture reflect her silky but soulful style.

However, the most pertinent cocktail for the founders is Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten, made with vodka, sticky rice syrup, ginger and lime. It is named after the 2015 music documentary film of the same name, which tells the story of 1960s and ’70s Khmer rock before the Khmer Rouge regime decimated the scene.

Beyond Chhay’s family ties, the film crystallised his

and Sagoi’s will to open Le Boutier as the perfect place to toast Cambodian rock. “We’d already decided to celebrate this era,” says Sagoi, “and when we saw the film we were in tears, awestruck.”

No 32, Street 308; leboutier.com

opened Le Boutier in 2016 with fellow thirtysomething David Chhay, a Parisian of Cambodian descent. As a child, Chhay’s mother lived a few blocks from the bar, a fact that cemented his desire to set up a place in the area.



+

THREE

DRINK RULE

Don’t forget these long-time Phnom Penh bar favourites



ELEPHANT BAR

Established in 1929, the famous cocktail bar at Raffles Hotel Le Royal, is the classiest venue in town. Try the afternoon tea before rounding off with the famous Singapore Sling. raffles.com



METRO HASSAKAN

It may be surrounded by less reputable venues, but the former Café Metro offers great service and quality snacks, making it worth braving this busy strip. metrokh.com



FCC

Opened in 1993 to quench the thirst of international journalists, the Foreign Correspondents’ Club is all whirring fans and riverside views. fcccambodia.com

ELBOW ROOM

The elegant local

Try:
Mekong Swizzle | Rum, kaffir lime leaf and coconut oil



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR RIGHT
ANDRE CHALSON, OWNER OF ELBOW ROOM; THE SOPHISTICATED INTERIORS OF THE ELBOW ROOM



In Cambodia, palm wine is known as “the poor man’s drink”. The home-brewed spirit is sold by street vendors in bamboo tubes for as little as S\$0.30 a shot.

It is not an ingredient you’d expect to find in a classy place like Elbow Room, opened in 2016 by Singaporean Andre Chalson of drinks company La Familia. But one of the most popular drinks, the Mekong Swizzle, includes

the spirit the *Phnom Penh Post* dubbed “the liquor of last resort”.

Former manager Eric Stephenson designed the Swizzle, which also features rum, kaffir lime leaf and coconut oil. “The idea was to highlight the diverse flavours of the Mekong Delta. We knew using palm wine would raise eyebrows, but it can give an earthy, robust funk or a sweet, floral undertone, based on the palm wine used.”

Elbow Room’s elegant interiors and street-art-style décor – the image on a wall of a tattooed elderly local woman is particularly arresting – arguably make it feel more suited to Singapore or Bangkok. Study the menu more carefully, though, and you’ll see that the Cambodian touches aren’t limited to palm wine.

“The syrups have local sugar cane, ginger root, almonds, spices and fruits found in the wet market a few blocks away,” says Stephenson. “The old hand-cranked ice shaver on the bar pays homage to the old Khmer snow-cone-like treats served on streets.”

The entrepreneurial spirit of Elbow Room’s founders clearly rubs off on its local staff. “I’ll be working from my tuk-tuk bar after I clock off at 10pm,” says smiley young bartender Sok Nan. “I’ve set up loads of spirits inside the vehicle.” You might think she does basic mixes. She laughs. “No, not at all – come over for a negroni.”

No 35, Street 308; fb.com/elbowrm



PHNOM DE SCÈNE

Other venues adding to the eclectic scene



FARM TO TABLE

With a leafy, hen-filled courtyard, this place has quickly proved popular for its laid-back vibe and commitment to healthy, sustainable food. It

also hosts regular live music, including the weekly *Acoustic Friday* showcase. fb.com/farmtotablepp



TINI

Spread over two floors, the cocktails and coffee at this compact hangout are top notch, and the work of local artists

adorns the walls and the T-shirts for sale. fb.com/tinipp450



INTÉGRITÉ

This intriguing restaurant/bar/café/boutique offers French colonial-style décor, Asian artwork and fashion

designer (and co-founder) Sabrina Wong’s unique clothing. fb.com/integritephnompenh



YEMAYA

The urban escape

Try:
**Yemaya
daiquiri**

Rum, brandy,
lemon and
palm sugar
syrup

It is in the corner of the Kinin courtyard, next to the wood-beam-buttressed Kumbhaka restaurant, which specialises in Khmer dishes. “I wanted a place where Cambodians and foreigners mix,” says 28-year-old architect Sophal Thim, from Phnom Penh, who designed Kinin. “So far, it’s working.”

Indeed it is. Located about two kilometres south of Bassac Lane, Yemaya is near other great bars such as Sundown Social Club and Long After Dark, which opened in the past few years. “It feels a bit wild around here, and there’s so much going on,” says Harris, pouring some fat Cambodian cashew nuts into a jar. Thim eyes up his Scotch-based Penicillin cocktail and nods in agreement. **No 24, Street 123; fb.com/yemayaphnompenh** ■

RIGHT
CO-OWNER OF
YEMAYA ROSS
HARRIS AND
ARCHITECT
SOPHAL THIM
RELAX IN THE
COURTYARD
OF KININ

In the green-shrouded calm of the Kinin courtyard – a leafy enclosure containing a number of F&B establishments, close to the Russian Market – the quiet is broken by the slap of plastic on wood.

“This is local palm sugar – the guy I buy it from just taps palm trees and gets this yellow, sludgy-looking, unrefined sugar paste,” says Florida-born Ross Harris, 36, dropping a see-through packet of the stuff onto the bar of cocktail joint Yemaya, which opened in May.

The sugar palm tree, *Borassus flabellifer*, is the national tree of Cambodia, and sweetening food with its gooey yield is common across the country. Harris, who opened Yemaya with fellow Floridian Ariel Tudela and Australian Kerryn Leitch – both also in their mid-thirties – uses it for the signature Yemaya Daiquiri.

“The sugar is so incredible, it smells like caramel,” he says, prodding the packet.

Aside from cocktails fortified by local ingredients, the small, pastel-coloured Yemaya bar is the result of local architectural talent.



WHERE TO STAY



Opened this May, the Rosewood Phnom Penh is a luxury hotel within the sky-scraping Vattanac Capital Tower. The building is the tallest in the country, being 187 metres and 39 storeys high, and is a 15-minute tuk-tuk ride from the Bassac Lane area. The hotel has 175 well-appointed rooms and 37 suites, with French and Japanese restaurants and its own classy cocktail bar, rooftop spot Sora. rosewoodhotels.com/en/phnom-penh



*SilkAir flies
daily between
Singapore
and Phnom Penh*