



Expert orders: Jaan Bai places great importance on training front-of-house staff to a level where they are able to “get jobs anywhere in the world”

CUISINE

TOPPING UP THE RICE BOWL

Jaan Bai, a new training restaurant in Cambodia’s Battambang province, enlists international heavyweights to elevate the country’s foodie scene

By Lara Dunston Photography by Terence Carter

The second the chef turns off the gas, spoons are swiftly whipped from the pockets of chef jackets, dipped into pungent curry and promptly popped into mouths. Eyelids close, brows arch and lips curl up at the corners in delight. Yet there is one nose of the dozen or so in the kitchen that scrunches up. “Too spicy!” a young Cambodian cook declares, flapping a hand in front of her mouth. Still, she dips again.

Chef David Thompson’s uncompromisingly authentic Thai cuisine – gleaned from heritage cookbooks and long-lost recipes he travels Thailand

to find – has that effect on people. The student cook, used to gentler Cambodian cuisine, jots down some notes about Thompson’s famously fiery jungle curry, as her colleagues gather around the legendary chef for another lesson.

Thompson turns a live crab over on a bench, its back down and legs in the air. Cambodian chef Mohm Meah, the woman who will head this new kitchen, has just spent one month training at Thompson’s Bangkok restaurant, Nahm. She takes the cleaver and, with a loud whack, kills the crab instantly. Thompson throws it into a

wok, shell and all, along with ingredients Matthew Albert has been preparing. Albert – a former head chef of Nahm London, the world’s first Michelin-starred Thai restaurant, and who will soon be at the helm of Thompson’s new Singapore restaurant – has been in the kitchen for a week teaching staff.

Sparks fly and flames shoot into the air as Thompson continuously shifts the wok over the burner, ensuring the crustacean is evenly cooked and smothered in sauce. The young cooks, who have encircled the master, don’t flinch.

East meets West: local pork fills sliders that are given a zesty twist with Asian coleslaw



Fresh fusion: a quinoa salad with pomegranate seeds and fresh Cambodian herbs



Going nutty: prawn and coconut curry complete with sweet Battambang coconuts and papaya



Hot in here: David Thompson’s famously fiery jungle curry featuring scallops from Kep





Learning environment: the restaurant's Australian trainers say the most eager students bring handmade notepads to lessons

This is the kitchen of Jaan Bai ('rice bowl' in Khmer), one day before the recent opening of the stylish new hospitality-training restaurant, bar and gallery in Cambodia's Battambang town, the capital of a fertile province regarded as the country's rice bowl. The new cooking area gleams in the afternoon light, its stainless steel and sparkling glass in stark contrast to the gravelly street outside that sends dust inside each time a vehicle crunches by.

About three hours from Siem Reap and some five hours from Phnom Penh, this little riverside city might seem like a strange choice for a chic new eatery set up in a renovated French colonial-era shophouse – let alone one with an advisor of the calibre of Thompson, a celebrated Australian chef who has made a career from cooking authentic Thai cuisine.

Nahm holds the number-three spot on San Pellegrino's Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list, while Sydney's Quay, the restaurant of John Fink, another advisor tasting dishes in the kitchen, has been on San Pellegrino's World's 50 Best Restaurants list five years running.

Jaan Bai is the brainchild of Tara Winkler, the Australian founder of Cambodian Children's Trust (CCT), an NGO established with Jedtha Pon, now the director of CCT, in 2007 after the pair rescued 14 abused children from an improperly run orphanage. Since then, CCT has assisted hundreds of vulnerable kids through foster care, outreach and a youth centre.

"We want to expand CCT's work to include social enterprises that provide training and create jobs for underprivileged youths and, in time, help

generate funds for CCT, reducing our reliance on donations," Winkler explains. "We decided on a restaurant as our first social enterprise, thanks to Fink, Thompson and Rolando Schirato from Vittoria Coffee, to create a public face for CCT, to help boost the local economy and bring more visitors to Battambang."

It was Winkler, a friend of Fink's, who got him involved, and Fink who persuaded Thompson to contribute his expertise to Battambang's first training restaurant. They plan to return regularly to assist with the restaurant's growth.

"Cambodia is a post-colonial, post-war country populated by some of the warmest people I have ever met in the world," Fink explains. "Before that horrendous time with the Khmer

Rouge, Battambang was a creative and cultural powerhouse, and there's an East Berlin-feeling of enthusiasm emanating from the artists rebuilding their lives and careers."

Home to Cambodia's largest performing arts school – the quirky Phare Cambodian Circus – and several art galleries, Battambang is an emerging arts destination and Jaan Bai's exterior is decorated with murals by local artists whose paintings hang inside.

While tastings are under way in the kitchen, Rolando Schirato, a senior manager of Australia's 50-year-old Vittoria Coffee, is busy front-of-house. Beside him, a builder is working on electrics, a cocktail trainer is organising the bar and volunteers decorate display shelves. Schirato sets up a shiny new espresso machine – one of two Vittoria has donated along with providing funding for Jaan Bai's first year of operations, restaurant set-up and staff training.

Schirato befriended Winkler after approaching her about volunteering. "We spoke about projects we'd been involved in," he reveals, "including one where Vittoria helped a rural Australian town build a community centre and café to build youth skills, in particular barista training. Tara hoped to do something similar in Battambang."

Restaurant manager Tom O'Sullivan is teaching young Cambodians to pull beers. O'Sullivan has a background in social enterprise cafés in Melbourne, Australia's coffee capital, working at Kinfolk and managing The Mission Café.

"I realised the potential that hospitality has to empower individuals and create positive change," O'Sullivan explains. "At Kinfolk, we raised money for projects in developing countries. To have the opportunity to work with CCT really exposes you to the need. It's pretty motivating."

O'Sullivan collaborated with Fink to develop the concept of Jaan Bai when he visited in April last year. O'Sullivan was in hospital at the time. "I knew John was serious about making this work," he reveals. "He was my

first visitor; bedside, 40 degrees, no air-con, flies, no partitions between us and other patients in ICU, notepad was out, and we had our first brainstorm. A week later John emailed the notes. That was the catalyst for our business plan."

O'Sullivan accompanied Meah to Bangkok. While she learnt how one of Asia's best restaurant kitchens operates, O'Sullivan discussed kitchen design and menu development with Thompson and Albert. "David and Mathew were key to us using local produce (grown in CCT gardens) to create a

seasonal menu that captures the best of Southeast Asia, while leaning on some Western influences," O'Sullivan says.

The idea is to diversify skills, making trainees more employable. After Schirato, Fink, Thompson and Albert leave, it will be O'Sullivan who manages the restaurant day to day and trains staff.

"I hope to train employees to the point where they can get jobs anywhere in the world," O'Sullivan says. "I've quickly learnt who the trainees are that want to learn. They're the ones with notepads." ■



The young ones: a group of Jaan Bai's trainee chefs at the new training restaurant