



## FOOD & DRINK

# Cambodia's fine dining evolution

John Krich, CNN • Updated 26th February 2018

**(CNN)** — If Las Vegas can become a world culinary capital, why not [Siem Reap](#)?

The western Cambodia city, its bright lights and big hotels fed by an overflow of visitors to the [ancient city of Angkor](#), now caters in somewhat slapdash fashion to an international potpourri of imported tastes and flavors.

But what are the best choices for those seeking to actually experience the classic cuisine of [Cambodia](#), beyond wandering through the many markets to gawk at local oddities like moringa leaves and Tonle Sap snakehead fish?

Just a few decades back, following the Khmer Rouge's famine-inducing dictatorship, such middle-class amenities as restaurants or cookbooks would have been unthinkable.

And even recent visitors, hoping for tasty local fare like they might find in neighboring Thailand, would instead have been faced largely with smelly fermented fish prahok and variants of amok or hor mok, a fish mousse of wildly varying consistency.

But with tourism and prosperity on the rise in Siem Reap and capital Phnom Penh, custodianship of the national cuisine has moved beyond well-meaning researchers and NGOs to a new generation of chefs, both domestic and international, all equally dedicated to their craft.

## Chi Restaurant & Bar



Chi Restaurant & Bar's staples are big and hearty.

courtesy Chi Restaurant & Bar

Usually when hotel chains invest large sums in a refurbishment, dressing their house restaurant in a heavy wood and dramatically high-ceilinged look, it's rare that they'll give the spotlight to local, lesser-known fare.

But the sumptuous [Anantara Angkor Resort](#) in Siem Reap has given free rein to young German chef Kien Wagner's "progressive Cambodian cuisine."

Having already done a stint in provincial Kampot, source of Cambodia's prized pepper, Wagner is no homesick transplant thumping for schnitzels and potatoes. He's an unabashed fan of the local cuisine who borrows inspiration from a sous-chef who grew up in a Cambodian orphanage and, more significantly, his Cambodian wife.

Choices are broad at Chi -- which means "herb" in Khmer, rather than referring to the Chinese "energy." It's couched in the expected five-star finesse and plating and none of it is too gritty or harsh.

Wagner is scrupulous about using local, chemical-free produce where he can find it, even if his staple lok lak stir-fry is made with US beef.

But his soups of pumpkin and Tonle Sap fish are entirely authentic, including the medicinal moringa tree and "rice paddy" herb.

Staples are big and hearty, and the Hamburg native is especially proud of how he's married pork knuckle with Asian-style pickled vegetables and a glaze of anise caramel.

*[Chi Restaurant & Bar](#), Anantara Angkor Resort, National Road no. 6, Khum Svay Dangkom, Siem Reap, Cambodia*