

13 Cambodian Dishes You Should Know



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There's a delicious smell of burning wood that permeates the air in Cambodia. It reminds me of the best barbecue or the coziest bonfire, and it comes from the hardwood charcoal that flames and smolders all day in small clay stoves, wire-topped braziers, and beneath woks and rice and soup pots.

That smell is just a hint at what's to come. When I arrived as an NGO volunteer in this Southeast Asian country two months ago, I had no idea what to expect on my plate. What I found was this: **Cambodia's food is often all about the contrasts**—sweet and bitter, salty and sour, fresh and cooked. It shares many dishes with its neighbors, and you'll find noodle soup similar to Vietnamese phở and sandwiches like bánh mì, Thailand's refreshing salads and sour soups, Indian-inspired curries, and noodles and stir fries handed down from years of Chinese migration. From Cambodia's days as a French Indochina colony, there's a national love of coffee, pate, and good bread. Baguettes are served with soup, made into sandwiches, and sold by men riding bicycles carrying baskets of long loaves.

Cambodia is filled with lively markets and spirited street vendors. Eating can be a breathless sport: many street vendors are on the move all day, pushing rolling woks and grills on wheels, riding motorbikes with cooktops attached to the side, and cruising on bicycles with mango-filled baskets attached to the back. Markets open at sunrise with soups and porridge, stir-fried dishes roll out mid-morning, and by afternoon grills are filled with the day's catches. Open-front restaurants set up sidewalk tables to entice people passing by on foot, in tuk-tuks or on motos.

Condiments and accessories are important. The side plates of greens, herbs, peppers, limes or sauces that appear before you are always the thing that snaps your dish together. Sometimes this is a heap of fresh herbs and sliced vegetables; other times it's combination of fish sauce, chopped chilies, shallots, garlic, and palm sugar, or a make-it-yourself mix of black pepper, salt, and lime juice.

Your dining table will have a dispenser of tiny, floral-scented napkins and a mug with filled with hot water and utensils: the water is for sterilizing the spoons, forks, and, if noodles are involved, chopsticks. Pick out your utensils, wipe them down with a tiny napkin, and dig in.

Check out the slideshow for 13 unique dishes from this Southeast Asian nation.

About the Author: Jennifer Kikoler is a writer and editor currently volunteering at a youth outreach NGO in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. She blogs at jenniferkikoler.wordpress.com.

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Writer and editor Jennifer Kikoler is a born-and-bred Midwesterner, hailing from Des Moines, who just moved from New York City after nearly ten years in Manhattan and Brooklyn. During fall 2012, she is working as a volunteer communications advisor with a youth outreach NGO in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. She has taught creative writing at 92YTribeca, Brooklyn College and Pace University. Her fiction has been featured in The Parlor's first annual emerging writer's festival in Chicago, and in Crack the Spine.