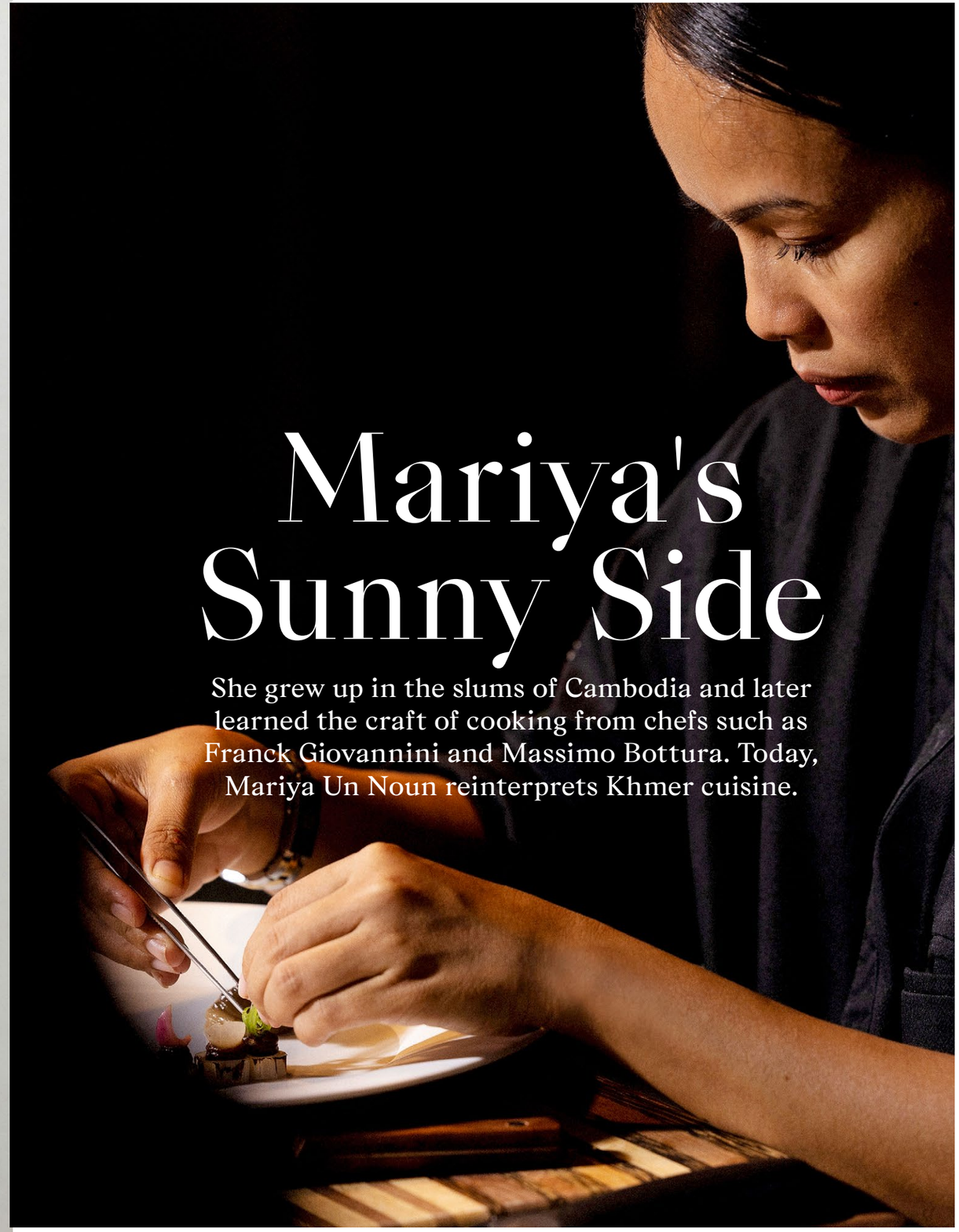
Flavors from Cambodia meet Western cooking: Mariya Un Noun's lamb carré with Kampot pepper, leek and pickled shallot.



Mariya's Sunny Side

She grew up in the slums of Cambodia and later learned the craft of cooking from chefs such as Franck Giovannini and Massimo Bottura. Today, Mariya Un Noun reinterprets Khmer cuisine.

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Photography: Digitale Massarbeit

Mariya Un Noun remembers exactly how she tasted pizza for the first time in her life. „For me, it was just bread and tomato at first." But it tasted so good, she says, that she memorized the name of the dish so she could order it again. That was a good ten years ago, when she was in her mid-20s and a guest at the Lucerne Hotel Management School. There, she literally soaked up everything she encountered: unfamiliar ingredients, new cooking techniques, friendly encounters with the chefs. „I could barely speak a word of English," she remembers, „I satisfied my curiosity by trying everything."

Mariya has come a long way since then: as head chef, she has a team of 24 people under her, and her restaurant is considered one of the best in Cambodia. This is even more impressive when you know the bitter poverty in which she grew up. At just twelve years old, she was sold by her mother as a maid to ensure the family's survival. She was later forced into marriage, gave birth to a child - and was then abandoned. But how did Mariya find her way back to the sunny side of life? Two things tipped the scales: her talent coupled with determination. And the Swiss Hannes Schmid. The former TopFoto graf met Mariya Un Noun as part of his non-profit organization Smiling Gecko. He quickly realized what an extraordinary sense of flavour she has. What culinary skills lie dormant in the 1.50 meter tall woman. It was „Mister Hannes", as Mariya calls the Swiss photo artist, who sent her to work with selected chefs in Europe and, after years of training and travel, put her in charge of the four restaurants at the Farmhouse Resort & Spa around 60 kilometers outside of Phnom Penh.

The 150-hectare complex is not only a school area for dozens of local children and a workplace for 350 locals, but also a luxurious vacation resort for tourists. „My two daughters go to school there," says 33-year-old Mariya Un Noun as she cooks in Switzerland, Singapore and Thailand to raise money for Schmid's project. She has a good 25 kilos of spices in her luggage, including several varieties of lemongrass, which she cannot get abroad in the desired quality. But also a lot of Kampot pepper, which she particularly likes to use.

This is Piper nigrum, but it is only cultivated and harvested in the two provinces of Kampot and Kep according to prescribed guidelines. As recently as 1960, there were around one million pepper plants there,

but the tradition of cultivation was almost lost when the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975. Because dictator Pol Pot wanted to turn Cambodia into a peasant state, he used the cultivated areas for rice and vegetables. It is only since the 1990s that kampot pepper, which Mariya Un Noun describes as having a more restrained aroma than the traditional product, has been planted again: „For me, it's like the backbone of Cambodian cuisine."

What does the chef serve her guests? It is a refined Asian cuisine with a variety of flavors, including mild coconut-based fish curries. Roasted lamb chops seasoned with Kampot pepper are combined with jus, leeks and pickled shallots that have been simmered for hours. Mariya's multi-course meals include fruity desserts, for which she sends „Mr. Hannes" here in Europe to get her the best passion fruit and mangoes.

Mariya takes the dishes, which are based on the almost lost Khmer cuisine, to a higher level by preparing them in a western style and using modern equipment. So a curry sometimes ends up in the Thermomix. She has a Green Egg in her kitchen. Like many of her colleagues around the world, the Pacojet gives her ice creams the desired creaminess: „I change the taste of the traditional preparations as little as possible. I want them to taste good to my mother too."

Mariya Un Noun was able to learn a lot more from her European colleagues: With Massi mo Bottura, she was impressed by the way he leads his team as a leader because he knows himself and his strengths inside out. „Of course, I also like his rock star attitude." Her stage with Franck Giovannini is unforgettable. „He's like an opera conductor, everyone follows his instructions with discipline." On the very first day, the seriousness shown by his almost 30-strong workforce was irritating for her. When she helped out peeling tomatoes in the cold kitchen, she asked one of her colleagues: „Couldn't you smile a little?" And because that didn't really help, she made mischief with her chef's hat and pulled it down over her nose. She has already had several opportunities to get a taste of Andreas Caminada - the lesson there: a team can only perform at its best if the atmosphere is right. „It's more of a family environment than a workplace," praises Mariya Un Noun. She is all the happier that she is now able to regularly introduce chefs from Europe to Cambodian cuisine for the Uccelin Foundation.

However, Mariya will have to give her first cooking lesson after her fundraising tour to her own children: „My daughters really want to learn from me how to make pizza dough." Pizza is also one of their favorite dishes.

”Giovannini is like an opera conductor, everyone follows his instructions with discipline”
Mariya Un Noun

The cuisine in the “Farmhouse” meets western standards. But Mariya finds the ingredients at local markets and even in the jungle (photo right).

Portrait

A guest of Mariya

The crew has clearly taken Andrea Ehrbar (3rd from left) to their hearts.

Mariya Un Noun and Andrea Ehrbar (right) work hand in hand in the „Farmhouse“.

Contemporary techniques: pour on the sauce and decorate with flowers.

Chefs build bridges! The Fundaziun Uccelin, Smiling Gecko and the Thomas Abegg Foundation are joining forces.

Better together: Andreas Caminada's Uccelin Foundation promotes young talent, Hannes Schmid imparts knowledge and fights poverty in Cambodia. Thomas Abegg builds (and finances) the bridge with his foundation: Scholarship holders who have successfully completed the 20-week Uccelin program in the best kitchens in the world are allowed to continue with a further stage: Flight to Cambodia, cooking in the Smiling Gecko team alongside Mariya Un Noun. „I'm delighted that our three foundations work so well together," says Andreas Caminada, „our scholarship holders always come back from Phnom Pen inspired."

Andrea Ehrbar, for example. The young chef was a guest at the Farmhouse for several weeks this summer, taking the opportunity to get to know Cambodian culture and Khmer cuisine recipes. „It's not my first time in Southeast Asia," writes the Swiss chef in her diary, „but it feels different when you're working." The first ten days of the stay are spent getting to know each other. The Uccelin graduates get to know the Smiling Gecko team, supply chains, everyday life and Cambodian cuisine. They then work in the resort's fine dining restaurant, develop an understanding of Mariya's cooking style and support her in developing the menus. In return, they pass on the knowledge they have acquired to the local crew. The common insight: nothing builds better bridges than food and drink.

More information about the Uccelin Foundation, which promotes service and kitchen talent, can be found at uccelin.com.

Fotos: zVg