

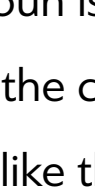


STARCHEFS

Mariya Un Noun: the face of Khmer cuisine

The exceptional Cambodian chef cooked with her team in Zurich. And raised money for Smiling Gecko.

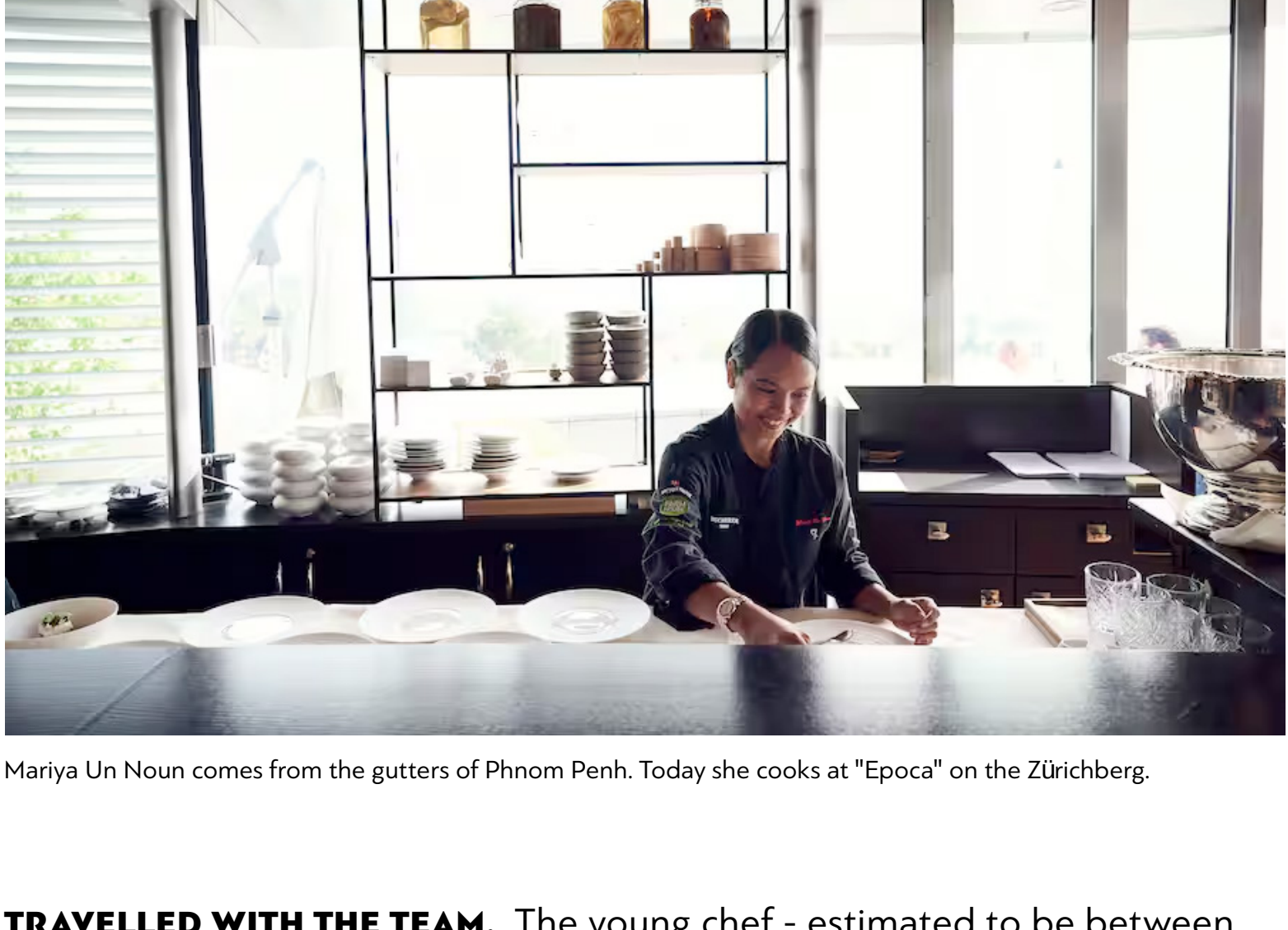
by Kathia Baltisberger | 1 May 2024 - 20:21



Photos: Lukas Lienhard

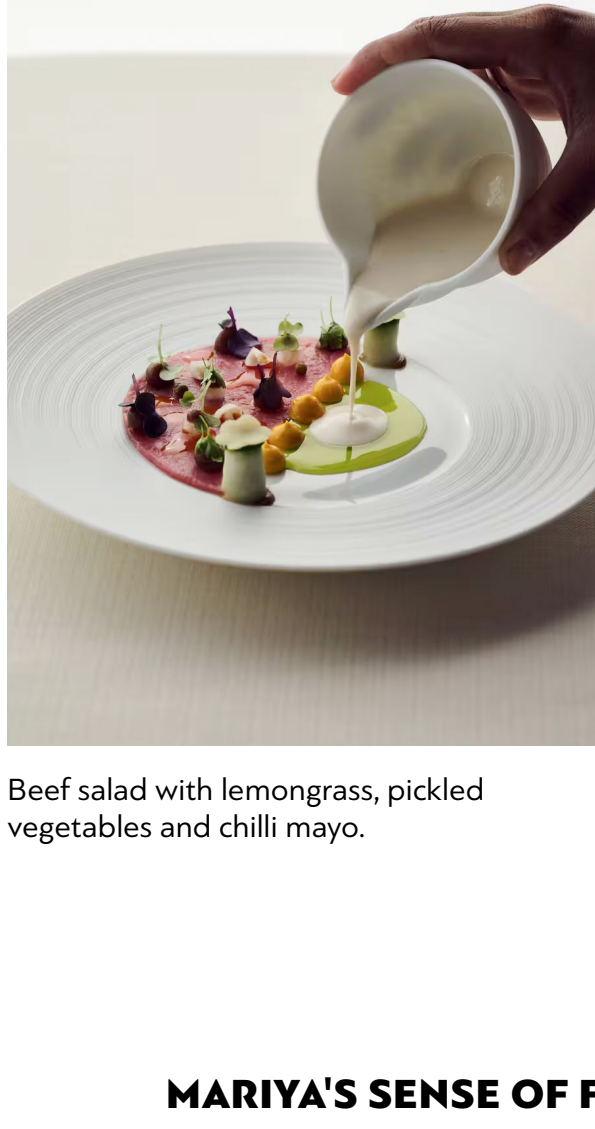
THIS IS JUST A DREAM. Mariya Un Noun is sitting on the terrace of the Epoca restaurant in Zurich, looking out over the city. She could never have imagined that one day she would be in a place like this, surrounded by a great team, raising money for an NGO. I didn't have any dreams as a child. How could I? My family was so poor that my mother sold me, she says. Mariya Un Noun came from nothing. Today she is head chef at the Farmhouse Resort & Spa by Smiling Gecko in Cambodia. Together with Hannes Schmid, star photographer and founder of the Smiling Gecko charity, she is cooking for several fundraising dinners at Sonnenberg Restaurant. The aim is to raise awareness of the project in Cambodia and to collect donations for new projects. Sometimes I pinch my cheeks with both hands and say: "Wake up, Mariya! This is just a dream."

Large picture above: Semnang Koy, Mariya Un Noun, Sreymey Vat and Vuthy Keant (from left to right).



Mariya Un Noun comes from the gutters of Phnom Penh. Today she cooks at "Epoca" on the Zürichberg.

TRAVELLED WITH THE TEAM. The young chef - estimated to be between 32 and 35 years old - did not come to Zurich alone. For the first time, she was able to take a small brigade with her. "I am so grateful. It can't be taken for granted, because flights are very expensive," says Mariya. It is also a special experience for Sreymey Vat. I've always dreamed of coming to Switzerland. Now my dream has come true, says the 19-year-old. Semnang Koy, Mariya's sous-chef, and Vuthy Keant, the man with the sweet tooth, complete the team.



Beef salad with lemongrass, pickled vegetables and chilli mayo.

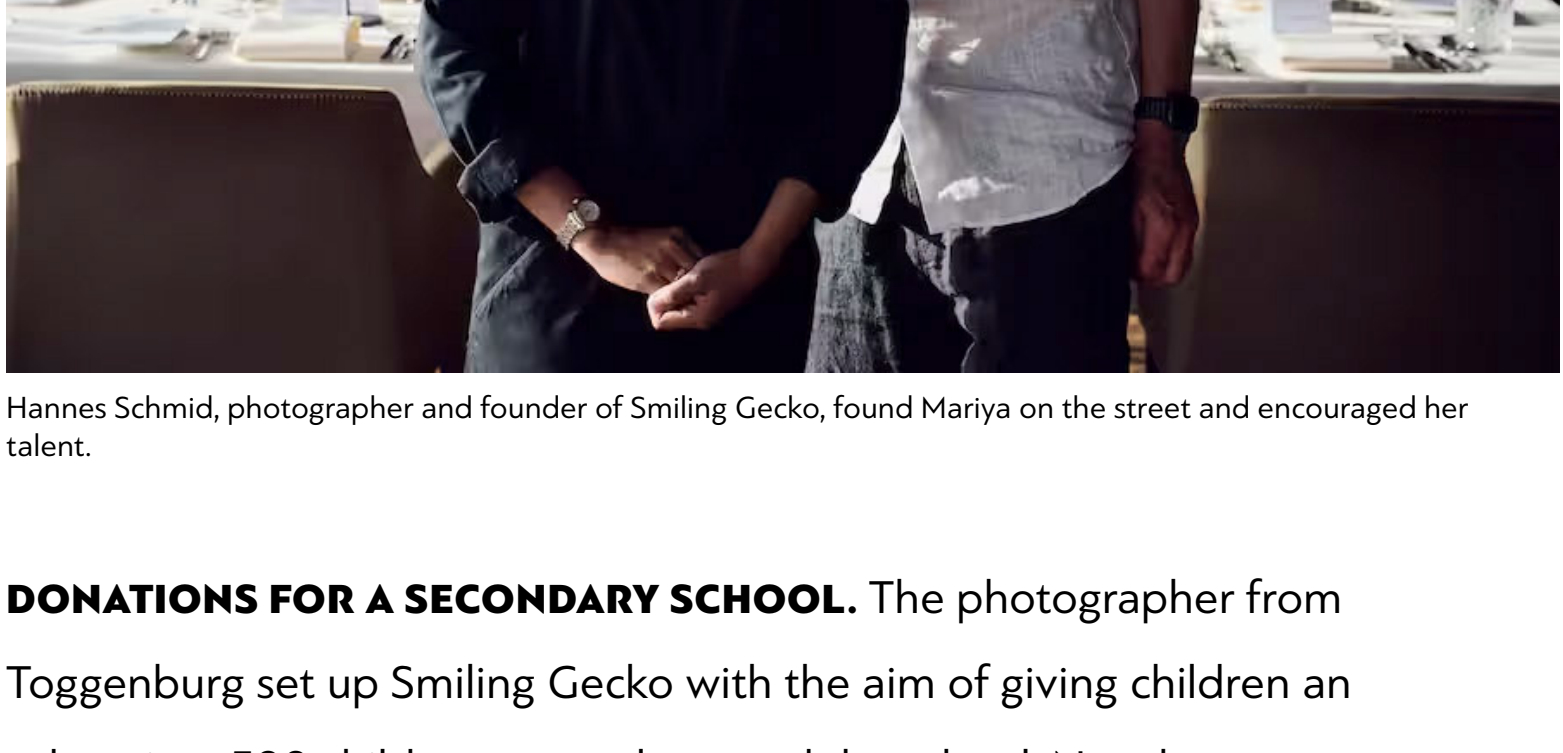


Mariya is now one of the best chefs in Cambodia.



Hannes Schmid smuggled 30 kilos of mango into Switzerland for this dish.

MARIYA'S SENSE OF FLAVOUR. Cambodia is not known for its excellent cuisine. Restaurant guides such as GaultMillau or Michelin are nowhere to be found in the country. And yet the tone in the kitchen of Epoca, on the first floor of Sonnenberg, is like that of a gourmet restaurant in France or Switzerland. Mariya's instructions are greeted with an 'Oui, chef'. When Hannes Schmid found Mariya on the street, she could neither read nor write. And she certainly couldn't cook. But it soon became clear that she had a flair for taste. Mariya was sent to hotel management school in Lucerne and cooked under Franck Giovannini, Massimo Bottura and Andreas Caminada. At first nobody wanted Mariya in their kitchen, but in the end they didn't want to let her go, says Hannes Schmid.



Hannes Schmid, photographer and founder of Smiling Gecko, found Mariya on the street and encouraged her talent.

DONATIONS FOR A SECONDARY SCHOOL. The photographer from Toggenburg set up Smiling Gecko with the aim of giving children an education. 500 children currently attend the school. Now he wants to use the fundraising events in Zurich to raise money for the construction of a secondary school. The charismatic Schmid is putting a lot of effort into this. He tells his guests about his life. How he was kidnapped by cannibals in Papua and barely survived. Or how he has photographed the biggest rock stars of all time. And how he became aware of the misery in Cambodia by chance and has been doing everything he can to change the fate of these people ever since.

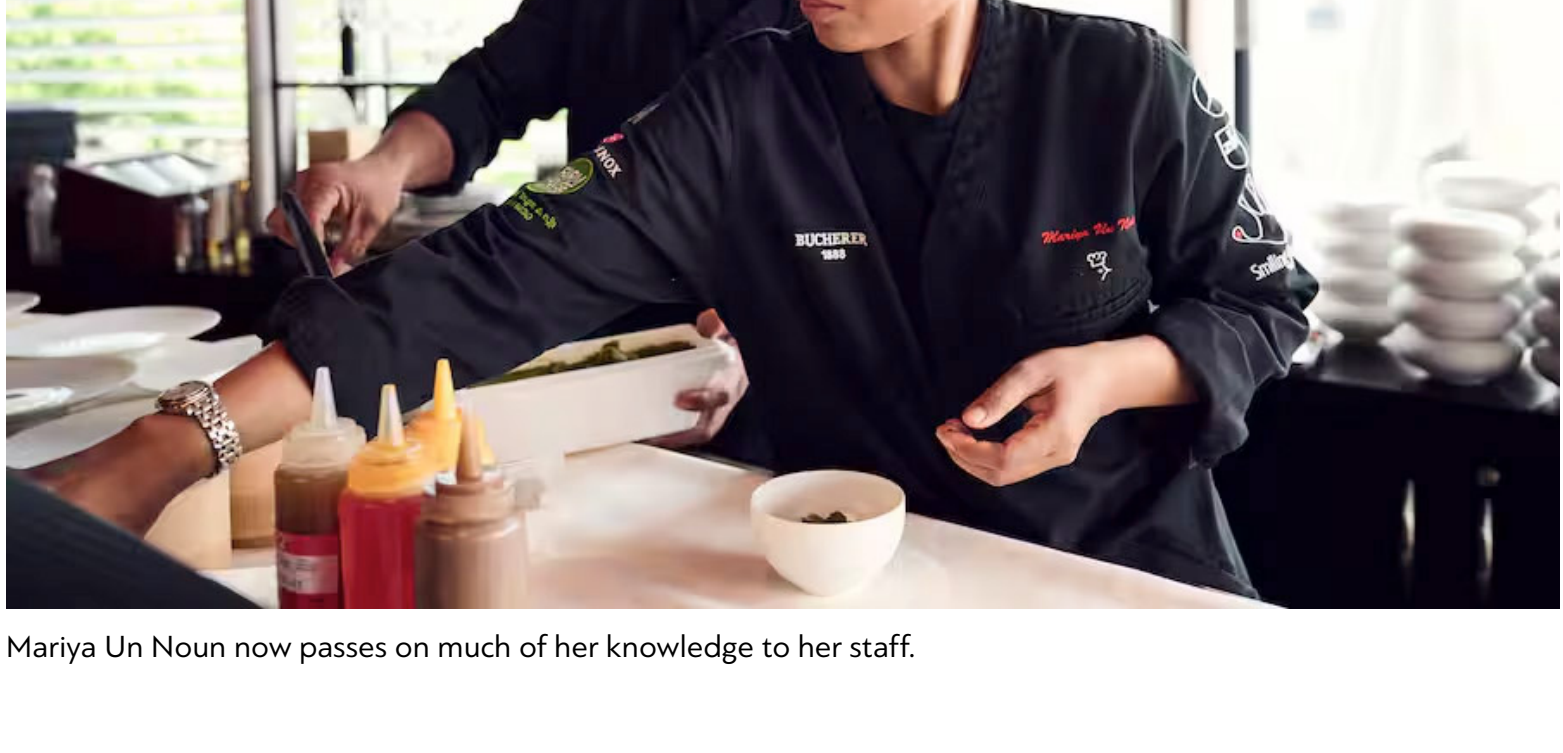


Khmer curry soup with sea bass, beans and fresh noodles.



Scallops with coconut cream sauce, broccoli puree and coriander oil.

RENEWING AND PRESERVING CULTURE. French colonial rule, and later the Khmer Rouge, robbed Cambodians of all their cultural heritage. Smiling Gecko is now trying to restore and preserve a piece of their culture. Food is part of it. Thanks to Mariya Un Noun, Khmer cuisine has a face. She takes guests - and potential supporters - on a journey to Cambodia. She starts with a beef salad with lemongrass, pickles, chilli mayo and lemongrass yoghurt. "You have to mix everything and eat it together," advises the chef. She continues with a scallop with coconut cream sauce, broccoli puree and coriander oil. The curry soup comes with a piece of sea bass, beans and fresh noodles. In Cambodia, Mariya would not serve this dish with loup de mer, but with nilo, a fish bred on the Smiling Gecko farm. The main ingredients of Mariya's dishes, such as fish or meat, are important. But something else is much more important. It is all about the taste! Mariya knows how to combine spices and flavours, but her dishes still pack a punch.



Mariya Un Noun now passes on much of her knowledge to her staff.

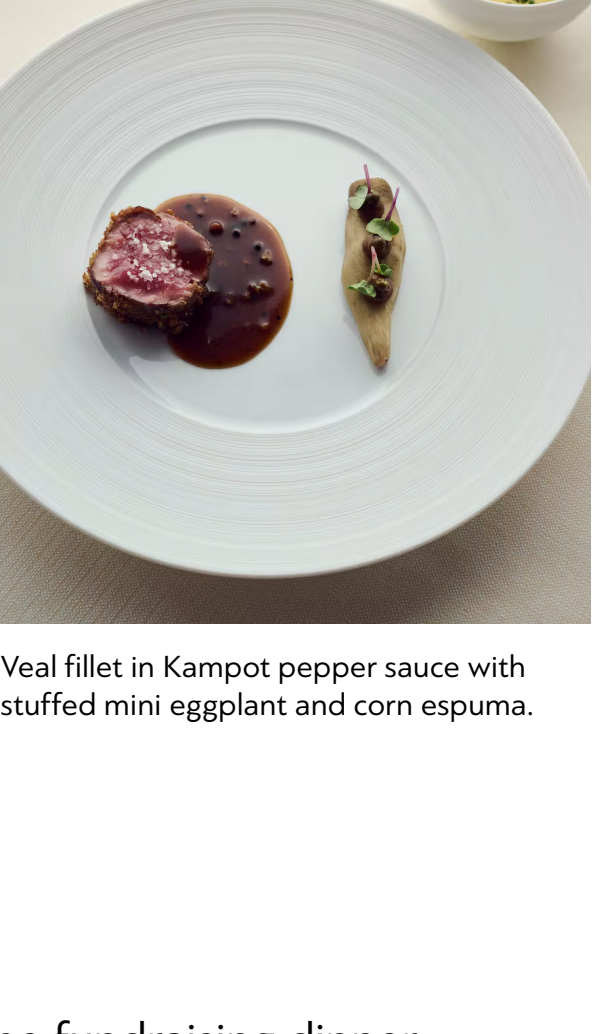
FONDUE AND HASH BROWNS FOR THE CREW. Now it's time to give back. Mariya has a team of 25 cooks in Cambodia. "It is very important for me to pass on my experience and knowledge. I often tell my staff what I have seen in Europe. But now they can see it with their own eyes. Mariya is an incredibly warm person. But I'm strict at work. We work in a very focused and professional way," she says. They laugh after work. We are like a big family. I love my people. In Zurich, her team can learn from Niklas Oberhofer, who is her host at 'Epoca'. But Mariya also trains her team's taste. The area around the farmhouse is very poor. There is not much variety in food. That's why I let them try everything here. Semnang, Vuthy and Sreymey have already tried fondue and hash browns.



Ice cream with vanilla from their own plantation and Kampot pepper.



Mariya came to Europe to learn from the best chefs. When it came to taste, the star chefs could learn a thing or two from her.



Veal fillet in Kampot pepper sauce with stuffed mini eggplant and corn espuma.

30 KILOS OF MANGO IN ONE SUITCASE. The menu for the fundraising dinner is very different. The basil sorbet is accompanied by mango from Cambodia. "I told Hannes I needed 30 kilos of mango. He had to bring them to me in a suitcase," Mariya says, laughing. It's not quite legal. The fruit is not the only product Mariya has brought with her. Kampot pepper is a must. Mariya has also brought her own fermented fish sauce. The Kampot pepper really comes into its own with the main course. The fruity, spicy flavour is perfect with the veal and stuffed mini eggplant. And the pepper is even used in desserts. "Put a little on the vanilla ice cream," Mariya tells Vuthy. It adds a subtle spice to a sweet dish. Or as Mariya puts it: All you need to taste in this dish is Mariya's love.

Kathia Baltisberger Where does our food come from? How is it prepared? Kathia Baltisberger gets to the bottom of chefs and their producers.

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Keywords: Smiling Gecko