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LIFESTYLE

Neighborhood Kitchens Visits Simply Khmer



By **Margarita Martinez**

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I am always on the hunt for the authentic yet unique experience while traveling. Who knew that I would discover entirely new adventures while visiting Lowell, a place I have visited so many times before. I had thought of Lowell as home to historic mills and museums, downtown parks and restaurants, and the resting place of Jack Kerouac. This visit I was in for something completely different.

I first met up with Linda Sopheap Sou, an active Lowell community member and president of the **Angkor Dance Troupe**, an organization started by her father in the 1980s in order to preserve Cambodian performing arts, specifically Cambodian classical dance. Linda took me to the Angkor Dance Troupe's studios in one of the renovated mills downtown. There, young students of all ages were practicing choreography and the techniques of Cambodian classical dance in colorful silk outfits imported from Cambodia.

The students' dedication took me back several years to my experience studying Thai classical dance, which is similar to Cambodian classical dance, with dance masters in Bangkok, Thailand. Thai classical dance is the hardest type of dance I have ever attempted. I tried to dust off my skills with the youngest group of dancers at the Angkor Dance Troupe, but if you don't practice, it is hard to get your fingers and your limbs positioned correctly. I was also reminded of a Cambodian classical dance performance I had seen in Bangkok from a visiting group of recently reunited dance masters. These dancers and singers barely survived the genocide of the Khmer Rouge and practically gave up on ever dancing again. As the troupe bowed at the end of their performance, I still remember rising to my feet with the rest of the audience and clapping with tears streaming down my face.

To see how the Angkor Dance Troupe is now passing down Cambodian classical dance to new generations of Cambodian-Americans and providing an extra-curricular and cultural pursuit for inner-city youth that can be shared with the greater Lowell community made me well up with tears all over again.

After my visit to the studios Linda took me to the Pailin Volleyball Complex at Roberto Clemente Park, a community gathering place in the Cambodia Town neighborhood. With pick-up volleyball games and plenty of spectators, the park is a bustling center with a food stand where you can get papaya salad and other Cambodian delicacies. However, I knew I shouldn't fill up on food at the park, because I was going to learn how to cook authentic Cambodian food with husband and wife Sam Neang and Denise Ban at **Simply Khmer Restaurant**.

Learning to Cook Cambodian

Located on a nondescript street on the border of downtown Lowell and Cambodia Town, Simply Khmer is a welcoming Cambodian restaurant serving traditional Cambodian food. Sam and Denise started the restaurant with the intention of sharing and introducing Cambodian culinary traditions with all of Lowell and to the next generation of Cambodian-Americans.

The menu at Simply Khmer is extensive. It was difficult for Sam and Denise to decide which dishes would demonstrate the complexity of flavors in Cambodian cuisine and would inspire viewers to try these recipes at home. They decided on fried egg rolls, fresh spring rolls, and the ever popular green papaya salad. To finish, we moved on to Som-Law Ma-Ju Yuon. This sweet and sour soup felt like the culmination of many Cambodian ingredients and flavors. The sweetness of the sugar, pineapple, and tamarind powder together with the bold flavors of the Thai basil, ma'om, Asian coriander, fried garlic, fish sauce and lemongrass created an amazingly flavorful, crisp, and tangy soup. My mouth is watering just writing this blog post!

While Sam and I were cooking up some delicious egg rolls, we were interrupted by a special visit. Sam said that he had to take a quick break because Buddhist monks were coming to the restaurant. The monks come at the same time each week to offer a blessing to Sam and Denise, as well as the business. Sam was very apologetic and promised that it would only take a few minutes. But we were thrilled to be able to witness this sacred tradition in their restaurant. When I traveled in Southeast Asia, it was commonplace to see monks accepting alms of food from community members and to offer blessings to businesses and community gatherings and events, but I hadn't seen it done in the United States. I was so touched to see Sam and Denise take pause in their busy day and participate in this custom.

From the historic mills being re-used as museums and business lofts, to the Angkor Dance Troupe and Simply Khmer Restaurant, I witnessed so many examples of cultural preservation during my visit to Lowell. It is amazing to see the children and grandchildren of Cambodian refugees experiencing Cambodian culture and traditions. Denise says that she loves hearing from some of her younger Cambodian-American patrons that Simply Khmer is their first experience with authentic Cambodian cuisine. This example and so many others demonstrate how essential it is to have places such as Simply Khmer Restaurant, the Angkor Dance Troupe, and Pailin Park in order to preserve

Cambodian culture in the United States and to serve as ambassadors of Cambodia's rich cultural and culinary traditions to the greater community in Massachusetts.

Margarita Martinez

Margarita Martinez grew up in the Bronx and Ossining, N.Y., with a Puerto Rican father and a Franco American mother. From making her first empanada as a teenager visiting Argentina to her lifelong search for authentic Mexican food in the Northeast, Margarita has always had an insatiable appetite for Latin American food.

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