

NEATH PAL

At Home with Cambodian Flavor



It's a long way from preparing stocks and painting plates in a restaurant kitchen to making peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and wiping dirty chairs at home but Neath Pal handles his transition from being owner-chef of Neath's restaurant to assuming duties at home with typical ease. As he plays catch with his children, Sam, 6, and Juliana, 4, in the backyard of their East Side of Providence house, Monk, the Labrador retriever, is lying in the grass and Dr. Beth Toolan (Neath's wife, and the kids' mother) is at work. Before rustling up dinner he surveys the domestic scene, "This is completely different for me. I'm loving the moment."

Neath (pronounced knee-it) closed his successful Cambodian-fusion eatery, on South Water Street, Providence back in April. "I felt I was missing out on spending time with the kids," he says. "As busy as we were at the restaurant, it was time to take a break."

And what a sabbatical it's been so far. First there was the 165-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail in May, where, naturally, Neath was given the trail name of "Chef." Then there was the planting of his garden plot

at the Fox Point Community Garden with heirloom tomatoes, broccoli, Cuban peppers, habaneros peppers, nasturtiums and Thai basil, among other edibles. Not to mention the adjustment to full-time parenting, with its requisite activities director, referee and short-order cook duties.

"With two young kids, it's a bit of a challenge," observes Neath. Juliana, when asked about her food preferences says, "broc-o-lee and cel-er-ee." Sam, on the other hand, has plainer tastes. "He could live on rice and soy sauce," Neath grins.

The family's meals are fresh and simple. Lunch might be grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. Dinner could be pasta with a sauce of plum tomatoes, garlic and parsley; or meat with stir-fried vegetables. Rice is served three to four times a week. Everybody loves Neath's traditional Cambodian dishes, such as chicken rubbed with lemon grass and whole grilled sea bass with black bean sauce, which he intersperses with American fare.

Neath helps Sam and Juliana roll the Nime Chow; Sam in his chef's hat waiting for the next bite; Ingredients are all assembled

“In Cambodian culture, food is the center of the family,” Neath says. “You have your own family, but also a bigger family. Everyone in the village—neighbors and kids—is part of this family. Traditionally, we sit on a mat on the floor. There is always meat, vegetables, soup and rice. During the preparation, all the aunts and mothers participate. There are usually five to 10 women in the kitchen. Kids see what’s going on.”

Neath has brought this tradition home to Providence.

“Would you like to cut Daddy some basil?” Neath asks Juliana, as Sam takes a turn on his bike. “It’s time to start making supper.”

With her small pink scissors, Juliana steps into the herb garden by the kitchen door, lush with thyme, peppermint, coriander, parsley, hot peppers, chives, Thai basil, rosemary, fennel, oregano and sage, and snips away.

Tonight will be a Cambodian dinner: grilled baguettes with coconut milk—actually a signature fusion dish from Neath’s restaurant that he laughingly calls “Cambodian bruschetta;” nime chow, or uncooked spring rolls with shrimp, rice noodles and veggies; and grilled teriyaki beef skewers.

In the kitchen, Neath is busy doing his prep work. He arranges red-leaf lettuce, sprigs of Thai basil and cooked, room-temperature rice vermicelli, all components of the nime chow, on a large plate. He deftly slices scallions on the diagonal. With surgical precision he peels and cuts cucumbers into narrow sticks. (“For knives, you need a very sharp chef’s knife, paring knife and slicer. The most important thing is that they feel comfortable in your hands,” says Neath.)

Cooled, cooked shrimp are peeled and carefully sliced in half horizontally. “I buy them at the Mekong Market on Broad Street; they’re one-third the price of shrimps in the supermarket.” The warm, soothing aroma of a previously prepared coconut-milk sauce for the baguettes mingles with the anise fragrance of Thai basil and the tang of scallions.

Neath’s cooking is about recreating the memories of the flavors of his childhood in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Coconut milk, lemon grass, Kafir limes, Thai basil and garlic figure prominently in Cambodian cooking, as do fish sauce (nam pla), black bean sauce and galangal. These ingredients are also used in other Southeast Asian cuisines such as Thai and Vietnamese but in different quantities and proportions. “We’re all closely related geographically,” Neath says.

After the war in 1975, at the age of 13, Neath’s father brought him to Providence to live with Myrth York and David Green. Neath traces his interest in cooking to this time. “Myrth and David were both young lawyers working long hours. I had a big appetite, so I learned to feed myself,” he laughs.

NEATH RECOMMENDS

Asiana Food Market

92 Warren Ave., East Providence
401-438-9992

A great selection of Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese ingredients.

Mekong Market

316 Broad St., Providence
401-272-5769

Choose a live fish swimming in a tank, or crabs, periwinkles, shell-on shrimp and other seafood at reasonable prices.

Antonelli Poultry Co.

62 De Pasquale Sq., Providence
401-421-8739

Live chickens, ducks, rabbits, pheasants. Select an animal from the cages at the back of the store and they butcher it for you. Not for the faint-hearted.

After graduating from Colorado College, he took a summer job as a dishwasher in Newport, Rhode Island, which led to a line-cook job at Dave and Eddie’s Seafood Grill, also in Newport. In 1987, he travelled to France for professional training at the prestigious La Varenne cooking school and worked in the kitchens of culinary greats Andre Surrain and Patrick Asfeaux. He returned to Providence in 1989 and worked at Al Forno, Anthony’s and L’Epicurio, before opening Neath’s in 1998. “I still love Providence’s diversity,” he says. “North Africans, Asians, Hispanics, Italians and Portuguese—it’s very inclusive here.”

When he finishes the prep, Neath’s “assistants,” Sam and Juliana, suddenly reappear in adorable, spiffy white chef’s jackets and colourful, monogrammed aprons, ready for action. The large Weber kettle grill has been fired up with Nature’s Own charcoal, made in Warwick. As Neath carefully places the baguettes on the grill to brown, Juliana uses her own whisk, decorated with a plastic Mickey Mouse, to stir the tasty accompany-

ing coconut sauce. Once plated, she spoons the sauce over the finished baguettes and we dig into an irresistible, soft, milky, sweet-charred comfort food.

Next come the nime chow. “We soak the rice-paper wrappers in warm water, here,” Neath demonstrates, “and then we lay them down on this chopping board and top them with lettuce leaves, rice noodles, cucumber sticks, bean sprouts, shrimp and Thai basil. Then we roll, nice and easy.”

The kids set to work, survey their handiwork and then eat with gusto. The delicate rolls are served with a dipping sauce made from fish sauce, sugar, lemon juice and water. Sometimes a roasted peanut sauce is served alongside. (Interestingly, Neath says that nime chow are “a Providence invention.” The original dish, goi cuon, is Vietnamese. It consists of pork, shrimp and Chinese chives rolled in a wrapper and served with a sweeter dipping sauce of nam pla, sweet sticky rice and hoisin sauce.)

Lastly, Neath places his pre-marinated beef skewers on the grill. Beth will soon be home from work but none of us can resist these delicious morsels. As the kids inevitably race back out to their bikes, by way of chasing each other with a basting brush, Neath takes it all in stride, with a patient smile. Future projects might include writing a cookbook or opening another restaurant but for now, his big adventure is closer to home. eR

Elizabeth Field is a Providence-based food writer. She is completing a master’s degree in gastronomy at the University of Adelaide, Australia.

RECIPE

CAMBODIAN SPRING ROLL "NIME CHOW"

By Neath Pal

- ½ cup nam pla (fish sauce)
- ¾ cup water (room temperature)
- 1 tsp rice wine vinegar
- 2 Tbsp fresh squeezed lime juice
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 12 rice paper wrappers (12" round)
- 1 head green leaf lettuce, leaves washed, dried and separated
- 1 pkg rice vermicelli, cooked, drained and cooled
- 1 cucumber, cut into julienne
- ½ pound bean sprouts
- 1 bunch Thai basil, washed, stemmed and dried
- 24 cooked shrimp (26-30ct), peeled and sliced lengthwise
- 2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 3 Tbsp chopped roasted peanuts

Whisk together all liquid ingredients with sugar in a small bowl. Cover and refrigerate.

Fill a large bowl with warm water and put the rice paper wrappers in to soften for about 20-30 seconds, one at a time. Gently, lift the wrapper from the water, allow it to drip dry. Lay the wrapper on a cutting board and blot dry with a clean dish towel.

Assemble the spring roll by stacking each ingredient across the lower third of the rice paper, beginning with a lettuce leaf, some rice vermicelli, several cucumber slices and some bean sprouts, Thai basil and shrimp (2 per spring roll). Fold the bottom end over the stack and roll one full turn. Fold the sides in about 1 inch then continue rolling the rice paper up to the top. Place the roll seam side down on a plate lined with plastic wrap. Repeat with the remaining wrappers. Cover spring rolls with plastic wrap and a damp towel.

To serve add slices of garlic and toasted peanut to reserved dipping sauce. Cut spring rolls in half, on a bias and serve with dipping sauce. Enjoy! Serves 6.



RECIPE

WOOD GRILLED BAGUETTE WITH COCONUT AND SCALLION DIPPING SAUCE

By Neath Pal

- 1 baguette
- 3 Tbsp olive oil
- kosher salt
- 4 cups coconut milk
- ¾ Tbsp palm sugar
- 1 ¼ tsp nam pla (fish sauce)
- 2 Tbsp scallion, sliced

Slice ½-inch pieces of baguette on a bias. Brush slices of baguette with olive oil and sprinkle with kosher salt. Grill or toast baguette slices until golden brown on both sides.

Make the dipping sauce in a saucepan. Bring the coconut milk, sugar and fish sauce to a boil. Lower the heat and let simmer for 15 minutes. Add scallion slices and spoon over grilled baguettes. Serve.

Serves 6.



RECIPE

LEMONGRASS MARINATED SKIRT STEAK

By Neath Pal

- ½ cup lemongrass (green leafy parts only), coarsely chopped
- 1 Tbsp finely chopped ginger
- 1 Tbsp coarsely chopped shallot
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 cup cilantro (leaves and stems), washed and dried
- 2 Kaffir lime leaves (can substitute with 2 tsp lime zest)
- ½ cup lite sodium soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp rice wine
- 1 Tbsp vegetable oil
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 ½ - 2 pounds skirt steak, sliced in approximately 5-inch strips
- 1 package 8-inch bamboo skewers

In a blender or food processor, combine lemongrass, ginger, shallot, garlic, cilantro and Kaffir lime leaves. Pulse and chop coarsely. Add remaining liquid ingredients and sugar, blend until smooth paste forms. Place marinade in non-reactive bowl, cover and refrigerate for minimum of 1 hour.

Soak 12 bamboo skewers in water for approximately 1 hour. Prepare a gas or charcoal grill for direct-heat grilling over high heat and oil the grill rack. Or, preheat a broiler.

Drain the skewers. Remove the meat from the marinade, discarding the marinade. Thread the meat onto the skewers, dividing the meat evenly.

Place the skewers on the grill rack, or put on a rimmed baking sheet and place under the broiler. Cook, turning once or twice, until seared, 3 to 4 minutes total for medium-rare, or to taste. Serve immediately.

Serves 4 to 6.



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