

EAT LAO

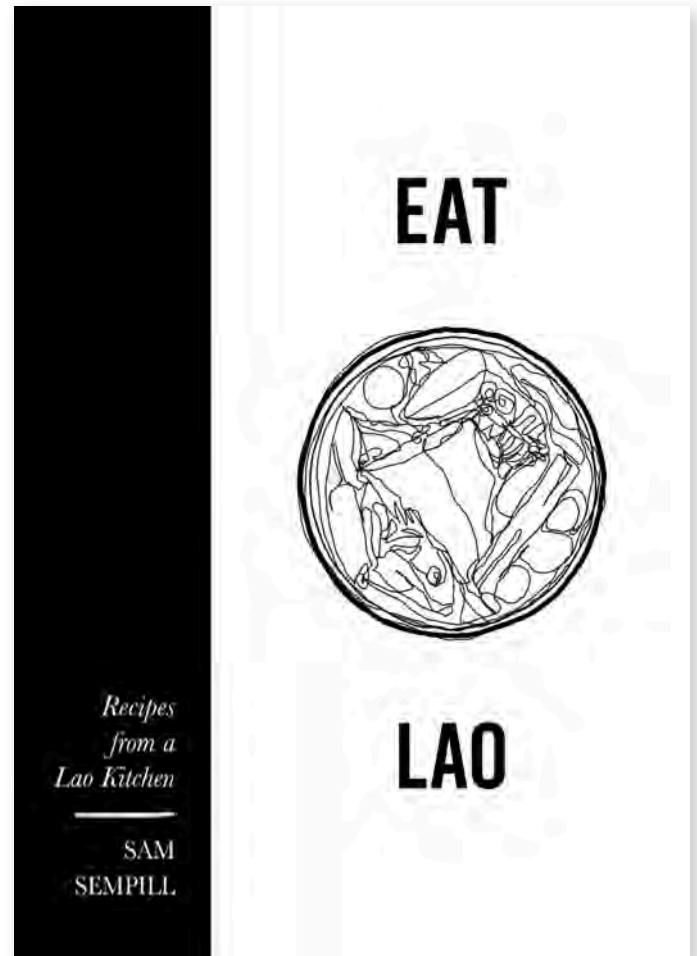
Recipes from a Lao Kitchen

SAM SEMPILL

Sam Sempill is a Lao-born Australian architect.

This book follows the memories of her grandmother's cooking back to Lao. The food her grandmother cooked provided her with a connection back to a country she left as a child. The recipes celebrate the uniqueness of the Lao food tradition. Each recipe, like the scent of a signature perfume, evokes memories of a certain moment in time. Sam tells the story of her family's (earliest) integration into Australian culture. Through compiling these recipes, Sam discovered the comforting central role that food has played in her life, and how food was used to communicate empathy and love in a family where hugs and kisses were substituted with soups and braises.

The recipes in this book aim to keep those memories alive and to share the unique flavours, joy and love of cooking from a Lao family kitchen.



“Through compiling these recipes, I have discovered the central role that food has played in my family's life.”

“The recipes in this book contain the essence of my childhood, and my family's gradual but earnest integration into Australian life.”



'In time, weaving and cooking didn't just enrich my life – they became intrinsic to my life, and to my identity.'

'It is this desire to maintain my culture that inspired me to learn how to cook and weave textiles in the tradition of my grandmothers.'

The Author

Sam Sempill is a Lao-born Melbourne Architect. In 2001, while studying for her architecture degree at the University of Melbourne, she opened a restaurant in Fitzroy where, together with her mother and grandmother, she cooked family recipes. After finishing her degree, Sam became a registered architect and has worked at a range of Melbourne architectural studios, including her own architecture and textile studio in Carlton.

Inspired by her Lao heritage and family traditions, Sam is a self-taught textile artist and handweaver. Many of the textiles seen in this book have been designed and handwoven by Sam, and the antique Lao textiles are family heirloom pieces, many of which were woven by her grandmother. All illustrations seen in this book are by Sam.





STEAMED FISH PARCEL

Mok Ph

The success of this dish will largely depend on the preparation. Prepare the aromatic marinade, then coat the fish and allow it to infuse before wrapping it up in parcels and steaming.

Gran used to reminisce about the endless hot days spent with her friends along the shady Mekong River. This was before the trees were cut down in the name of progress. They made these parcels at home and packed them on their journey. They were cooked low and slow over hot coals for lunch. What a great memory to have to make a dish so memorable.

Serves 2 if there are other dishes to share, otherwise double the recipe to serve 2 with a side of glutinous rice

Ingredients

Approximately 400 g Murray perch (you can use chicken instead – then it would be called 'Mok Gai')

1/4 cup chopped dill

3 Tbsp finely sliced spring onion

4 Tbsp finely chopped coriander leaves

3 Tsp salt

1/4 Tsp ground black pepper

2 Tsp fish sauce

4 Tbsp Soaked Glutinous Rice (*refer to page 41*)

A few sheets of banana leaves for wrapping and the rough outer leaves of lemongrass for tying the parcels, or you can use cooking string

Fish stock – water would be fine if you don't have any pre-prepared stock

Steaming 147



RAINBOW TROUT SOUP

Geang Pa Trout

When I was young we used to drive to the trout farm in Albury to catch a rainbow trout for this soup. The dish is memorable because an adventure preceded the meal. It was Gran's favourite soup, and she made it often. We used to nervously supervise her eating, as she wasn't very careful, and was known to visit the doctor frequently to have bones removed.

The broth is clear and the soup full of flavour. Cook it low and slow on the heat to keep the fish and tomatoes intact, the soup crystal clear. This will ensure that the tangy flavour imparted from the tomatoes, lemongrass and kaffir lime leaves will remain concentrated.

If you are concerned about eating bones, make a separate stock out of fish bones; cook the recipe using the strained fish stock and use filleted and boned fish for this recipe. The fish should still be cooked in a low and slow manner. I used this method when my daughter was younger and it was her favourite soup, enjoyed with rice.

Serve as a side in small bowls, or add noodles and other vegetables for a satisfying lunch.

Serves 2-3

Ingredients

1 whole trout, cleaned, gutted, and quartered

1/2 brown onion, thickly sliced

Cold water to cover the fish

5 thin slices fresh ginger root

8 whole cherry tomatoes

3-4 coriander roots cut 1 cm away from the roots, washed

4 kaffir lime leaves

Boiling 77

sample spreads

**BEEF SALAD***Yam Neua*

This dish is memorable. Ask my brother-in-law Julian – it's one of his favourite dishes, as it is my husband's. This dish does have that affect on people, it's the freshness and tanginess of the ingredients that when well-balanced, is in perfect harmony.

I'm not shy of herbs – the more the better for me. Adjust your quantities as you wish. Enjoy on a bed of crunchy iceberg lettuce, or with steamed rice.

Serves 2

Ingredients

- 500 g rump steak
- 1 Tsp Ground Toasted Glutinous Rice (*refer to page 39*)
- 1/2 Tsp dried chilli
- 2 red birdseye chillies, sliced
- 1/2 cup mixed coriander and mint leaves
- 1/8 Tbsp spring onion, finely sliced
- 1/4 Tbsp red onion, finely sliced
- 2 Tbsp lemongrass, remove the tough outer leaves and finely slice the stalks
- 3 Tsp kaffir lime leaves, very finely sliced
- 5–6 Tsp lime juice, adjust to taste
- 5–6 Tbsp fish sauce, adjust to taste
- 2 Tsp caster sugar
- 2 Tsp vegetable oil to cook the meat
- Sliced cucumber to serve

Salads 187**CURED PORK SAUSAGE***Som Moo*

My gran enjoys these moreish bites raw, and theoretically you can, as they are cured like salami. I prefer it sliced into thick pieces and seared on a hot pan until cooked through and caramelised. It isn't unusual for them to fall apart slightly, particularly if you haven't worked the mix to the right sticky consistency, or rolled it tightly enough. If this happens, don't fret, it will still taste delicious and just mop these up with some glutinous rice.

Traditionally, these can be wrapped in banana leaves but if you don't have any, then food-grade plastic bags can be used for the curing process. Don't be fooled by the pink colour of the meat, as when they are cured and ready to eat, the meat will always remain pink. Serve with glutinous rice and sliced cucumber.

Serves about 6

Ingredients

- 1 kg pork mince (ask your butcher to mince a good quality piece of pork. I have used a pork shoulder)
- 1.5 kg pork crackling skin (ask your butcher to cut into 2–3 mm-thick slices that are about 4–5 cm long)
- 4 Tbsp salt
- 3 Tbsp cooled and washed Steamed Glutinous Rice (*refer to page 27*). Wash the rice in cold water to separate the grains and drain out excess moisture, blot with a paper towel
- 6–8 whole garlic cloves cut in half length-ways
- 3 whole red birdseye chillies with stems removed
- Sterile plastic food-grade bags and rubber bands or cooking string for tying

Curing 63

sample spreads

**COCONUT CUSTARD PUMPKIN***Nung Ghati Mok Poo*

After I moved out of home and I went back to visit Gran, she would prepare this to literally greet me with at the door. Freshly made coconut milk is the best for this but, understandably, if you can't make your own, you could substitute with canned coconut milk. Gran made this contraption to replace one she had in Lao to grate coconut with. It looked a bit like a wooden baby crocodile, which had a serrated circular blade attached to the mouth end.

She could break a coconut perfectly in half using the back of a heavy cleaver – more like a machete, actually. She'd sit on the back of the crocodile, and grate the half coconut with the semi-circular blade. The white flesh would fall onto the wooden tray below like wet snow. She'd then undertake a first pressing of the coconut by hand, squeezing hard until the coconut milk was extracted. Then the second press would require a bit of water to make the coconut go further. The remaining desiccated coconut would be mixed with palm sugar and eaten with glutinous rice, or sprinkled on top of this steamed pumpkin custard to make it just a little more special.

Serves 2

Ingredients

600 ml coconut milk

2 eggs

1 egg yolk

4–5 Tbsp caster sugar

A pinch of salt

A small whole Japanese pumpkin or similar, sweet variety

Optional: Combine 1/2 Tsp grated palm sugar and 1/2 Tsp desiccated coconut and some toasted sesame to serve

Sweets 213*Connection & Memory*

My family eventually settled in Melbourne. After a pretty uneventful upbringing in suburbia, I yearned for a more exciting life full of art, culture and people. At twenty years old, I chanced upon a one-line newspaper advertisement that read: 'Restaurant for sale in Fitzroy'. When I saw this, I left electrified and was on a mission. Perhaps because food had always played such a central role in my upbringing and identity, the idea of starting a restaurant at such a young age didn't faze me at all. On the contrary, it seemed like the most natural pathway and this was my ticket out of the bleakness of my suburban life. However, as a poor student, I had no money to speak of, so I pitched the idea to my mum and gave her a very rough outline of a business plan. At twenty-one, during my architecture degree, I took the money that I had been saving to buy my first car and purchased a business in Smith Street, Fitzroy.

For the next six years, Fitzroy became my haven; it was a completely different world to what I had grown up around. It was dirty, urban, artistic, noisy and exciting, and it was a brutally honest place. I was faced with a choice – to quietly live amongst the grit and noise as a spectator, or to participate in the scene. I dived in head-first. I immersed myself in this vibrant place of artists, musicians, and people from all walks of life who came into the restaurant to share stories over family recipes cooked from the heart. It was here that I honed my cooking skills and was able to share my cherished family recipes with others, many of whom became close friends.

Many years later, I began to reflect on the important role that food has played in my life. From those early memories of cooking with Gran, my childhood days spent in our family restaurant in Tasmania, to one day owning my own restaurant in Fitzroy. Why am I so drawn to food and cooking?

I have grown up Australian, but I yearn to remain connected to my Lao culture. It is this desire to maintain culture that inspired me to learn how to cook and weave textiles in the tradition of my grandmothers. In time, weaving and cooking didn't just enrich my life, they became intrinsic to my life, and to my identity.

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sample spreads