The Nam Ou river was once a major transport route, bringing people and produce from northern Laos to Luang Prabang.

The complexity, grace, and taste of Luang Prabang unfurl one delicious bite at a time.

By Andrew Nelson. Photographs by Ewen Bell
Raise a spoonful of *tom kha kai*, a traditional Laotian coconut chicken soup, to your lips, and a tantalizing perfume of lemongrass, lime, and galangal wafts upward. Its scent is sublime and earthy, hot and sour. The fragrant plume comes with a peppery kick. The sensation is vivid, somehow poignant, and utterly transporting.

The memory brings a smile as I stand in a line of passengers at Luang Prabang airport, in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. I’ve traveled 9,000 miles to Southeast Asia inspired by Van Nolintha, a charismatic 32-year-old Laotian-American restaurateur in Raleigh, North Carolina, whose inventive renditions of his childhood dishes from his native land have earned the acclaim of diners and food critics alike.

Now I’ve come for a taste of the real thing. Upon leaving the airport, my first views of Laos are the Phou Thao and Phou Nang mountain ranges, which surround the ancient royal city of Luang Prabang like an embrace. The slopes are lush with trees that comb and catch the low-lying clouds. As I enter the city, a cluster of motorbikes overtakes my taxi, trailing fumes and impatience. A teenage girl, sitting sidesaddle in a Laotian silk tube skirt called a *sinh*, flashes past. Her face is inches from her smartphone. She’s texting furiously, oblivious to her young driver and the pushy traffic puddling up behind us, which includes four Toyota vans packed with Chinese tourists. Their wide-brimmed sun hats curl against the steamy windows.

Built on a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers, the city was once an important Buddhist religious center and seat of empire. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, it served as the capital of a state that called itself Lan Xang, or Kingdom of a Million Elephants. Princely wars and declining fortunes followed. In 1560 the Laotian capital was moved to Vientiane, though Luang Prabang retained its own king. Eventually Laos fell into European possession following the creation of the French protectorate in 1893. The French recognized Luang Prabang as the Laotian royal seat once more.

Beside the ancient temples, a new Parisian-designed palace and French administrative buildings filled the historic core, now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

I locate my friend Van at Satri House, a former colonial mansion revived as a boutique hotel. He’s in the courtyard, dangling his legs in the pool. “Do you like it here?” he asks as a bottle of chilled rosé appears. I do. Furnished with antiques, the

*SOMETIMES A PORTAL ISN’T A DOOR. IT’S A BOWL OF SOUP.*


Luang Prabang’s Night Market, along Sisavangvong Road, is known as a place where hungry travelers can enjoy an entire meal for a dollar and change. In addition to Laotian dishes, local beer, and tropical fruit shakes, vendors sell handicrafts, textiles, and souvenirs.
28-room property exudes serenity and lost grandeur. As if on cue, a buttercream-colored Rolls-Royce glides past on the street beyond, with an elegant, white-haired Laotian woman seated in back. Who is she? Where is she going? There are mysteries in Luang Prabang. And, I come to learn, ghosts.

“My grandmother was named Mae Tao,” Van tells me. “Growing up in Luang Prabang, I tended the family flower garden with her. She taught me that each flower had a life and personality, and how to cut, clean, and arrange each bloom in a certain manner,” he says. “‘You are from Luang Prabang,’ she liked to say. ‘You should care about small details—they’re sacred.’ ”

That attention to the little things would sustain Van, who grew up in this neighborhood, in a small house in another time in a different Laos. The years following the American War (the Laotian term for the Vietnam War) brought turmoil to Luang Prabang. In 1975 the monarchy was overthrown, and Laos became a communist state.

For Van’s family, the two decades following meant disruption, conflict, and hunger as Laos turned inward. He and his sister, Vanvisa, saw their parents struggle, but their hospitality was forever bountiful.

“We were so poor, but there was always someone visiting the house,” he tells me. “There were always people at the table.” His parents fretted over their children’s future. Should they send them away for an education, into a world they barely knew? Should they keep them close to home and tradition? In 1998, at age 12, Van left for America, and his sister soon followed. He would not see his home in Luang Prabang for six years.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, Van stayed with family friends and attended a public middle school. It was a difficult separation from all that he knew. He began cooking the food he remembered from Laos, determined not to forget the place he and his sister left behind. “I needed to make sure our memories of Luang Prabang were preserved,” he says.

He listened to pop music and spoke English fluently, attended university in Raleigh on a scholarship, and studied design and chemistry. In 2004, like so many immigrants before them, Van and Vanvisa became U.S. citizens. The next day, van invites me for breakfast in the heart of the historic district on Sakkaline Road. We sit down at a family-run, open-air restaurant across from a gilded temple where monks clad in marigold orange robes whitewash the walls. An iron pot full of a tangle of rice noodles bubbles away, heated by a wood fire. The owner welcomes us with big broth-filled bowls and piles of fresh mint, basil, and lettuce leaves in a dozen shades of green. We spoon in jeow bong sauce—orange and scarlet and sweet and sour. Additional plates of sticky rice, bean sprouts, limes, and long beans, as well as small bowls of fish sauce and fermented shrimp paste, crowd the table. The bounty finds its way into our bowls. All is simple, yet with a complexity of flavor.

“Identity is in the very food you eat here,” Van says. “It’s profoundly important to Luang Prabang. Our cuisine is central to how we understand ourselves. Our sense of place and relationship to the sacred are found in the ingredients we harvest along the river and the food we cook at home.”

What happens when you can no longer experience the food that so defines you, I wonder, knowing that with suitcases and ambitions, each wave of newcomers to U.S. shores brings memories and yearnings for a taste of home. According to a study by the National Restaurant Association, the top three global cuisines eaten in America—Chinese, Mexican, and Italian—are scarcely considered foreign anymore, as nine out of 10 Americans eat them. But only 20 percent of Americans have sampled cuisines such as Korean, Ethiopian, and Brazilian. Laotian food is so uncommon it didn’t even make the list, but for Van and Vanvisa, it became their meal ticket. “How you tend your land is how you honor your family,” says Van, who made the difficult choice to sell a piece of ancestral land to finance their restaurant in Raleigh. In 2012 he and his sister opened Bida Manda (Sanskrit for “father mother”) in a revitalized neighborhood around the corner from the city’s bus station. The mix of Laos and Dixie created a sensation. Last year, with co-owner and brewer Patrick Woodson, the siblings opened Bhavana, a craft brewery and community café that introduced Raleigh’s techies and Tar Heels...
Sisavangvong Road in Luang Prabang retains its colonial-era architecture and is a hub for casual cafes, tourist services, and French-style pastries.
to the piquancy of Laotian delicacies like mok pa—aromatic steamed fish in a banana-leaf wrap, spiced with coconut curry and served with sticky rice—and handcrafted ales brewed with mangos and peppercorns. Purple hydrangeas from the house flower shop and art books from the house bookstore grace its interior, which fills out a light-washed, warehouse-size space. As his grandmother said, it was all in the details. “A showstopper,” proclaimed Bon Appetit. Soon after, Bhavana was nominated for a James Beard award, the Oscar of edibles.

A love for the small, artful moment infuses Luang Prabang in unexpected ways. Walking on a side street in the old city, I notice plumeria blossoms set carefully and reverently atop fence posts and doo...
"A big pot of pork broth and a few chairs are all you need to open a pho stall in Laos," says photographer Ewen Bell. Opposite: riverside dining at Burasari Heritage hotel.
as a megaphone erupts in Mandarin to beckon clattering Chinese visitors to assemble beneath a guide’s flag. Tourist numbers are growing. Not just from China but from all over the world. Already foreigners outnumber locals at the traditional dawn alms-giving ceremony for the monks. Old, ornate, and delicate, Luang Prabang must guard against overtourism or else crumble under the invasion.

So I think the Nolinthas’ effort to establish Luang Prabang’s culinary traditions in Raleigh is important. It was daring to trade a plot of land in Laos for a promise of success in the United States. The last time I spoke with Van, I told him I worried about his old home. But he reassured me that the city’s spirit is less fragile than it might appear at first.

“I’m uncertain of what Luang Prabang will become,” he said. “But whatever happens, the city will always be a portrait of generosity, grace, and beauty. Guests will always be welcome at our table. After all, that is our way.”

Award-winning Washington, D.C.–based writer ANDREW NELSON (@andrewtyrrellnelson) is already planning a return visit to Laos. Photographer and journalist EWEN BELL (@ewenbell) lives in Melbourne, Australia, and has visited Laos every year for the past decade.

**Travel Wise:**
**Luang Prabang**

**WHAT TO KNOW**

Flying into Luang Prabang is easy with daily, direct service from Bangkok and Hanoi. A tourist visa is required. For Americans, visas are furnished on arrival for $35 cash; bring two passport-size photos.

**NOT TO MISS**

National Museum
Built in 1904, this palace museum offers a glimpse into the world of Lao kings and their families. On the ground floor is an elegant pavilion housing the Prabang kings and their families. On the third floor, the museum offers a glimpse into the history of the Royal Palace.

Wat Xieng Thong
Known as the Golden City Temple, this 16th-century complex was built near the meeting of Luang Prabang’s two rivers and is important as a religious and national symbol. It was here that Lao kings were crowned.

Phousi Hill
This energetic climb brings you to the summit, with 300-plus steps for a fantastic view of the city and its surroundings. A small 200-year-old stupa, or temple, sits atop the hill's 300-plus steps for a fantastic view of the city and its surroundings.

WHERE TO EAT

La Banneton Café
This Paris-inspired boulangerie offers dark, rich coffee plus freshly baked pastries, baguettes, and croissants, a tradition from the French colonialists.

Dyen Sabai
You need to cross the Nam Khan on a bamboo footbridge to get to this casual restaurant, but the trek is worthwhile for the stunning views, floor pillows, and fresh eggplant salad.

LaDerm Restaurant
Near where Sisasongprong becomes Sakkaline Road, LaDerm serves Lao comfort food—everything from crunchy, spicy som tam (green papaya salad) to cricket deep-fried with lime leaves and tossed with salt.

WHERE TO STAY

AVANI+ Luang Prabang
A sleek and chic, five-star hotel built around a large pool offers easy access to the nightlife, located just across the street. morphotels.com/en/avani/luang-prabang

Rosewood Luang Prabang
The Rosewood sits a bit out of town but pampers with a waterfall, an indulgent spa, and wellness programs. rosewoodhotels.com/en/luang-prabang

Saint House
This boutique hotel housed in a French colonial villa has a prime location in the World Heritage district. vilaxhanoihotel.com

**GO WITH NAT GEO**

Nat Geo Expeditions offers a 13-day “Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia Adventure” itinerary that includes three nights in Luang Prabang. Guests visit the city’s renowned shrines, experience a Buddhist baci ceremony, and go hiking in the countryside. natgeexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687