

Helping out by dining at a safe haven

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Social service: The calm outdoor dining space of Haven (photo left) serves as a training ground for orphans like Chhao, shown here with owner Paul Wallimann. *JP/Munir Winkel*

“Do I want to go back?” my friend Ermias asked me.

“Are you asking me if I want to go back to my favorite restaurant in Cambodia? Of course I do!”

We were talking about Haven, a training restaurant for orphans in Siem Reap, Cambodia. When David, a Bangkok-based consultant, introduced me to Haven, he described it as: “superb – a restaurant that keeps bringing you back – for the food, the ambience, the people and for the philosophy.”

As soon as you step inside Haven’s bamboo enclosure and walk along the gray gravel stones towards the outdoor wooden tables, you feel the serenity of the restaurant. Tropical plants line the blue walls around it, giving the half outdoor restaurant a sense of an oasis. The large umbrellas, stand-alone fans and relaxed ambience add a sense of tranquility as diners quietly nibble away at the feasts in front of them. Yet, it is not just customers who benefit from this haven.

“We are doing this for the orphans,” explained Paul Wallimann, who started Haven with his wife Sara in December 2011.

They had just spent seven months volunteering at a local orphanage. That led the Wallimanns to wonder: what happens to orphans after they turn 18 and are no longer supported by the orphanages?

“Their prospects are not so good,” sighed Wallimann. With high tuition and education costs and no family businesses to work for, “the likelihood of getting education or finding a legitimate job is incredibly slim.”

As a result, the Swiss couple founded Haven. Through their non-profit organization Dragonfly, they provide orphans with valuable job skills along with housing, food and medical care. Needless to say, Haven also provides delectable dishes at desirable prices.

Chhao, one of the the first to be accepted into their training program, brought out my order with a warm smile. I was soon smiling as well – the Khmer Amok curry was delicious.

Ermias seemed to be enjoying himself as well with a pumpkin burger.

“The secret to great calamari is in the sauce,” David raved about his dish. “And they know the secret.”

When he found out that the chef used to work at the Foreign Correspondent's Club, he smiled. “No wonder the food tastes so good.”

Everybody helps

As to why he made the switch, Pardet, the chef of Haven, explained, “There, I could cook. Here I can cook and help.”

Helping is an integral part of Haven's philosophy and extends to their motto, “where helping tastes good”.

Perhaps they should add: “smells good and feels good” as well.

“And looks good,” suggested Ermias, noticing the wide open window to the kitchen — spotlessly clean and quite modern with its stainless steel equipment and counters.

“Food safety and hygiene are top priorities,” explained Sara. “That is why, everyone, from the wait-staff to the cooks, get training on proper hygiene and even basic microbiology.”

“And financial education,” Paul added. All the tips the orphans receive over the year long program go directly into a bank account in their name. “Once they graduate from our program and find jobs, they're going to need a sum of money for housing or education.”

Thinking about the long run is a theme with Paul and Sara. From asking what happens after the orphans turn 18, to what happens when they graduate from the program, they take steps to help these orphans have a greater chance for success.

“What happens next, for you and Haven?” I asked them.

“We are hoping to make Haven self-sustainable within two years,” Sara said. “So all donations go directly to the program. Our staff get paid, but we,” Sara pointed to her husband and herself, “We volunteer.”

“Ten to twelve hour days,” Paul quickly added.

While long days are the norm for Paul and Sara, excellent service and delicious dishes are the norm for the customers. I would know — it seems that every day that I spent in Siem Reap included at least one meal at Haven. From feasting on their exquisite vegetarian pumpkin burger (\$5.25) to soaking in the warmth of the Khmer Amok, my meals have been tasty, well presented and filling.

With most entries costing less than \$5.25, Haven offers relief for one's wallet while providing relief for some of Cambodia's orphans as well.

"But we're closed on Tuesdays," Sara said. "That's when we conduct training on hygiene and industry practices. Besides, we all need some time off."

While that may be true, I certainly am a bit hungrier on Tuesdays.

Getting there:

A flight to Siem Reap to visit Haven would be worth it, but I would also recommend that you visit a few temples — Angkor Wat comes to mind. Once you've arrived in Siem Reap, take a stroll past Pub Street and glance up. X marks the spot of one of the tourist's favourite bars, X-Bar, located on Sok San Street. Just 20 meters past X bar, on your right, are the bamboo gates to Haven.

The writer is currently traveling throughout Southeast Asia.

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