



PHNOM PENH'S GOLDEN BREADS

AN SIMPLE DISH WITH BIG FLAVOURS AND A BIGGER SENSE OF THE CITY'S HISTORY — NO WONDER NAM PANG IS ONE OF CAMBODIA'S FAVOURED STREET DISH. AUSTIN BUSH TUCKS IN

PHOTOGRAPHY AUSTIN BUSH

Phnom Penh's wide, tree-lined avenues and stately colonial-era buildings may be the most distinct and visible remnants of the French colonial dominance that lasted over a century. But a closer look reveals that the French influence in a slightly more unlikely place: the city's street food.

At every market and from virtually every street corner in Phnom Penh, vendors can be spotted selling vast baskets of French-style baguettes. Baked daily, the golden-hued breads are often sold and eaten plain, and are among the tastiest in Southeast Asia. When served with a mixture of French-style meat products (charcuterie) and local vegetables and condiments, the result is nam pang, a dish that straddles two very different cuisines.



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To the uninitiated, nam pang resembles banh mi, the baguette sandwiches so popular all over Vietnam and abroad. But unlike banh mi, the Phnom Penh version is usually not served as a sandwich. Instead, the bread and fillings are presented separately. Cambodians eat this dish by clutching the bread in one hand while using the other to pick at a side dish of pickled and fresh vegetables and meats. These vegetables invariably include a sweet and sour 'salad' of crispy green papaya and carrot strips, pickled and fresh cucumber, thin slices of tart green tomato and sprigs of green onion. The meats typically consist of two or three varieties of pork sausages, ranging from a pale loaf studded with black peppercorns to strips of a gelatinous and often tough head sausage.

Another unique twist to this Cambodian favourite, compared to its Vietnamese counterpart, is the accompanying condiments. For instance, the ubiquitous topping is a bright red and fiery chilli jam that shatters all preconceived notions that Khmer cooking is less spicy than its neighbours'. Other condiments include a mild bottled chilli sauce, a shaker of the famous black pepper from southern Cambodia and soy sauce. These are usually sprinkled directly on the side dishes or generously slathered onto the bread itself.

To make nam pang, a half or entire loaf is sliced lengthwise, slathered with sweet butter and then briefly toasted. Next, the hawker will spread over a thick layer of coarse pork pate. Thanks to the use of wheat and rice flour in the dough, the baguettes are especially light and crispy, and tend to remain so even in the sweltering tropical heat. Enterprising nam pang hawkers and most nam pang shops also sell deliciously creamy fruit smoothies, an ideal accompaniment on a hot Phnom Penh afternoon. Nam pang are also commonly sold from mobile vendors, who usually serve the entire dish as a sandwich, tightly wrapped in a piece of recycled paper.

Despite its indisputable French origins, nam pang is in many ways a Khmer creation. Any suggestion otherwise might well result in a mediocre loaf from a disgruntled vendor!