

FEATURED

# Why You Must Eat at Haven Cambodia (+A Delicious Khmer Curry Recipe!)

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 eat travel - by country

If your travel plans will be bringing you to Siem Reap, mama, be sure to visit Haven, a restaurant that educates, trains and empowers local young people

***Jamie Oliver** set up Fifteen in London in 2002, training unemployed students to become great chefs. He has since had over 500 trainees through the doors. Ghillie James chats to founder of Cambodian restaurant **Haven**, Sara Walliman, about the work she and her partners have also done to help empower local Cambodians to improve their prospects through training. She also shares how we can also do our bit to help give Cambodians a brighter future.*



### ***Who were the founding team of Haven?***

The founding & managing team is comprised of my husband Paul and I, Steffi Feierabend from Switzerland, and Pardet Chhom from Cambodia.

### ***Why did you all decide to set up Haven?***

Paul and I came to Cambodia in 2008 on our world trip – and boom! We fell in love with the country and its people. I know that sounds so cliché. But the smiles and warmth of the Khmer really touched our souls in a way no other place had, and so we ended up staying much longer than we had planned to.

During our stay we realised that there were so many organisations taking care of children (orphanages, street children shelters, etc.), but when we started asking

around *'What happens with all these kids when they grow up and have to leave the organisation?'*, no one had really thought much about that (back then).

This really worried us and we both felt that we needed to do something. But we didn't just want to create another organisation where these young people would go from living off donations to another place run the same way. We really wanted to create something where these young people could learn to take care of themselves, not depending on donors.

And so we came up with the idea of HAVEN. To create and set up a training restaurant teaching quality work skills and important life skills to young adults, so they could then go out into the world and take care of themselves and their (future) families.



***What were you doing before and how did you all get together?***

I come from a background of event marketing and communication side. My last job before the world trip was Head of Marketing at a vegetarian restaurant chain in Switzerland. Paul is a food engineer specialising in hygiene and microbiology and he was hygiene consultant for hotels and restaurants in Switzerland. Additionally he studied marketing and became a teacher of marketing at a private school.

That is also where he met Steffi. In 2010 Paul and I returned to Switzerland for a year to work, save money and do the fundraising for HAVEN. During that year Paul worked together with Steffi at the private school where she was responsible for the administration and also taught accounting. A precious friendship grew and when Steffi learnt about the big idea she decided that she wanted to come and help with HAVEN. And so, in 2011, half a year after we had returned to Cambodia, she too arrived.

By then we had already met with Pardet, a talented Cambodian Head Chef, who was at the time still working at a 5-star hotel. When he heard about the training restaurant that was being built, he got very excited. He knew this was the right thing for him. A place where he could cook AND help his people. Pardet immediately clicked with the Swiss team and since then all four have become close friends and strong partners.



### ***Are all the team from local villages?***

The three Swiss founders are the only foreigners at HAVEN. Chef Pardet, all the employees, the teachers and the trainees are all Cambodians from local villages. Some closer, some from further away.

**[Read More: How Janne Ritskes helps empower Cambodians through Tabitha Foundation](#)**

### ***What do you offer the apprentices?***

During our 15-month training program we offer our apprentices professional on- the-job work training accompanied by theoretical classes, life skills trainings, English lessons and computer classes. Furthermore we provide our trainees with protected housing where they get **full board, medical care** and all other costs are covered. The

apprentices are taken care of at the trainee house by our house mum, who creates a family environment.

Furthermore, our trainees receive a trainee allowance for any additional personal needs and also to **learn how to manage and deal with money**. And at the end of the training year they receive their tip money from the whole year in form of a savings book, which provides them with a starting capital into their new lives.

The total training time is 15 months. The first 12 months are completed at HAVEN. These are followed by a 3-month work internship at another reputable restaurant or hotel in Siem Reap. During these last three months, we still pay, house and coach the apprentices.

After graduation, we actively assist our students in finding meaningful employment and coach them until they have settled in to their new work environment.



***Do you have any stories to share about what any of the previous apprentices are doing now?***

Most of our former trainees are working their way up in the hospitality industry. Others have found jobs to be able to work part-time and finance their studies at university and push themselves even further. They are now aspiring engineers, teachers and lawyers.

But really every single young adult that has gone through the program and is now out there working and leading an independent and safe life is a full success.

***You must be thrilled it has been such a success!***

We all put our heart and soul into HAVEN and I believe that shows. From the beginning we have had wonderful guests from all around the world who have been great supporters of our work and cause, with people from **Singapore** being amongst the first international guests and supporters we had.

We have also been improving and adapting the training program from year to year to keep up with the current needs and requirements. And we have always found good jobs for all our graduates.

So yes, we are very happy and proud to say, that all the dedication and hard work has paid off and that it has been a real success for our team and trainees.



***Have you had many famous faces through the doors?***

We've had some. From Cambodian and Swiss singers and actors, to Korean sportsmen and Taiwanese politicians. But to be honest, we consider and treat every single guest as a VIP. After all, it is thanks to every single person who comes to enjoy a meal with us, that we are able to run this social enterprise and the whole training program.

***Who writes the menu and teaches them to cook? The food is amazing!***

Well, the menu has been carefully put together by us four founders, according to the different cooking techniques the students need to learn and the liking of our guests. But it is our Head Chef Pardet who does all the magic in actually turning these dishes into the delicious creations they are. And he is also the one who teaches the trainees how to cook, not just as a skill, but with love and passion. And that is why it tastes so good.



### ***Will there be a Haven cookbook?***

There already is one out, called ***HAVEN – Cooking for a Cause.***

It is available either at HAVEN in Siem Reap or online via our non-profit Dragonfly Association in Switzerland.

### ***How can we help when next visiting Cambodia?***

Come and visit Haven! Since we've opened a few more training places have also opened too, but there are also completely other concepts that do great work and are helping to empower Cambodians, break the poverty cycle and are putting much effort into having a positive impact on the people and environment.

Some top places to visit when next visiting Siem Reap:

- Shop at the **Made in Cambodia Market** that sells local products made by local people /many stalls are from organisations
  
- Visit the **Rehash Trash** workshop
  
- Don't miss the **Phare Circus**, which is an amazing show and such a worthwhile cause to support
  
- Donate blood at one of the **Kantha Bopha Children's Hospital** or the **Angkor Children's Hospital**
  
- Book your local tours via responsible travel agents like **Beyond** or **Ayana Journeys**
  
- Visit and support the **Apopo Visitor Center**, where you learn how they clear the country from landmines with their awesome landmine rats
  
- Stay at a responsible guesthouse like the **Jaya River Park**, **Seven Candles Guesthouse** or **Babel Guesthouse**
  
- Pamper yourself at the **Kaya Spa** which belongs to Senteurs d'Angkor
  
- Enjoy a coffee at **Sister Srey** and at **The Little Red Fox**
  
- And last but not least you should stuff yourself with cupcakes at **Bloom!**