CAMBODIA

# Where to eat in Siem Reap ? HAVEN, a training restaurant with a cause (our big favourite)

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*This article is a collaboration between Voyages Yolo and HAVEN.*

If you're wondering where to eat in Siem Reap and you'd rather not spend every evening on a Pub Street terrace, I have a place for you. It's tucked behind Wat Damnak, on a street called Chocolate Road (yes, really). It gave me my best food memory of the whole trip to Cambodia.

HAVEN is a "training restaurant". The young people you see on the floor and behind the stoves are apprentices in training. The whole place exists for them. But I'm also telling you about it because I ate really, really well there. A green mango fish fillet for $8.50 that I still talk about.

👉 You can have a look at the full menu here and book your table directly on their website. In high season, honestly, don't skip the booking.

## HAVEN at a glance

- **What it is:** a training restaurant and social enterprise, opened in December 2011 by Sara and Paul Wallimann, a Swiss couple
- **Where:** Chocolate Road, Sangkat Sala Kamreuk, in the Wat Damnak area. Ten minutes by tuk-tuk from Pub Street
- **When:** Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 10pm. The kitchen closes at 9:30pm. Closed on Mondays
- **Budget:** $6 to $11 per dish, 10% tax already included
- **The bonus:** loads of vegetarian and vegan options, gluten-free menu on request

## An enchanting hideaway: the garden, the welcome and the decor

You walk through the gate and the noise of Siem Reap switches off all at once. That's the first shock. Chocolate Road is already a quiet street, but here you step into a lit tropical garden, with tables spread out under the trees.

There are several areas: secluded tables for couples (lovely in the evening), a corner that easily handles big groups and an indoor room with ceiling fans and two large cooling units for the hot season. The lighting does a lot for the place. It's low, warm and hung in the trees.

Paul welcomed us himself at the entrance. He runs the restaurant with his wife, Sara.

And the service... so kind. The apprentices on the floor ask you three times if everything is fine, apologise for disturbing you and come back anyway. It surprises you at first (we're not used to it anymore!) and then you understand they're giving it everything because they're learning and they really care. It's touching. That very close attention mostly belongs to the first two or three months of training. Once they have settled in, the apprentices grow in confidence and interrupt far less.

On my way out, I went into the kitchen to thank the chef in person. Pardet Chhom is Khmer. He worked at the FCC before joining HAVEN, back when the restaurant was still a building site. He painted the last walls and planted the garden before setting up his kitchen and opening the place alongside Sara and Paul. He has seen every class come through since. A great man.

## What do you eat at HAVEN?

The menu is bigger than I expected. It splits into two main families.

- **The Khmer and Asian side:** amok (the country's signature coconut curry, with freshwater fish or chicken), lok lak with fresh Kampot green pepper, Khmer curry, tempeh stir-fried with ginger, orange-ginger chicken. Everything comes with local red rice.
- **The Western side:** cordon bleu, schnitzel, homemade burger, pasta with Thai basil pesto and even a reworked Zuri Gschnetzlets (a Swiss nod from the founders) served with rösti.
- **Starters, salads and soups:** banana flower salad, spicy beef salad, Caesar, pumpkin soup, somlor m'chou kroeung, gazpacho.
- **Chef's specials:** beef tenderloin with Kampot pepper, pork ribs, green mango fish, hoisin tempeh.
- **And also:** desserts, breakfast served from 10am and a great list of *fresh fruit drinks*, smoothies and coffees. The name on the menu is deliberate: not all of them are juices, there's the fresh coconut served as it comes or the house passion fruit soda.

A big plus for vegetarians and vegans: the menu marks the (V) and (VG) dishes, plus all the ones that can be adapted on request (VO and VGO). In practice, a good half of the menu works without meat. That's rare at this level in Siem Reap.

👉 See the full menu with all the prices.

## From the market to the plate

Before I tell you about the dishes, here's the detail that explains everything else: every morning the chef goes to the local market with an apprentice. They bring back the day's fish, vegetables and herbs. What's on your plate in the evening was picked by hand.

And the apprentice who goes with the chef learns to spot a fresh fish, a good vegetable or a perfectly ripe fruit before even learning to cook it. I love that idea.

### My dish: green mango fish ($8.50)

On the menu, look for *Fish Filet with Green Mango*, that's its official name. A fried freshwater fish fillet on diced potatoes, with homemade lime mayonnaise. On top, a green mango salad dressed with Khmer herbs.

Absolutely delicious. Really. The green mango brings the acidity that stops the fried fish from feeling heavy after three bites, the homemade mayo ties it to the potatoes and the herbs on top give that green, slightly aniseed flavour no factory sauce can copy. I wiped the plate clean and I fully own it.

My absolute favourite of the meal.

### My friend's dish: banana flower salad ($6)

Shredded banana flower with chicken, carrot, cucumber, Thai basil and crushed peanuts, all in the same Khmer herb dressing. Served with local red rice. A vegan version with tofu is available.

Honestly, it's the kind of dish nobody orders because nobody knows what to expect. So let me explain: banana flower has a texture somewhere between artichoke heart and raw cabbage, with a slight bitterness that stands up really well to the peanuts. With the red rice, it's a full dinner for $6 that tastes like nothing you eat back home. Go for it!

### What I'll order next time

- **The cordon bleu ($9.50).** Pork or chicken rolled around Swiss Gruyère and ham, tartare sauce, fries or mash. Everyone talked to me about it during the meal. Everyone.
- **The HAVEN cheeseburger ($9.50).** Bun baked on site, beef and pork patty made in the kitchen, Gruyère, caramelised onion, house sauce. Made here from start to finish.
- **Khmer lok lak ($8).** Beef stir-fried with fresh Kampot green pepper, still on the stem, with a fried egg and a pepper-lime dip.
- **Beef tenderloin with Kampot pepper ($18).** The only dish on the menu above $11. One for a special occasion.

A nice little detail: the prices on the menu already include the 10% tax. In Siem Reap, plenty of places add it at the end. Here, no nasty surprise when the bill arrives.

## A restaurant with a big heart: HAVEN's mission

Here we are. Because yes, behind that green mango fish, there's quite a story.

Sara and Paul left Switzerland in 2008 for a two-year trip around the world. Just two rules: keep travelling as long as there's money left and get as far as possible without ever taking a plane. They did the whole route overland on public transport, from Switzerland all the way to Indonesia: trains, buses, sometimes the back of a motorbike, sometimes a boat. A general direction, never a detailed plan (that speaks to me a lot). They spent seven months volunteering in Cambodia and discovered what awaits young people who leave care homes at eighteen or come from poor rural areas. No university, no network, no trade.

Back in Switzerland in 2010, they set up the Dragonfly association and raised the first funds. In April 2011 they moved to Siem Reap. In December, HAVEN opened with its first class. At the end of 2015 the restaurant moved to the Wat Damnak garden where it stands today.

The craziest part? Neither of them comes from the restaurant world. Paul studied food engineering, then worked in marketing before becoming a marketing teacher. Sara comes from communications, events and public relations. She's the one who keeps in touch with the partner organisations. They gave it all up with a backpack.

### How the training works

- **Sixteen months in total:** twelve months of training at the restaurant, rounded off by graduation, then a four-month internship in partner hotels in Siem Reap
- **A rhythm that follows the season:** six days a week, eight hours a day, all year round. What shifts from month to month is the balance between service and classroom
- **A new class every September**, just as the previous year's graduates head off on their internships
- **Everything is covered:** supervised housing, meals, medical care, a bike, clothes, plus a monthly pocket-money allowance
- **Classes beyond the trade:** English, computer skills and a session on Cambodian labour law, so nobody gets cheated on their first contract
- **Labour law applied to the letter** in the restaurant itself: health cover, public holidays, legal working hours
- **Completely free** for the apprentices. The restaurant and the donations raised by Dragonfly fund the programme

That split deserves an explanation. In Switzerland, an apprenticeship is shared between a business that provides the hands-on training and a public school that covers the theory. With no public school for this trade in Cambodia, HAVEN takes on both roles. The restaurant is closed in September, when the new class arrives: those first weeks happen entirely in the classroom, before the doors open to guests again. Then the practical training starts, topped up with some theory lessons. In high season the pace gets so intense that everything goes into practice, apart from English lessons. From March or April, classroom time grows back to consolidate what has been learned on the floor.

Eighteen apprentices were in the programme when we visited. Behind them, twenty full-time employees hold the place together: teachers and mentors who train on the job while making sure every service runs smoothly. HAVEN is a fully functioning, fully staffed restaurant that takes in eighteen extra trainees to give them real skills learned from the pros. The trainees are 100% involved, on the floor and in the kitchen. They learn as they work.

And every one of them finds a job at the end of the internship. I asked Paul how that 100% holds up year after year. His answer: HAVEN is well known in Siem Reap and the city's hotels know exactly what the training is worth, in theory and in practice. An apprentice who leaves here has a strong foundation and is ready to work. Employers know it before the interview even starts.

### What happens to the tips (my favourite detail)

I found this one while reading the menu. It blew me away.

HAVEN adds no service charge to the bill. Tips are shared equally among the whole team, apprentices included. Employees get their share in cash. The apprentices' share goes into a bank account opened in their name, with a monthly statement showing what they're owed.

On graduation day, they're handed the savings book along with their certificate. Twelve months of tips in one go, right when they need to fund the start of an independent life. You have to admit that's beautiful.

A useful note on the timeline: the apprentices spend twelve months at the restaurant, from September to August, and that's the stretch when the tips are set aside. They receive the money at graduation, at the end of those twelve months. The four-month internship that follows happens elsewhere, in the partner hotels. The graduates stay under HAVEN's care and keep living at the trainee accommodation, but they no longer work at the restaurant during that transition phase.

**Heads up:** if you pay by card and want to leave a tip, say so before the payment goes through. They can't add it afterwards.

### A school that works like a family

The teaching rests on professionals hired right at the start to build the programme and deliver it: head chef Pardet Chhom in the kitchen, Sophy running front of house. They're all still here, like most of the team, who have been with HAVEN somewhere between eight and fifteen years. And they hold two roles at once: teachers on one side, big brothers and big sisters on the other, alongside apprentices from earlier classes. That family structure was built in from day one. These young people leave their families to come here, so Sara and Paul see rebuilding a bond as part of the programme, just like cooking technique. Many former apprentices drop by just to say hello and share their news.

The programme also changes from year to year. When the team spots a gap, it adds a class. NGOs have, for example, funded iPads so everyone can work on their English on their own in the evening.

## Behind the scenes and local art

The kitchen is fully open to the dining room. You see the chef moving behind the apprentices, correcting a hand, tasting a sauce. In a training restaurant it makes perfect sense: the kitchen is the classroom. And it's honestly fascinating to watch while you wait for your food.

Beautiful restaurant in Siem Reap

Inside, the walls are covered with paintings by Tamara Venn, an artist based in Cambodia who runs her own gallery in town. Most of the furniture is upcycled. The red rice served with the Khmer dishes is local too. It all fits together.

And if the food stays on your mind once you're home, good news: HAVEN publishes its own recipe book, *Cooking for a Cause*, sold at the restaurant.

## Why a cordon bleu in Siem Reap?

I asked myself that reading the menu, so I'm asking you too. The answer is about teaching: every dish on the menu is an exercise.

The apprentices learn the basics on local dishes (amok, lok lak, Khmer curry), then move on to Western dishes that call for other skills: breading, emulsions, cooking a cut of beef, baking the burger buns. By the end, they can work in any hotel kitchen in Siem Reap. Clever, right?

## How much does a meal at HAVEN cost?

| DISH | PRICE (10% TAX INCLUDED) |
|---|---|
| Banana flower salad | $6.00 |
| Soups (pumpkin, somlor m'chou, gazpacho) | $6.00 to $6.75 |
| Khmer amok, Khmer curry | $7.50 |
| Khmer lok lak | $8.00 |
| Green mango fish | $8.50 |
| Schnitzel | $9.00 |
| Cordon bleu, cheeseburger, veggie Gschnetzlets | $9.50 |
| Chef's pork ribs | $11.00 |
| Beef tenderloin with Kampot pepper | $18.00 |

For two people with one dish each and a drink, budget $20 to $25. More than a street food stall, obviously. But less than most restaurants of the same standard in town. And you know exactly where your money goes.

If you're spending three days exploring Angkor, keep this address for the evening when you really want to slow down.

👉 Book your table here.

## Frequently asked questions

### Do you need to book at HAVEN?

In high season, from November to February, yes! The garden fills up fast and there aren't even thirty tables. The rest of the year, a few indoor seats are kept for walk-ins, first come first served. For a same-day booking, use WhatsApp rather than email.

### Is the food really good, or do you go for the cause?

For the food, honestly. Pardet Chhom is a true professional who came from the FCC. He oversees every service and nothing leaves the kitchen without his approval. Sara Wallimann even said it publicly in an interview with the *Phnom Penh Post*: she refuses to let HAVEN be seen as a charity that gets a pass for mediocre food. After eating there, I understand where that comes from.

### Where is HAVEN in relation to the Angkor temples?

Right in central Siem Reap, in the Wat Damnak area. It's ten minutes by tuk-tuk from Pub Street and about twenty from the entrance to Angkor Wat. It's the classic end-of-day spot, once you've left the temples and had a shower.

### Can you go with family or a group?

Yes, no problem. The garden has an area designed for big groups, away from the couples' tables. Just give the number of people when you book and the team will get organised in advance.

## My personal verdict

Siem Reap has hundreds of restaurants serving the same menu to the same travellers passing through for three days. HAVEN does something else. The garden is stunning, the service is disarmingly kind, the prices are fair and the money you leave on the table pays for sixteen months of training for someone who had no other way in.

If you only remember one place for a good dinner in Siem Reap, make it this one. And order the green mango fish.

I'm going back next time I'm in town, for the cordon bleu!

### Practical info and booking

- **Address:** Chocolate Road, Sangkat Sala Kamreuk, Siem Reap, west of Angkor High School
- **Opening hours:** Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 10pm. Kitchen closes at 9:30pm. Closed on Mondays
- **Booking:** the reservations page on their website, which gathers all the contact links, the WhatsApp and Telegram widget in the bottom right corner of every page of the site, eat@havencambodia.com or +855 78 34 24 04 by phone, WhatsApp and Telegram
- **The menu:** see it here
- **Running late:** your table is held for 20 minutes, let them know if you're delayed
- **Allergies and gluten:** mention it when you order, a gluten-free menu is available on request
- **Follow them:** Instagram and Facebook

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To plan the rest of your stay, I've also written about the coworking spaces that are actually open, about my favourite café to work from and about the zipline over the Angkor forest. For silent retreats, head this way.

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