



STARCHEFS

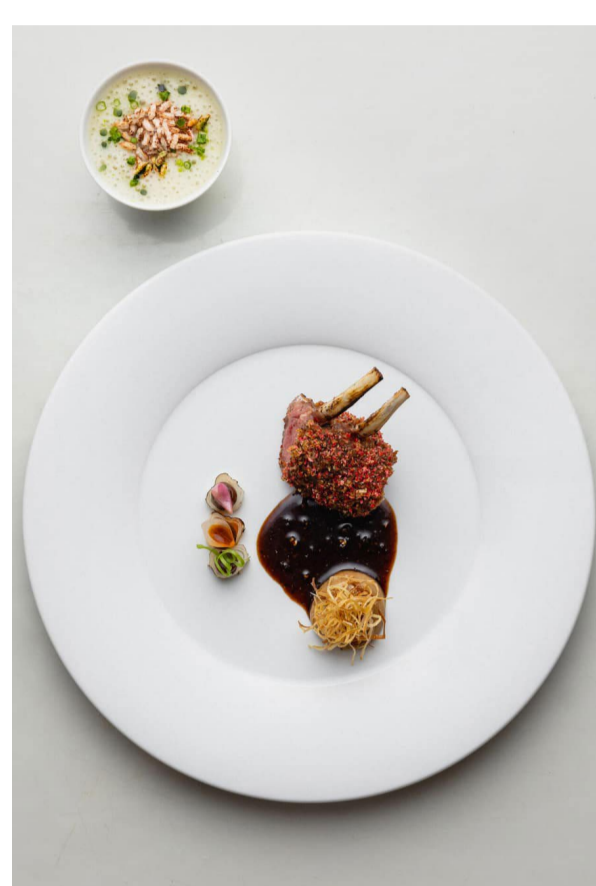
The remarkable career of Mariya Un Noun!

She grew up in the slums of Cambodia. She then learnt the art of cooking from chefs such as Giovannini and Bottura.

By Daniel Böniger | 26 December 2023

THE PIZZA PREMIERE: Mariya Un Noun vividly remembers her first time tasting pizza. “At first, it was just bread with tomato to me.” But it tasted so good that she made a note of the dish’s name so she could order it again. That was ten years ago. At the time, the Cambodian woman was in her mid-20s and a guest at the Lucerne Hotel Management School. There, she soaked up everything she encountered: unfamiliar ingredients, new cooking techniques, and friendly interactions with the chefs. “I could barely speak English,” she recalls. “I satisfied my curiosity by trying everything.”

SOLD AND FORCED INTO MARRIAGE. Since then, Mariya has come a long way. As head chef, she leads a team of 24 people, and her restaurant is considered one of the best in Cambodia. This is all the more impressive when you consider the bitter poverty in which she grew up. At just twelve years old, her mother sold her as a maid to ensure the family’s survival. Later, she was forced into marriage, gave birth to a child, and was abandoned.



Mariya Un Noun’s Rack of Lamb with Kampot Pepper, Leeks, and Pickled Shallots.



She is reinventing Cambodian cuisine. Mariya Un Noun.



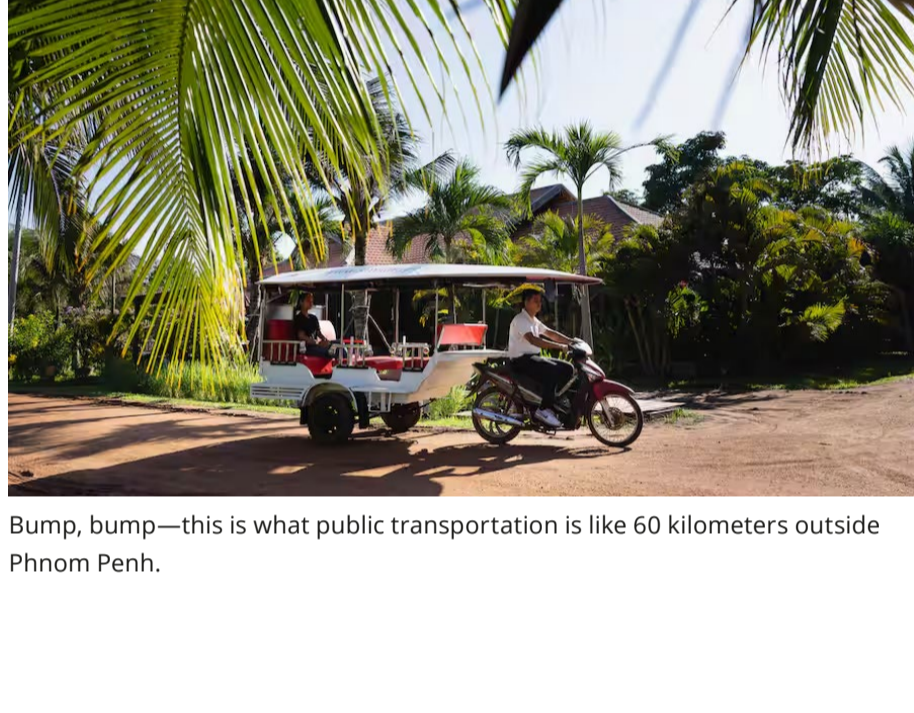
The Farmhouse Resort & Spa has four restaurants.

HANNES SCHMID DISCOVERED HER. But how did she find her way back to the sunny side of life? Two things were key: her talent and her determination. The other was the Swiss Hannes Schmid. The former top photographer met Mariya through his nonprofit organization, Smiling Gecko. He quickly realized her extraordinary flair for flavors. What culinary skills lie dormant in this 5-foot-tall woman! “Mr. Hannes,” as Mariya calls the Swiss photographer, sent her to work with select chefs in Europe. After her years of training and travel, he placed her in charge of the four restaurants at the Farmhouse Resort & Spa, located about 60 kilometers outside Phnom Penh.

IN HER LUGGAGE: 25 KILOS OF SPICES! The 150-hectare complex is a school for hundreds of local children, a workplace for 350 locals, and a luxury holiday resort for tourists. “My two daughters go to school there,” says Mariya Un Noun, who is currently cooking her way through Switzerland, Singapore, and Thailand to raise money for Schmid’s project. She packed 25 kilos of spices, including several varieties of lemongrass that she cannot find abroad in the desired quality. She has also packed a good amount of Kampot pepper, which she particularly loves to use.



„There are countless varieties of lemongrass,” says Mariya, who enjoys shopping at the local market.

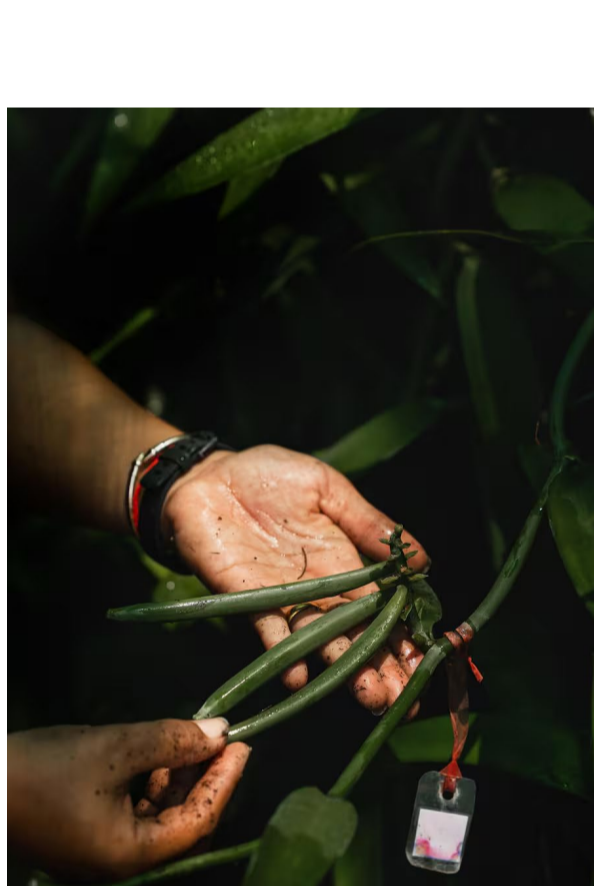


Bump, bump—this is what public transportation is like 60 kilometers outside Phnom Penh.

THE BACKBONE OF CAMBODIAN CUISINE. Piper nigrum is only grown and harvested in the provinces of Kampot and Kep, and only in accordance with prescribed guidelines. As recently as 1960, around a million pepper plants grew there. However, the tradition of cultivation nearly disappeared following the Khmer Rouge’s seizure of power in 1975. Dictator Pol Pot wanted to turn Cambodia into an agrarian state, so he used the farmland to grow rice and vegetables. Only since the 1990s has Kampot pepper — which Mariya Un Noun describes as having a more subtle aroma than conventional varieties — been cultivated on a large scale again. “For me, it is the backbone of Cambodian cuisine.”



A staff member harvests wild green asparagus that was planted especially for the resort.

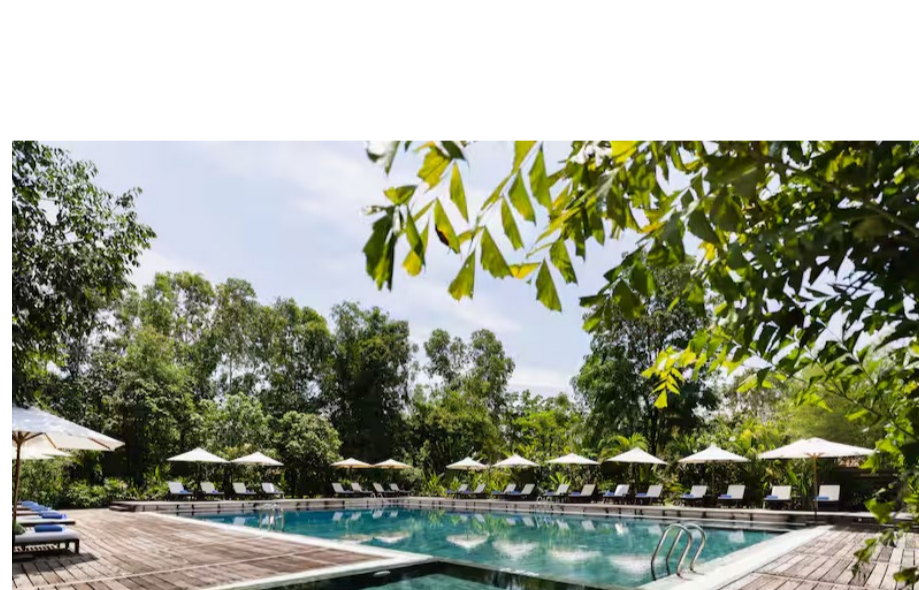


Near the „Farmhouse,” a delicate plant thrives: green vanilla pods.

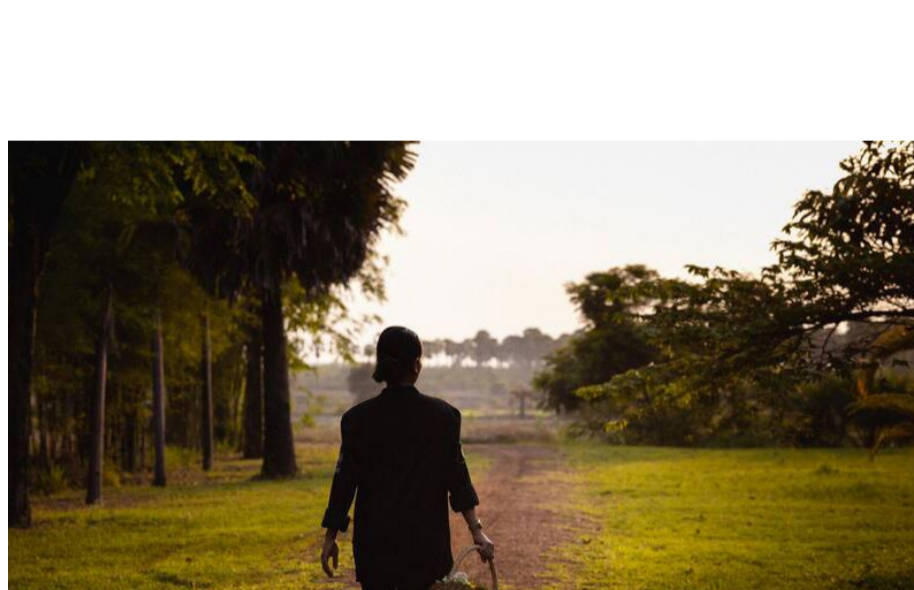


The resort’s own facility grows fish from eggs to fully grown: Nile perch.

„MISTER HANNES” ON A FRUITFUL MISSION. What does the head chef serve her guests? Sophisticated Asian cuisine with a complex flavor profile, including mild coconut-based fish curries. There are also pan-fried lamb chops seasoned with Kampot pepper and served with jus that has been reduced for hours, as well as leeks and pickled shallots. Mariya’s multi-course meals feature fruity desserts, for which she sends “Mister Hannes” out to Europe to find the finest passion fruits and mangoes.



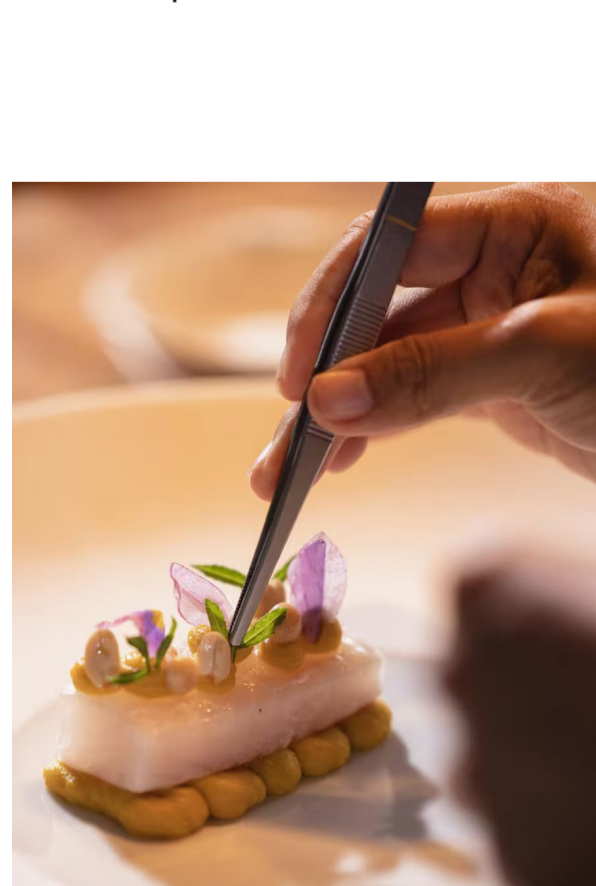
The Farmhouse Resort is a school for hundreds of local children and a workplace for 350 locals, as well as a luxury holiday resort.



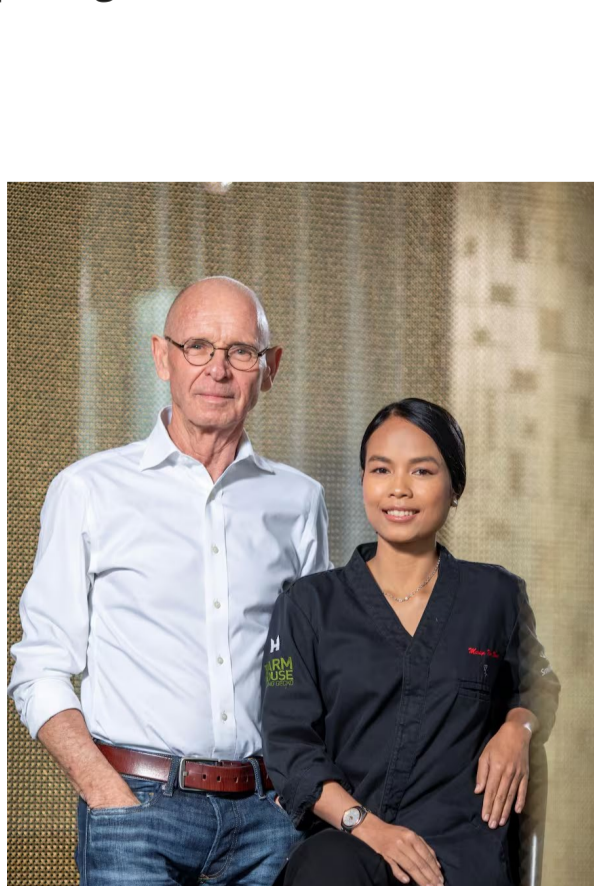
Mariya finds ingredients close by, at local markets, in her gardens, and even in the jungle.

THERMOMIX & PACOJET. Mariya elevates traditional Khmer cuisine by presenting it in a Western style and using modern equipment for preparation. For example, a curry might end up in the Thermomix. There’s a Green Egg in her kitchen. Like many of her colleagues around the world, she uses a Pacojet to give her ice creams the desired creaminess. “I try to alter the flavor of traditional recipes as little as possible. They should appeal to my mother’s taste, too.”

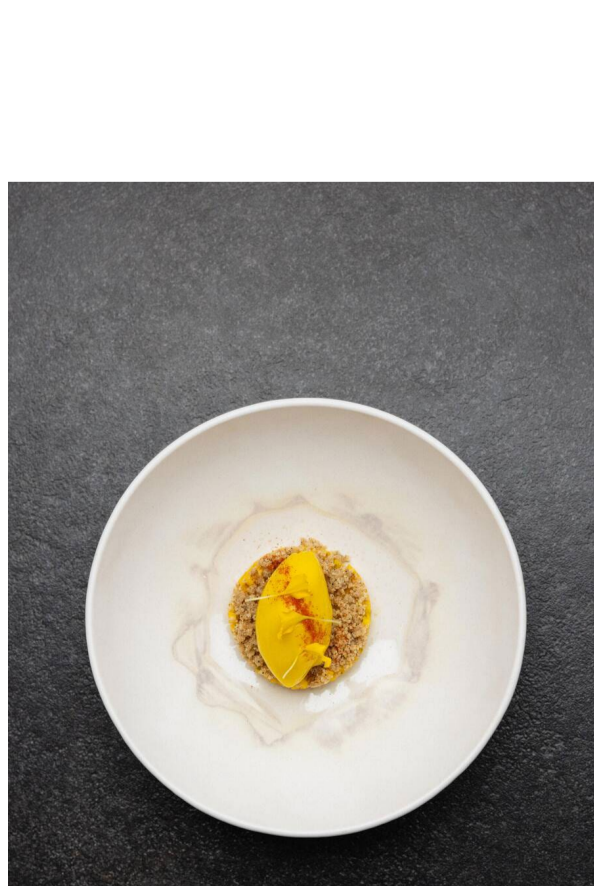
WITH „OPERA CONDUCTOR” FRANCK GIOVANNINI. Mariya Un Noun has learned a great deal from her European colleagues. At Massimo Bottura’s restaurant, she was impressed by how he leads his team because he knows himself and his strengths inside and out. “Of course, I also like his rock-star attitude.” Her time with Franck Giovannini was unforgettable. “He’s like an opera conductor. Everyone follows his instructions with discipline.” On the first day, she found the seriousness of his nearly 30 staff members unsettling. While helping to peel tomatoes in the cold kitchen, she asked a colleague, “Couldn’t you smile a little?” When that didn’t help, she played a prank with her chef’s hat, pulling it down over her nose.



Traditional dishes are prepared and served using Western methods (and tweezers).



He took her off the streets: Hannes Schmid and Mariya Un Noun.



Mariya likes to use sweet fruits for her desserts.

AT CAMINADA, IT WAS LIKE A FAMILY. At Caminada, it was like a family.

Mariya Un Noun has had the chance to work with Andreas Caminada several times. She learned that a team can only perform at its best if the atmosphere is right. “It’s more of a family environment than a workplace,” says Mariya Un Noun, who is happy that she now regularly introduces European chefs to Cambodian cuisine on behalf of the Uccelin Foundation.

A PIZZA COURSE FOR HER CHILDREN. However, Mariya will have to give her first cooking lesson after her fundraising tour to her own children. “My daughters are desperate to learn how to make pizza dough from me.” Pizza is one of her favorite foods, after all.

CHEFS BUILDING BRIDGES: Incidentally, scholarship recipients from the Uccelin Foundation, founded by Andreas Caminada, also benefit from Mariya’s culinary expertise. An internship at the “Farmhouse” is the optional conclusion of the 20-week support program. The Uccelin graduates learn about the Smiling Gecko team, supply chains, everyday life, and Cambodian cuisine. They then work in the resort’s fine-dining restaurant, develop an understanding of Mariya’s cooking style, and help her design menus. In return, they share the knowledge they have gained with the local crew. The shared realization is that nothing builds better bridges than food and drink.