

Holiday Time

Wining & Dining

World Heritage cuisine

Breakfast, lunch and supper in Luang Prabang

REGINALD PRESCOTT



Casual but very fine dining at Luang Prabang's hot pick — L'Elephant.



Every doorway leads to a different taste sensation along Sakkarine Road, Luang Prabang's gourmet central.

It isn't just Luang Prabang's 32 beautiful temples that make the erstwhile capital of the Land of a Million Elephants a worthy World Heritage town. Nor even its splendid museum, surreal cultural performances, pristine riverine setting and clean-swept streets. As a world class tourist destination in every respect, the food here also fits the bill.

For those with a penchant for bijou concept cafe dining and multinational taste buds, the town is as satisfying gastronomically as it is culturally. Indeed, there's no finer place within a thousand miles to chill-out on a terrace with wine

soup, or whatever takes your fancy.

Most of the best restaurants are congregated along Sakkarine Road between the interminable steps leading up Mount Phousi and the upscale Villa Santi Hotel whose Princess Royal Lao and Western cuisine restaurant is the only hotel situated must-visit eatery.

Here you can dine on German, French, Italian, Scandinavian, Canadian and, yes, even Lao food of a quality you will be hard pressed to locate at the price in Bangkok.

A good place to enjoy breakfast is at Healthy and Fresh Bakery, a Canadian set-up that reawakens one's pallet with

whipped cream and maple syrup, apple croissants, and cinnamon buns while the "healthy" in its name is justified by the likes of wholemeal toast and jam or homemade yoghurt, granola and fruit.

A decent breakfast here, including fresh fruit juices and terrific cappuccinos, still leaves change from a hundred baht, making it good fiscal as well as nutritional value.

For lunch, one might recommend the restaurant everyone's talking about — L'Elephant. Located down a twisting side street named Phagnalluannngmuangchan, just behind Villa Santi, its \$14 Set Menu du Chasseurs is top draw.



Distinctively Lao: Luang Prabang cuisine has its own unique set of flavours and traditions.

On my visit, onion soup or salade gourmande was offered as a starter. I chose the salad and was deeply impressed first by its size, then by its configuration and finally its freshness and subtle flavours. Like a leather tarpaulin over a haystack, succulent cuts of smoked duck sat atop a mountain of chilled, fresh lettuce, watercress, onion, walnuts, eggs and peeled tomatoes. Ready dressed French style, and served with crusty baguette, there's no more delicious way to up your iron and vitamins intake.

The main was a generously proportioned plate of tender venison sautéed with green pepper gravy accompanied by homemade linguine pasta and a decent selection of garden vegetables. A real gourmet fest.

Also offered was fricassee of wildboar with chanterelles.

Rounding things off one is given the option of selecting anything from an a la carte dessert menu stacked with irresistible items. I chose creme brulee a la noix de coco et sa rosace de banane poeles, a large shallow dish full of magnifique brulee with a delectably crunchy crust and marinated bananas. Abo of considerable appeal are mango

& starfruit sorbets, fruit salad and strawberries coulis and such delectable sounding ice cream flavours as rum-raisin-banana and ginger-honey-coconut.

Those wishing to choose their configuration independently should note the grilled lamb chops with herbs de province \$8.50, fillet of perch in coriander sauce \$6.50 and fried salmon in mushroom sauce \$9.50

Alternatively, there's a basic set menu comprising salad or soup and a fish or meat dish for \$6 or a vegetarian menu at \$9.

The wine list is also one of Luang Prabang's finest, including Beaujolais Village \$22, Shiraz Cabernet Australia Penfolds Rawson Retreat \$20 and California Chardonnay \$29.

The Frenchman owner is clearly an all-round paragon of style, as reflected in the bamboo, wicker, cotton, palms, rustic brickwork and tasteful art in evidence in and around the tangerine and mint green hued restaurant. Slinky modern jazz is the order of the day on the sound system and the outlook onto a little cross-roads where the heaviest traffic is a gaggle of geese is endlessly enchanting.

Sundowner

As for a lightish supper, what better than some Mekong inspired soup at Tamnak Lao, also known as "Three Elephant Cafe", the local restaurant most consistently recommended by western expats.

This family run eatery directly opposite Healthy and Fresh is an eye opener for anyone fixated with the idea that Lao cuisine is identical to Thai. For one thing, there's a much wider selection of non-spicy dishes, each with their own unique flavours.

A good example is Luang Prabang style spicy fish casserole with eggplant, spring onions, coriander, and chile. A generous hotpot stuffed with tender white local fish and all kinds of vegetables, it's a wonderfully nutritious original taste sensation for a modest 80 baht or so.

Equally tempting is the beef/chicken casserole with eggplant, Laos green leaf vegetables, onion, Lao fungus, crisp green beans, chili and juniper wood.

This is also the place to sample Luang Prabang Pork sausage, which lovers of British bangers will especially appreciate for their lean consistency and herby flavour.

There's also a decent selection of desserts, including banana coconut sticky rice balls — too many to eat alone for about 20 baht. Piping hot and delicately seasoned, they resemble donut balls but are in fact filled with a fibrous, sweet and dry rice mixture.

The fact that one has to wait a little to be served is a welcome indicator of the freshness that is an outstanding characteristic of Tamnak Lao. In any case, it gives one a chance to mull the views of Sakkarine Road's cafe society from the quieter side of the street while also enjoying an authentic Lao atmosphere, which is what we came here for in the first place, right?

Getting there

Bangkok Airways flies direct to Luang Prabang from Bangkok and back four times weekly, every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, and via Sukhothai Airport on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

♦ For reservations call 02-265-5555 or email to: reservation@bangkokair.co.th Bookings can also be made on-line at www.bangkokair.com