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Cambodian Cuisine

NEW CAFE INTRODUCES THE FOOD OF SOUTHEAST ASIA By Daemion Lee

If you're not sure what Cambodian food is like, Horn Nov, the owner of Angkor Cambodian Cafe, offers some tantalizing clues.

"Next door to Thailand, next door to Vietnam," he says about Cambodia's closest neighbors. "A lot of fresh ingredients, lemon grass, turmeric, ginger."

The curry, for example, is served with noodles, Cambodian-style. Nov tries to describe it and then decides to bring out a bowl of the colorful dish instead.

A quick spoonful and it is immediately clear that noodle curry gives a unique twist to the staple ingredients in Southeast Asian food: The taste is subtle and savory, flavorful but not overpowering. It really is like a cross between Thai and Vietnamese food.

"The curry is slower cooked," Nov says. "It's more stew-like, not as strong as Indian curry."

Angkor is the only Cambodian restaurant in Eugene — in the 20 years he's lived in the area, Nov says he has never seen another restaurant serving the cuisine. It's been open since Jan. 14, and Nov says he offers a unique alternative to the other Southeast Asian restaurants in town.

The cafe serves both noodle and rice dishes, including its signature Phnom Penh noodle — named after the Cambodian capital city — along with lemongrass chicken with rice and curry noodle with chicken. Loat cha — made with tapered noodles only found in Cambodian food — is on the menu, along with house special fried rice. The cooks make vegetarian options with a vegetable-based broth, and the fish noodle soup, Nov says, is made in the traditional fashion unique to Cambodia.

It is a family business, Nov explains, and they serve the dishes he likes to eat at home. "The recipes are from my wife's family and my mom as well," he says. "I'm always around food."

His daughter, Holly Nov, helps at the restaurant, and her duties include "a little bit of everything," she says.

Originally, Nov and his wife planned on starting the Cambodian restaurant when they retired. But when an opportunity came up, they decided to go for it. "We opened sooner," he says. "It's the right time to do it."

The restaurant is named after Angkor Wat, the large, ancient stone temple in Cambodia, which is a major tourist attraction and is listed as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. "A lot of tourists have been to Cambodia to visit Angkor," Nov says. But he says he hopes people can learn to appreciate the country's food as well. "It's clean, healthy food," he explains. "A lot of vegetables."

Of course, if you really want to know what Cambodian food is like, Nov admits there is really only one thing to do. "You just have to come in and try," he says. "That's the only way to find out." ■

Angkor Cafe is located on 1810 Chambers St., right behind Subway, open 11 am to 9 pm Monday through Saturday. More information can be found on its Facebook page.