

A taste of home

Ihab 'Alix' Mattar, the Master Chef at the Lebanese Restaurant Le Cedre, Has Earned a Formidable Reputation for Serving the Taste of His Homeland

BY CLIVE GRAHAM-RANGER • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The Cambodian and Lebanese flags flutter in the breeze outside No 1, St 360. It is a bilateral symbol that Ihab "Alix" Mattar, Le Cedre's manager, master chef and major-domo, is proud of. In the three years since he took on the restaurant from its previous owners, he has built an enviable reputation for serving the true taste of his homeland, which means food the way his mother cooked it in rural Lebanon.

Inside his glassed-in, air-conditioned dining room, a waitress ferries generous plates of mezze to six customers at a corner table, another greets a lunch party of four and a sharp-suited crocodile line of men with briefcases are heading toward the private room.

As the first Lebanese restaurant in Phnom Penh, Le Cedre deserves the good reputation it has earned through Mr Mattar's unremitting work ethic and insistence on only the best self-selected meat and imported ingredients cooked the old-fashioned way.

"I am always in the restaurant," he said. "From early in the morning I am in the kitchen for usually about three hours making food for the day, watching over the preparation of everything. My customers are the most important thing to me, and when I open the restaurant every day, I want them to feel they can stop me for a chat, complain about something or introduce me to their friends and families. I now call many of my regulars 'friends.' That's the first rule of good business in my book."

It hasn't all been such an unmitigated success. Sisowath Quay, the city's busy riverside thoroughfare, has been the graveyard of many a restaurant lured by the apparent success of long-established competitors.

Mr Mattar says he spent a small fortune developing his second Le Cedre on the riverfront near the Foreign Correspondents Club, but after 16 months he recognized that if he failed to face up to the grim reality of closure, it would be a long-drawn-out commercial suicide.

"We tried very hard to make it a success. But it was on the first floor and didn't have a big enough kitchen, so we had to prepare the food here and take it there. The foreigners that were passing by wanted to spend no more than \$3 or \$4 and our hommos was more than that. Then the financial crisis came and it was time to get out."

He says that admitting defeat wasn't easy, but in closing the riverfront location, he learned a tough lesson he won't repeat when he makes his



next move. That, he says, may be a new location outside the capital, but a more pressing task is to transform the current restaurant's courtyard into what he calls a lounge.

Turning ideas into commercial reality is the only way to keep a business fresh, he says, particularly in the food and beverage trade where fashions change faster than the weather and yesterday's trendy is today's old hat.

Mr Mattar fell in love with the art and craft of cooking at the age of 14 in his picturesque hometown of Aley in Mount Lebanon. Brimming with confidence, at 16, he got the first job he had ever applied for, at a restaurant in the United Arab Emirates.

"I have always been big for my age, and when the Lebanese owner asked how old I was, I told him and he said he wasn't sure he could hire me because I was so young. But he gave me some jobs to do and stuff to cook. I passed the test and he hired me, but the first six months were crazy," he recalls. "Eventually I was running the kitchen and the restaurant for him, preparing and making more food than I have here because we had many Lebanese customers."

On a visit with friends in Phnom Penh in 2007, he realized that not only was there only one Lebanese restaurant in town, but also that it was up for sale in a city he immediately liked and



where he knew he could settle. He didn't need a second invitation and bought Le Cedre.

His strict code of serving only true Lebanese food is, he believes, the hallmark of Le Cedre's success. He refuses to accept any substitute for the taste, texture and aroma of the ingredients he imports from his home country to create the dishes on Le Cedre's comprehensive and authentic menu. He is quick to underline the fact that his profit margin is confined because of his insistence on importing ingredients such as spices, sesame paste, chickpeas and the like from Lebanon.

"We import just about all our ingredients," he says, "and serve only the best, which is expensive compared to buying here. So the profit we make is not so great, but we are giving people the pure and proper taste of Lebanese food."

Although Le Cedre has a kitchen staff of seven, including two chefs, "hands on" is the only way Mr Mattar knows. He doesn't so much pummel balls of pastry into shape as stroke them into a perfect circle, put them through a powered mangle to flatten them, lift them off the drum and lightly brush flour on both sides so they run through again without clogging up the machine, repeating the process until the pastry is the perfect thickness. The flattened dough is then transferred to a gas-fired domed metal oven, where it becomes a perfect hot-air balloon markouk (a round of unleavened bread).

On another work surface, he creates four small circles cut out of another piece of rolled out dough to be the base for bite-sized fattouch, or Lebanese pizzas, topped with parsley, tomato,



Photos by Conor Wall

cucumbers and spring onions that will go into the oven. To one side, whole aubergines are being baked on charcoal until their skins split to release the heated but not burned eggplant, which become moutabbal when mixed with sesame paste.

Another miracle of experience over high-technology gizmos is the simple rkaftatt-Feta cheese mixed with parsley inside rolled filo pastry that is frozen for several hours then taken out of the freezer and fried for four minutes. The result in the mouth is a tasty crunch and feta delight.

For the majority of diners, Mr Mattar's signature dish and culinary triumph is what many call the "humble hommos," a pureed chickpea dip that in the right hands is a delicious and creamy dream.

In most people's kitchen, it can become a lumpen and garlic-infused disaster that sticks like cement to your teeth. Few get it right and even Mr Mattar stops several times through the process to spoon a taste into his mouth. And when he's done combining the component parts in a small commercial blender, tasting the result and adding a soupçon more tahini (sesame seed paste), he watches as it's poured into a flat-bottomed, sealable container prior to it going into the fridge, then stirs it with a spoon to eliminate any bubbles of air "which can ruin the taste and in a short time make it crusty and inedible."

If success in the restaurant trade is measured not in financial terms but by the quality of a restaurant's food, customer loyalty, ambience and loyal staff, Le Cedre has achieved it. ■

HOMMOS BY ALIX

15 oz chickpeas

1/5 cup (1.5oz) tahini
(sesame seed paste)

1 clove raw or roasted garlic

½ to 1 tsp salt

1 oz lemon juice (about ½ a
medium-sized lemon)

olive oil

pinch or two of dried or fresh
parsley flakes

sprinkle of paprika

ice cubes

Soak the chickpeas in water
overnight so they expand.

Put them in a pan of water and boil. As the water begins to simmer add a spoonful of carbonate and a foam will rise to the top. Skim it off then turn down the heat to a simmer and cover with a lid, leaving an opening.



TOP TIP: When blending the constituent parts of your hommos (the Arabic word for chickpeas)—which is packed with vitamins, iron, dietary fiber, monounsaturated fats and amino acids—add ice to ensure that the mixture does not "cake."

Cook for 90 minutes, adding more water if needed.

Once cooked, wash the boiled chickpeas with pure cold water to remove all the carbonate. The chickpeas should be plump and squashable with the back of a spoon. Crush the garlic and add to the chickpeas, then put the mixture in a bowl and mince to a fine paste, adding tahini and some cubes of ice, salt and lemon juice.

Transfer the mixture into a blender adding water to prevent it sticking and solidifying.

Put the smooth paste into a bowl and, using a tablespoon, spread the hummus around in swirls creating a hollow in the middle where you put olive oil and finely chopped tomato and parsley.

Add decorative paprika stripes at 12, three, six and nine o'clock.

Serve with pita bread.