

HOT STUFF

How a homegrown pepper has transformed Cambodia's cocktail culture

— by Doug Wallace —





KAMPOT PEPPER MARTINI

I'd had pepper martinis before, but nothing like this. Nervously tasting the Kampot Pepper Martini, belted up to the little bar at Rambutan Hotel and Resort in Siem Reap, Cambodia, my brain then momentarily went for a walk. Not in a wow-that's-hot way, but more like a taste-bud explosion had rendered me speechless—no small feat.

We threw back one of these concoctions each evening, the fresh mint and pepper-infused vodka combo blowing our minds every time. The crushed local peppercorns lent a layered, mineral-like quality, the mint, lime, Cointreau, vermouth and bitters melding to absolute perfection.

We took to the Rambutan instantly, the cozy atmosphere, traditional Khmer décor, central salt-water pool and warm staff providing an effortless, easy feeling. The hotel actually has two parts, one beside the other, on a little pedestrian laneway on the quieter side of the river that splits Siem Reap in two, just a five-minute walk from the old marketplace in the historic centre of town.

Bartenders start shaking things up at lunch for those ringing the pool, but the real action begins at 5pm, and not only with hotel guests, but also with other tourists wandering in off the street and pulling up a stool. The inventive fruit-forward cocktails and Cambodian takes on timeless classics really invite local flavours to shine in daiquiris and martinis. Their ginger mojito vibrates with fresh ginger, lime, and both gold and white rum. The Absolut Espresso employs a vanilla syrup to zing up the up-and-down marriage of coffee and vodka.

With our pepper martini, the quality of the Cambodian pepper completely elevates the drink. Organic pepper has been grown in the Kampot region of Cambodia since the 13th century, its quality revered thanks to the climate and the quartz-rich terroir. Pepper in Cambodia is classified by appellation, similar to the world's wine regions. In fact, pepper is actually considered a dried fruit. Here's the real oddity: Black, red, green and white peppercorns all come from the same plant, variations caused by a wild mix of variables that include growing conditions, harvesting and process, age and maturity.

But back to the bar. Although we tried not to be late for dinner, that happened more than once. It was just too hard to tear ourselves away from this tiny, perfect miracle. rambutansiemreap.com; kampotpepper.ca

INGREDIENTS

- 4 fresh mint leaves, finely chopped
- 1 ½ oz Kampot pepper-infused vodka*
- ½ oz Cointreau
- ½ oz lime juice
- ½ oz simple syrup
- 3 drops Angostura bitters
- 1 dash white vermouth

DIRECTIONS

In a shaker filled with ice, add all ingredients, shake, strain and serve. Garnish with a lime wheel.

***INFUSION**

Coarsely grind about a cup of dry black Kampot pepper. Add to a bottle of vodka and shake for 15 seconds. Store in the fridge for one week, shaking daily. Use a coffee filter to strain into a clean bottle.