

TRAVEL + LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA
HONG KONG & MACAU

WINTER 2025/26

Where we're
eating and
drinking
right now

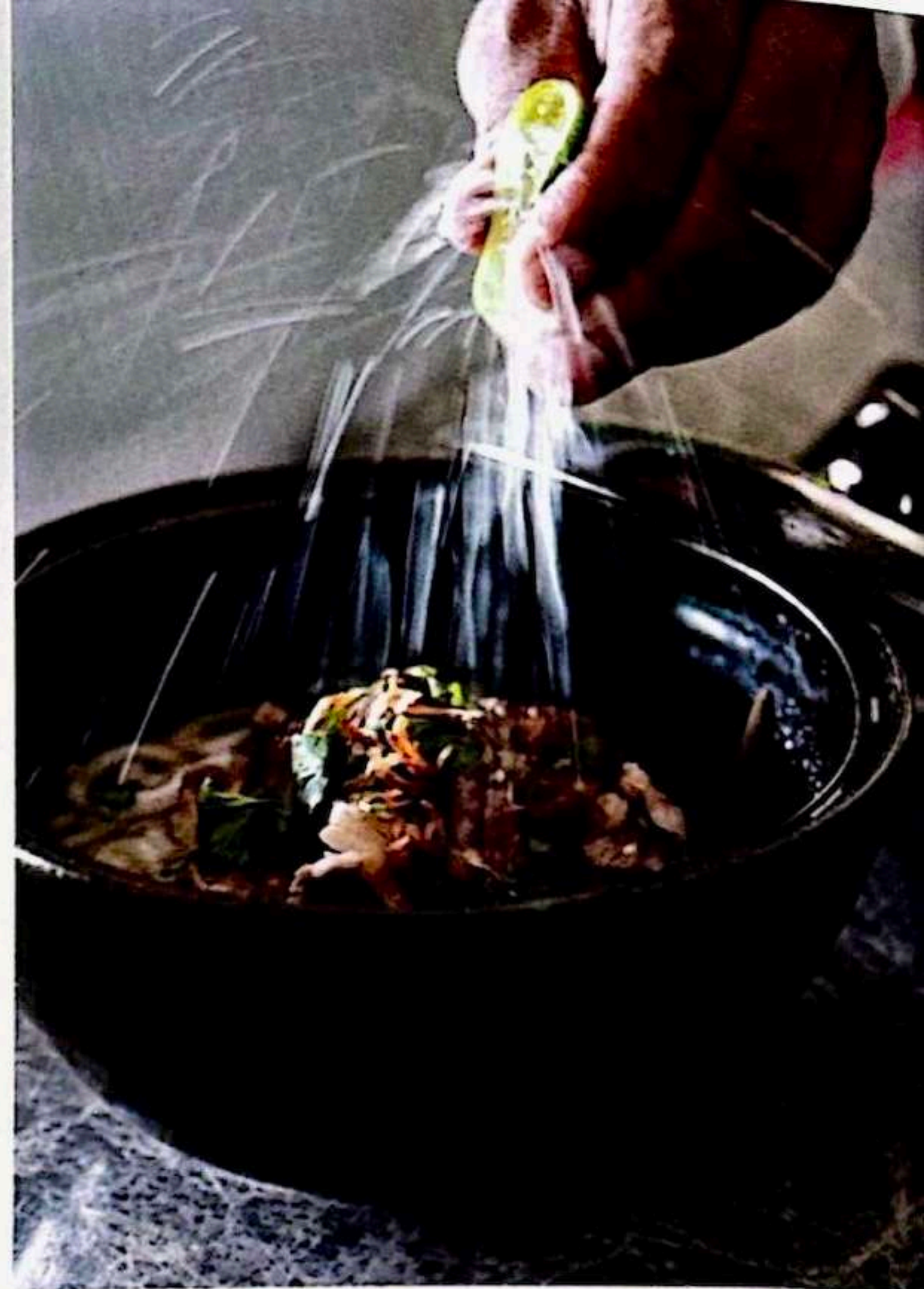
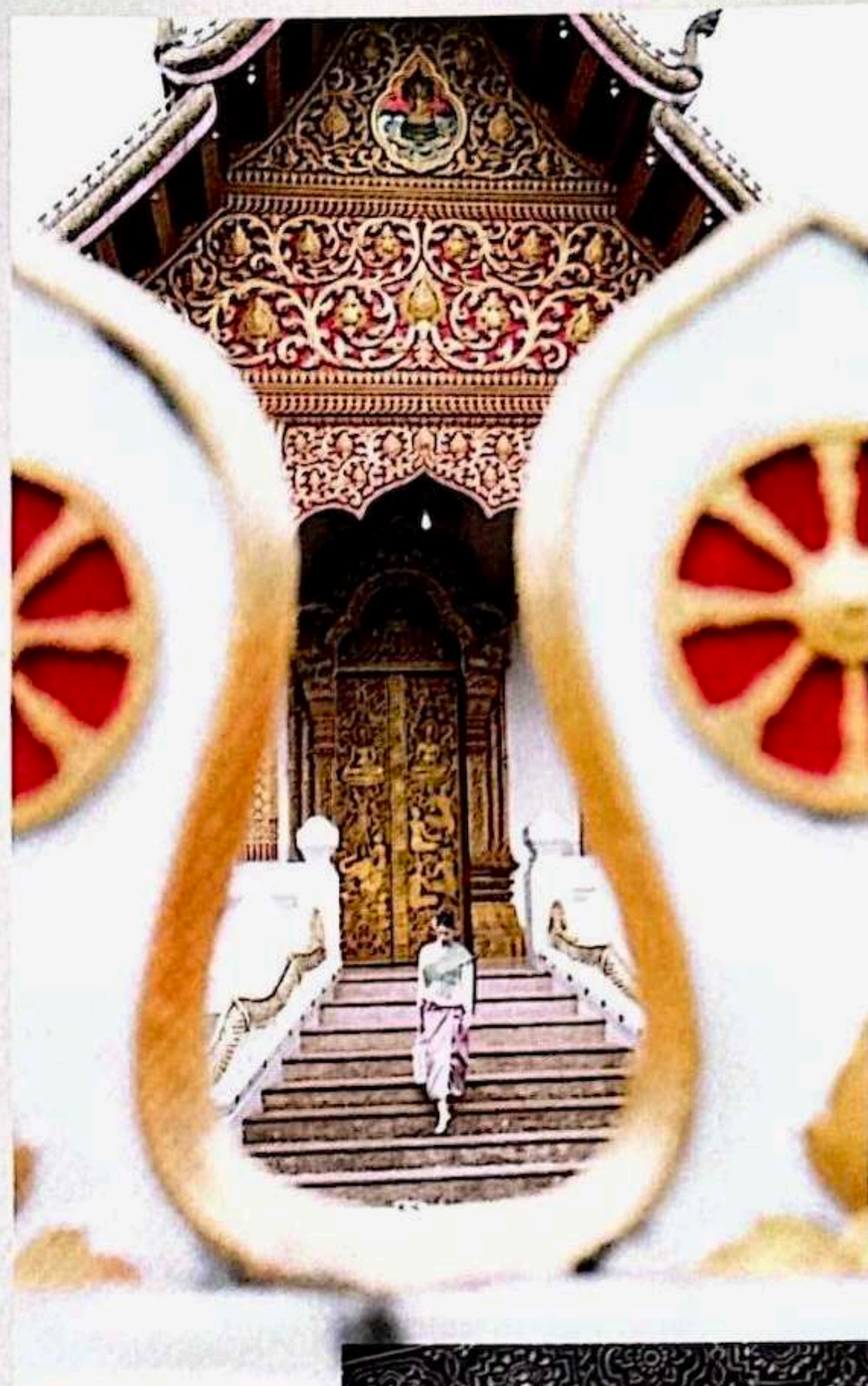
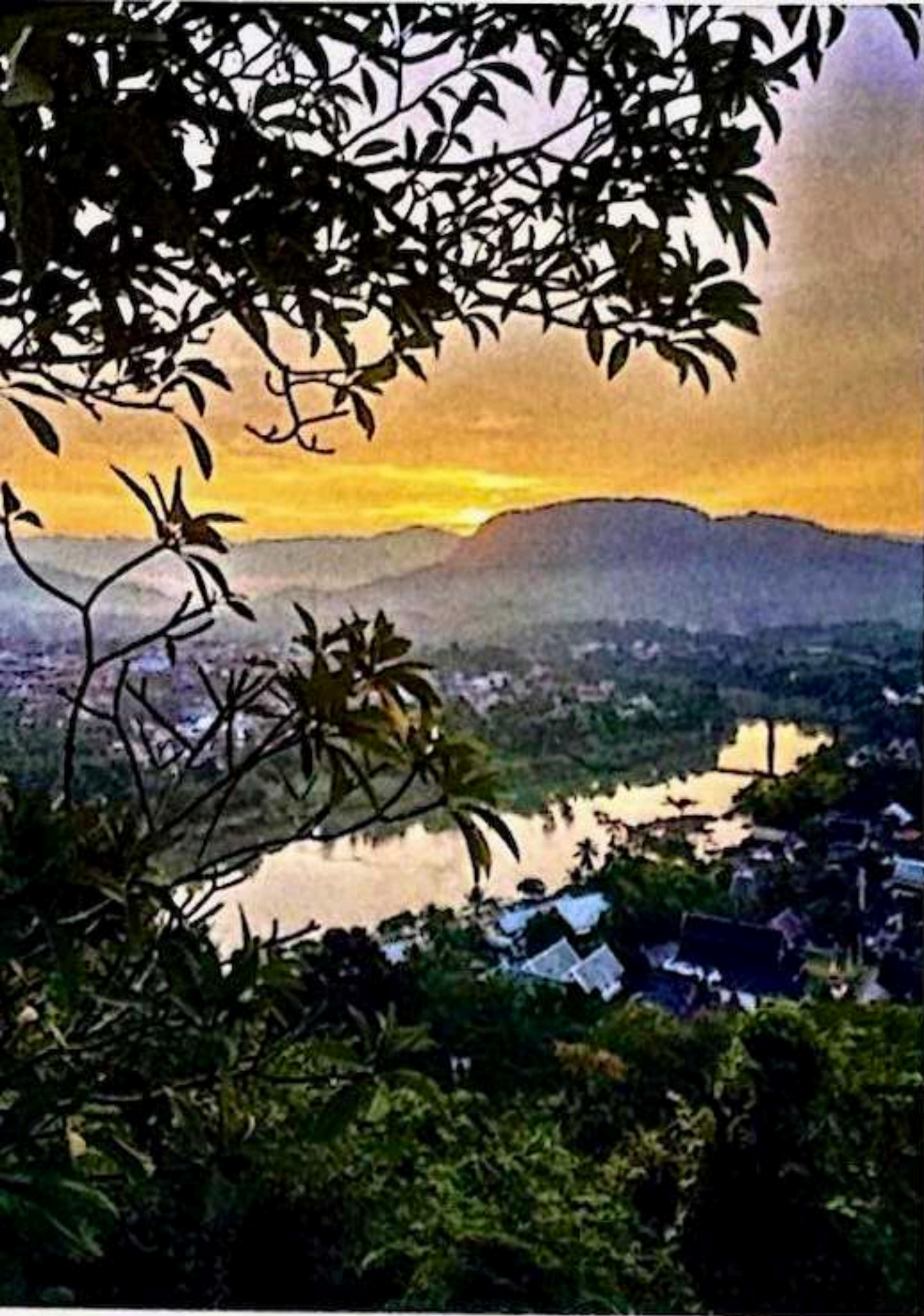
Angel Li
at Kimpton
Islam Shah Tsai

TASTEMAKERS

HKD60 - MYR15
SGD8 - PHP400
THB250 - IDR 100,000



250.-



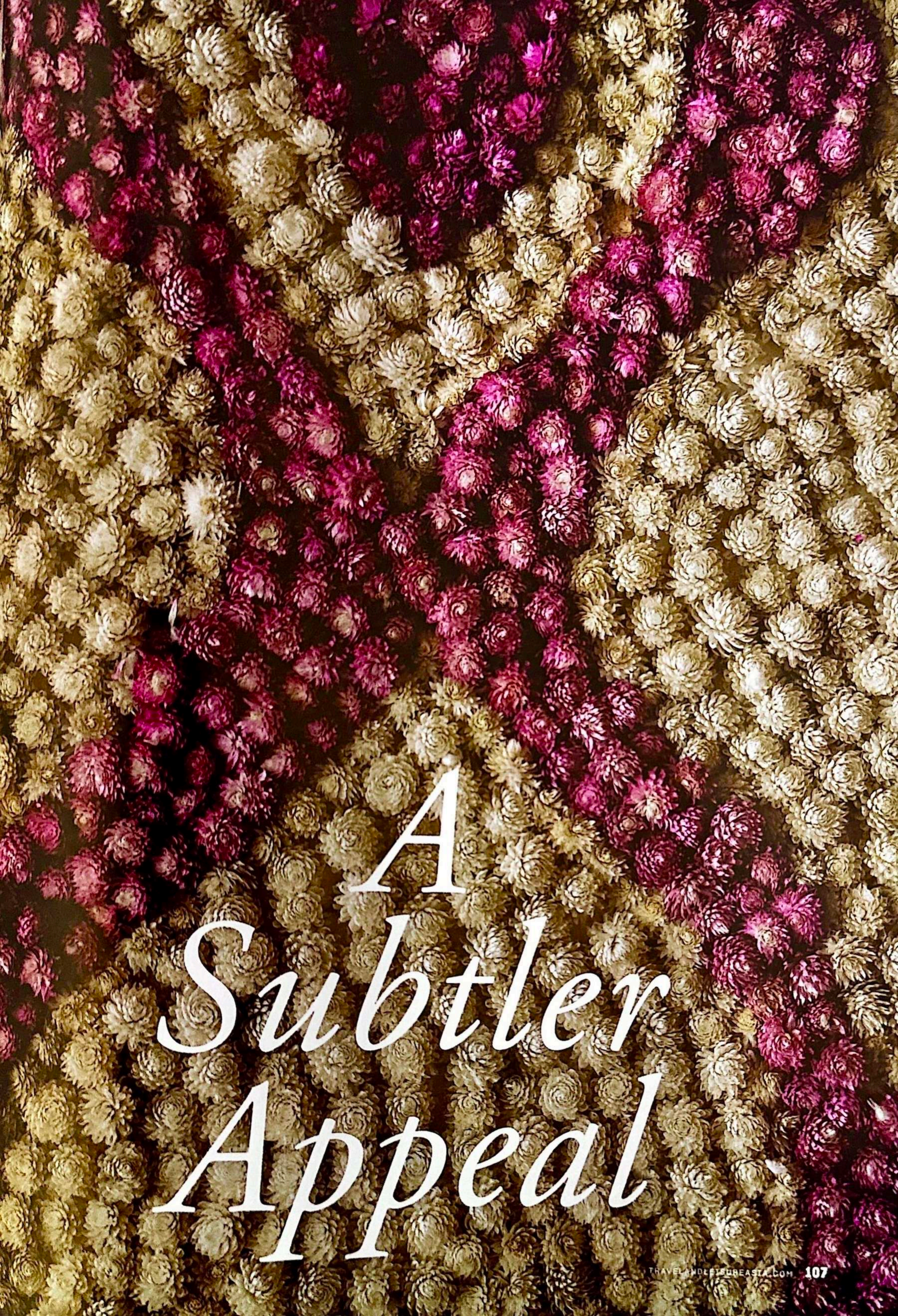
Clockwise from top left: Luang Prabang and Mount Phousi; a historic temple; a squeeze of lime at La Residence Phou Vao; traditional pottery at Little Lao; a classic car at 3 Nagas MGallery Collection hotel; local herbs and produce to be served at Little Lao. Opposite: Decor at Little Lao.



As Luang Prabang edges closer to the limelight, Lao cuisine is getting the props it deserves.
By Ron Gluckman



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF LA RESIDENCE PHOU VAO (3); COURTESY OF LITTLE LAO; COURTESY OF 3 NAGAS; COURTESY OF LITTLE LAO. OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF LITTLE LAO



A Subtler Appeal

A

MONG STANDOUT

Southeast Asian destinations, Luang Prabang, a charming, historic town in northern Laos, is a special gem. This former royal capital boasts scores of ancient temples and fairytale palaces, plus hip cafés and boutique hotels in converted estates evoking the era of French Indochina, all upon a leafy green peninsula where the mighty Mekong meets the Nam Khan River. The entire scenic, serene old town was proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995.

Back then, Luang Prabang was a hard-to-reach, almost mythical Shangri-La. Three decades later, with regional flights and a new railway connecting to Kunming, China, tourism is booming, with luxury hotels in historical sites spreading from the riverfront into a countryside filled with waterfalls, jungle and the possibility of grand adventure. Along with it, the long-overlooked Lao cuisine is finally getting the recognition it richly deserves, helping elevate this delightful destination to new heights.

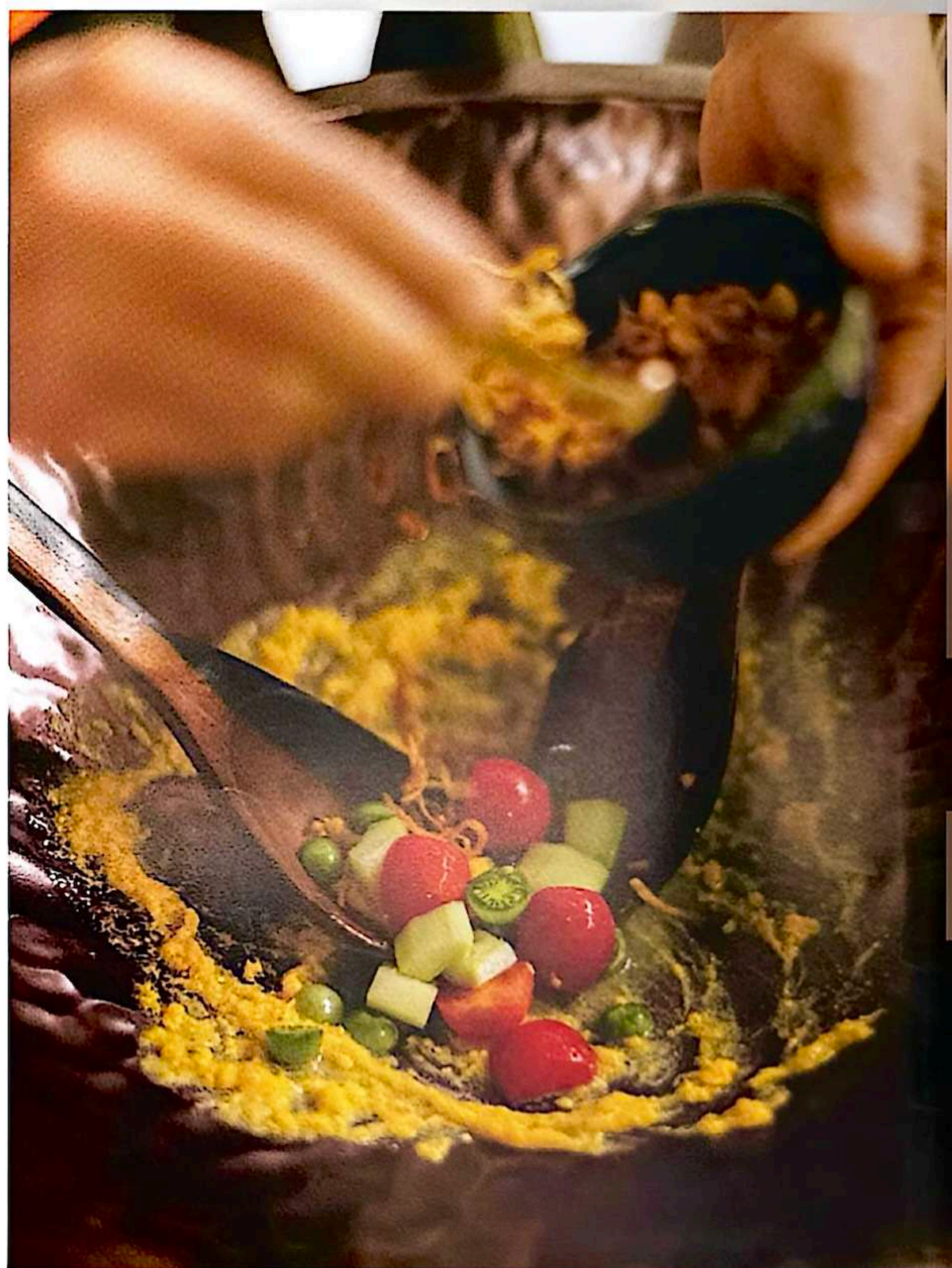
Lao food has long been overshadowed by that of larger neighbours Vietnam and Thailand. Southern Lao cuisine features dishes like *banh mi* and *pho*, famed in Vietnam, showcasing ingredients and flavours from a shared French colonial heritage. In Thailand, *khao soi* noodles and *larb* mince-meat salad are synonymous with northern food, but they're also common in Luang Prabang, where the language is similar to the Isan region, just across the Thai border. While the dishes are similarly named, they have their own unique taste. For example, local *khao soi* is tomato-based as opposed to the Thai curry broth, but both bowls pack a flavourful punch.

Typically, the profile of food in Luang Prabang is less salty and sweet than in Thailand, says Vansana Nolintha, one of the key figures powering a renewed appreciation of the cuisine, via his Little Lao and Little Lao House. Local food, he says, is tied to the nearby fields and forests, utilising herbs, foraging,

and ingredients like sakhaan, a woody stem gathered in the jungle, with notes of pepper and ginger, which infuse soups with their distinctive Lao aroma.

“Luang Prabang cuisine is a dance between wild, rare ingredients gathered from the Mekong River and surrounding jungles, and the refined cooking traditions

From top: 3 Nagas restaurant and hotel; preparing fresh ingredients from the garden at Rosewood Luang Prabang. Opposite clockwise from top left: Small bites at Little Lao; mixology at Artisan Bar; scooting by a temple.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF 3 NAGAS; COURTESY OF LITTLE LAO; COURTESY OF ARTISAN BAR; COURTESY OF LA RESIDENCE PHOU VAO; COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD HOTELS



that have been passed down from the Kingdom era," he tells me. "Layered onto this heritage are the influences of French colonial presence and the vibrant flavours of neighbouring countries. The result is a culinary identity so deeply rooted in its geography and history that each dish becomes a portrait of Luang Prabang."

Fans have included Anthony Bourdain, who featured Laos in two episodes of his *Parts Unknown* TV series, raving about simple local fare with his guest Barack Obama, who visited Luang Prabang in 2016—the first American president to travel to Laos. Obama is fondly remembered around town, including at food stalls above the Mekong, where tourists can pose in front of giant cardboard figures of him enjoying a fresh coconut.

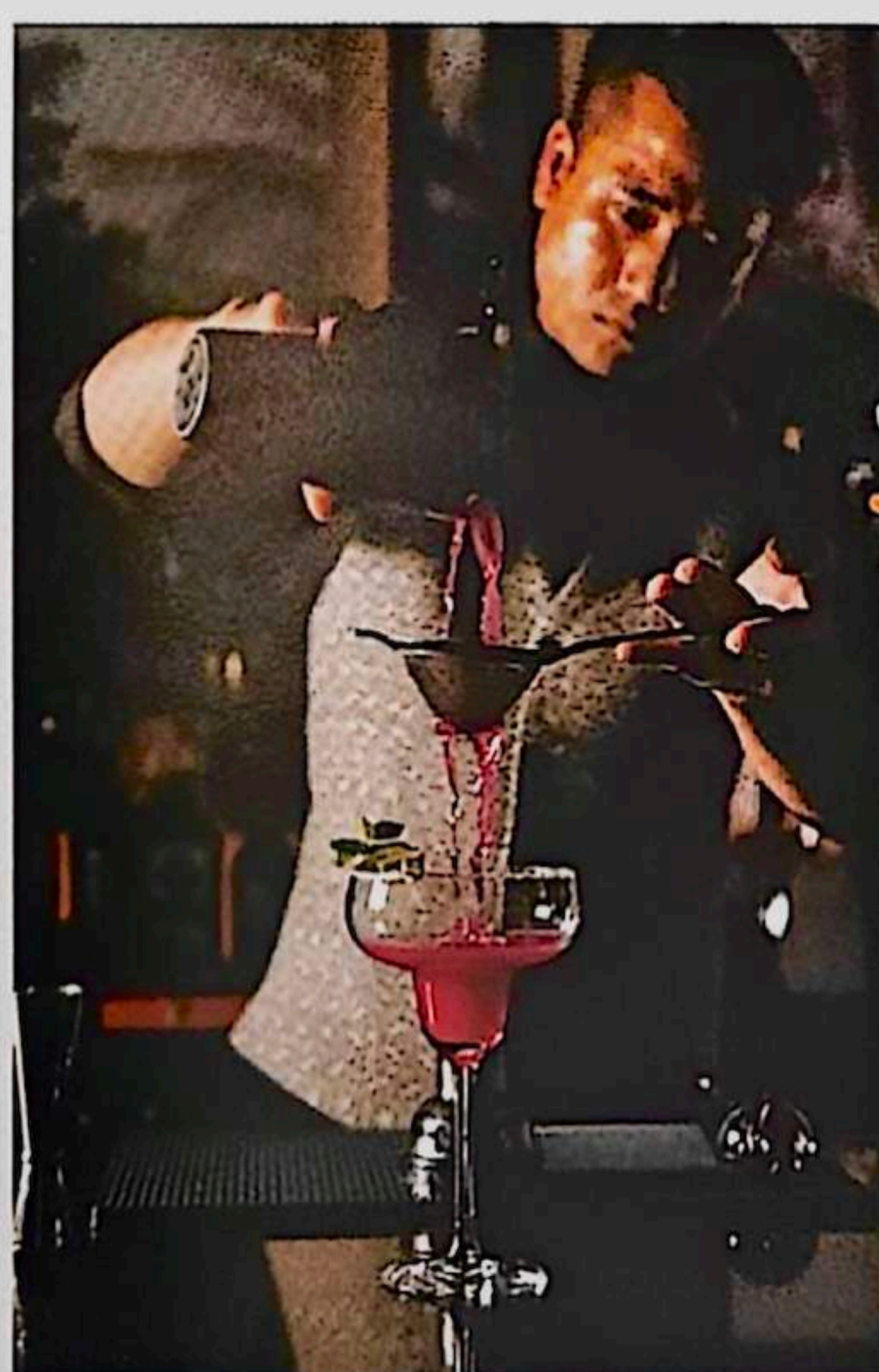
On the Broil

AS LUANG PRABANG TOURISM grows, a new generation of restaurants and bars is sprouting around town. The biggest splash has been at Little Lao, the fine-dining restaurant and bar that Nolintha opened last year after a fabulous renovation of this 1800s shophouse on Sisavangvong Road, the main street running through the old town. Little Lao is packed with locally crafted tiles, textiles and art. There are nightly events including live performances of Khab Thum, a captivating mix of classical and folk music, along with poetry.

The menu is just as zesty. Nolintha suggests a dozen dishes of small bites that fill our table, with the ubiquitous array of zingy *jeow*—chilli dipping sauces similar to the nam prik of Thailand. These are the secret sauces essential to Lao meals, he says, ordering a sampling of 20, ranging in taste from spicy to nuclear. As sweat streams down my face, he talks about how he grew up in this neighbourhood, his long journey back, and his goal of putting Lao cuisine on the map. Again.

Nolintha was 12 when he was sent to America with his sister, Vanvisa. They stayed with a Lao family, attending school in Raleigh, North Carolina, where they became a regional sensation at their acclaimed Lao restaurant Bida Manda ("father and mother"). They later opened Brewery Bhavana, with a taproom and mix of Chinese favourites like Peking duck and dim sum. A decade after his U.S. openings, he returned home to boost the profile of local gastronomy on home turf.

While Little Lao is established as the top table in town, you could easily miss the spiral staircase that leads to trendsetting Sun Song Social upstairs—a flashy, red nightclub with smoky herbal drinks and spirits. Next door is his newest addition, Little Lao



*Luang Prabang cuisine is a dance
between wild, rare ingredients
gathered from the river and
jungles, and refined cooking
traditions*





FROM FAR LEFT: COURTESY OF LA RESIDENCE PHOU VAO; COURTESY OF LITTLE LAO

House, a crafts and cultural centre in a 200-year-old shophouse beautifully renovated with a striking blue-and-white design that references its location in the Talat Mor—"pottery market"—neighbourhood. "The time just seemed right," he says about his growing hometown hospitality empire. "There is so much potential here now."

That's also the sentiment of Sanya Souvanna Phouma, another key figure in local hospitality. He lives in Bangkok but has deep roots in Luang Prabang. Royal roots, actually—his father was a prince. His grandfather, Souvanna Phouma, was prime minister of Laos right up to 1975 when the communist Pathet Lao overthrew the monarchy. Sanya has been involved in some of the hottest bars and restaurants in Bangkok over the years—Bed Supperclub, Maggie Choo's, Sing Sing, Iron Fairies—and is pushing a modern revival of Lao cuisine there with his acclaimed Funky Lam diners, including a new outlet that just opened at The Warehouse in Bangkok's Talat Noi.

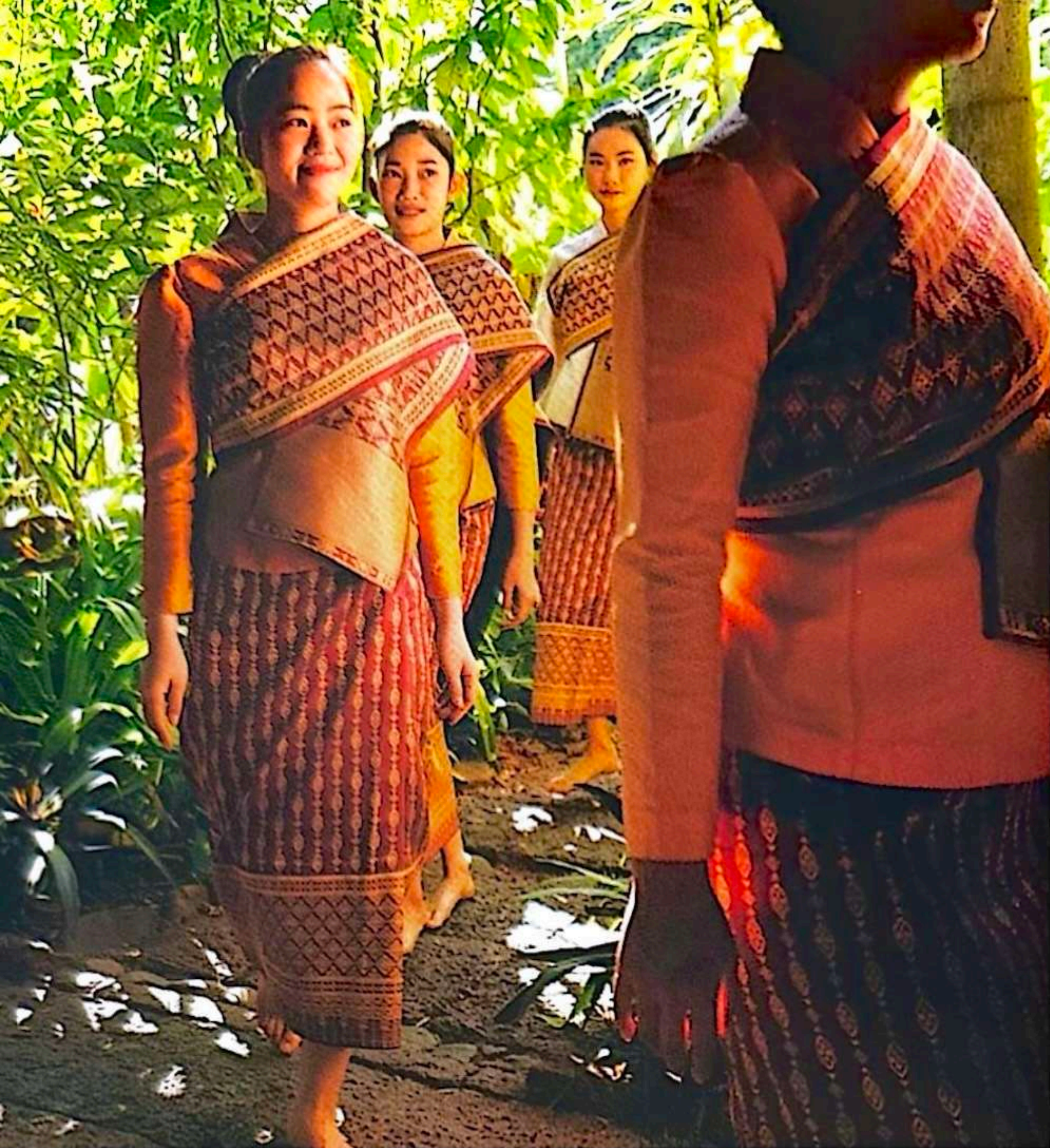
Now he's taken on the role of brand and heritage architect for HMD ASIA, the hospitality development and management company that's now running La Residence Phou Vao, and is planning for sundry new F&B outlets in Luang Prabang. I run into Souvanna Phouma the younger by chance at Silk Road Kitchen, at the Ock Pop Tok ("east and west") weaving centre, which exports high-end local silk around the globe. It's one of the city's top places for sundowners, with wood tables on terraces overlooking the Mekong, and, near the confluence of the two rivers, is a perfect place to discuss the layered history of this region's cuisine.

The Lan Xang ("million elephants") Kingdom was founded in 1353 over the remnants of the Khmer Empire. "After the golden era of the Lan Xang ended," Souvanna Phouma recounts, "with the demise of King Sourigna Vongsa [his ancestor], the kingdom split in three: Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak. We lost Isan and Chaing Mai, obviously, but our influence still remained."

Northern Thai food therefore can be considered a branch on the family tree of Lao fare. "Someone summed up pretty well the difference between Lao and Thai/Isan, and it's applicable to many other aspects of culture: the Thais exaggerate and overdo everything," Souvanna Phouma opines. "Lao food, architecture and art are more tamed. Luang Prabang art in particular is more humble and understated—one will see things differently with this perspective

in mind. So, a *larb* can be *jaad*—or excessively spicy, savoury, sweet and sour—in Chiang Mai, while the same one can be much more balanced and subtle in Luang Prabang."

From far left: The pastel hues of twilight over the town; pounding fresh herbs at Little Lao House.



Turning the Tables

NOLINTHA AND SOUVANNA PHOUMA ARE just the latest restaurateurs in a hospitality movement raising Luang Prabang, and Lao cuisine, to global expectations. Their venues bolster a lineup of hotels, eateries and hip bars making the historic town a must-visit for contemporary Lao culture.

Take the town's hippest bar, Artisan, and T56, a stylish restaurant with lovely riverside terrace for dining in jungle vines. Artisan is a bit hard to find, down one alley in this city of footpaths. And what a surprise! You step from an 1800s laneway into a bar that looks more Grand Central Station, or even London. Dimly lit with seating for just 15 in a row of barstools that face a long bar, it's cosy and elegant, with fantastic libations. Treats include tamarind and mango margaritas and the peach-and-vodka cocktail, alongside a solid selection of classics. International food here lives side by side Lao delicacies like pink pork curry (*lhen som*), a ripping Mekong fish salad (*larb plaa*), and the deep-fried Mekong River weed that is popular around town.

A few hundred metres down the street from Little Lao is 3 Nagas, one of the town's oldest, most colourful boutique hotels and which pays homage to the origins of its Lamache House, built in 1898, originally a royal ice-cream parlour serving local princes and princesses. "During its restoration," says Prolan Andre Canonoy, who handles marketing for 3 Nagas and Sofitel Luang Prabang, "an old orange-essence bottle was found hidden beneath the structure—an echo of its past."

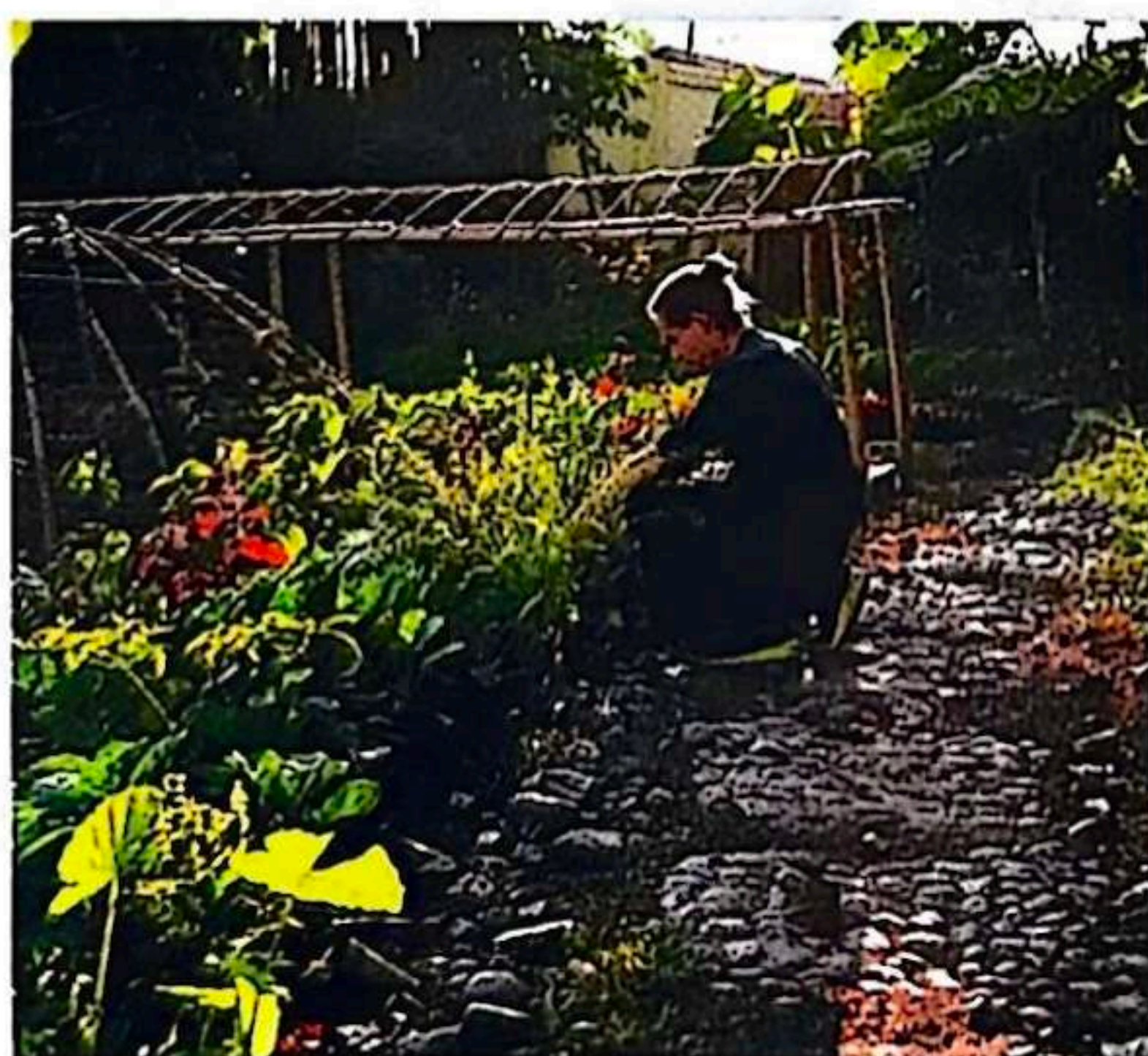
The building now houses the stylish Nagini Bar with live jazz, and special drinks like La Mache Zest cocktail, flavoured with the historic orange essence. At Governor's Grill at the Sofitel, which has a farm-to-table experience bursting with native flavours, popular dishes include the local buffalo burger and a spicy *sai oua* (local sausage) salad.

Further afield is prestige property Rosewood Luang Prabang, recently awarded three keys by the Michelin Hotel Guide, the sole property in Laos so honoured. Immersed in jungle just 15 minutes by car from the old town, Rosewood's recently launched chef-driven events do their part for promoting local cuisine. In November, the property hosted a collaboration between executive chef "Ice" Lerttanapornsit and Michelin-star chef Jeremy Gillon of Singapore's JAG. Meals were designed to evoke lavish Franco-Lao banquets French diplomats might have hosted a century ago.

You're also going to be able to find this type of cultural melange on the menu at La Residence Phou Vao, Souvanna Phouma tells me. "We want to rebrand the main restaurant to La Brasserie de la Residence, updating the brasserie concept to something more contemporary." Alongside the »



From top: A Bac ceremony at La Residence Phou Vao; *sai ou* (sour, spicy sausage) salad at Sofitel's Governor's Grill; in the onsite garden at La Residence Phou Vao.





classic French dishes, he says, “we will also feature a simple Lao set menu, changing weekly according to market availability.”

On the horizon, Souvanna Phouma has special plans for new project for the hill above the outdoor food stalls in the centre of Luang Prabang. He wants to bring his Funky Lam brand—a long-time hit in Bangkok, with its Lao heritage recipes—back to its origins. “The essence of Lao food is charcoal. Meat is grilled in the traditional way, and signature dishes include grilled chicken and ribeye, short rib, *larb pla* (minced-trout salad) and *olam* (slow-cooked vegetable stew).”

It all comes back to the food of his forefathers. “It’s very much based on plants, and forage,” he says, explaining that people lived simply, and close to what they farmed and gathered. “We define food as medicine here.” 🌐

From top left: La Residence Phou Vao's Mekong River tour; Artisan Bar is a new vibe.



THE DETAILS

EAT + DRINK

Little Lao

@littlolaoculturebar; meal for two approx. US\$40

Little Lao House

@littlolaohouse; meal for two approx. US\$30

Silk Road Kitchen

ockpoptock.com; meal for two approx. US\$40

T56

fb.com/t56cafeandbar; meal for two approx. US\$70

Artisan

@artisan.luangprabang; meal for two approx. US\$46

STAY

La Résidence Phou Vao

Previously run by Belmond, this tranquil retreat has spectacular views over the Mekong. Massive rooms have private balconies, and the pool-view wooden restaurant looks the part of a retreat originally for state guests, although more recently it's been a favourite of Mick Jagger. laresidencehotels.com; doubles from US\$600, including breakfast, roundtrip transfers and complimentary minibar.

Sofitel Luang Prabang

Located outside the main historical town on the site of a French-colonial fort from the early 1900s that housed the residence of the French governor and also a prison. With only 24 spacious suites, the property evokes old French-tropical elegance with antiques and freshly baked croissants infused with local ingredients. sofitel-luangprabang.com; doubles from US\$750.

Rosewood Luang Prabang

A masterful creation of architect Bill Bensley, who has designed many of the

region's most acclaimed resorts, Rosewood has a mix of suites and tented villas featuring carved wooden panels and gorgeous valley views. rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$750.

3 Nagas

An MGallery Collection hotel in the heart of the old quarter, with 15 guest rooms and suites across two residences that date back to the turn of the 20th century. 3-nagas.com; doubles from US\$150.