

Traveler

Word of Mouth
Travel Journal



Schwader's extended family prepares a ceremonial meal at their temple, Wat Pha Thangone, just outside Vientiane.

SOULAYPHET ("PHET") Schwader is peering into a vat of what he calls "The Funk," a distressing brown sludge composed of several types of seafood in varying stages of rot. For Laotians, this pungent sauce, known as *padek*—added to everything from curries to dips—is as comforting, even enticing, as a Westerner might find the smell of chicken stock bubbling away on a stove.

But at Khe-Yo, Schwader's excellent Lao-inspired restaurant in Manhattan's TriBeCa neighborhood, the stuff causes a mass kitchen exodus. "Even my sous chef is like, 'Dude, I can't be here right now,'" says Schwader. "But I get it! Hey, to me, Gorgonzola smells like dirty feet."

Before he began testing his staff's collective olfactory tolerance, Schwader was on a fairly typical career path for a chef: culinary school; long stints of kitchen drudgery, cutting carrots and onions into countless perfect cubes; and ultimately working as a sous under heavyweights like Patricia Yeo and Laurent Tourondel.

Then came the moment of reckoning that befalls so many cooks working at breakneck pace. "You have no holidays, no family," says Schwader. "You give up so much to make steaks and Caesar salads." When his friend Marc Forgione—chef/proprietor of the eponymous restaurant, also in TriBeCa—suggested they open a place together, Schwader took a hard left turn, betting his life savings on an obscure cuisine that, for all its bracing, intricate flavors, barely registers on most Americans' list of culinary cravings.

The food of Laos—marked by loads of herbs, pounded relishes, chilies, and fermented fish—is not for the timid, though by Schwader's own admission, Khe-Yo is not an exclusively Lao restaurant. Many dishes stray far enough from their original inspiration that he is reluctant to assert their authenticity. The first time his mother, Soubanh, visited Khe-Yo, he was nervous about feeding the woman who taught

Home Away

When acclaimed New York chef Phet Schwader decided to take his mother to Laos, he thought they'd eat their way through the country they once called home. What he didn't expect? A chance discovery that would change their lives forever.



THE DOOR

AN IDEA HOUSE

him everything he knew about Lao food. "I served her my take on *laap*"—a bright, fiery salad of minced fish—"but plated it in a way I thought would look good," he recalls. "And she goes, 'What's this?' and I was like, 'It's *laap*,' and she says, 'No, it's not.'" Then she took a bite and understood.

Schwader learned to cook not in Vientiane or Luang Prabang but while growing up in Wichita, Kansas, home to a sizable Lao diaspora. "Somehow I had both a typical Midwestern upbringing and a typical Lao one," says the chef. He fished, hunted, and camped like a proper Kansas native, but aside from the occasional trip to Pizza Hut, his staples were charred chilies, sour sausage, and The Funk. "It's weird," Schwader admits. "I had eaten Lao food all my life—but never in the place it comes from." Never, that is, until 2011, when he made his first trip back to Laos in 34 years and ate some of the best food of his life. The lessons gleaned from that trip informed the menu at Khe-Yo, which he opened two years later.

A year after that, Schwader wanted to return to Laos, this time with his mother. They hadn't been there together since Schwader was three, when he, his sister, his brother, and his parents fled their village to escape the insurgency that followed the CIA's Secret War. In 1977, the family crossed the Mekong River into northeastern Thailand and settled in a refugee camp in the city of Nong Khai. It was here that his father died—suddenly and without clear cause. In Lao tradition, the dead are cremated but not completely; his father's ashes and bones were transferred to a miniature tiered tower that served as a tombstone and was placed outside a local temple. "From there we went to Bangkok, then to Kansas, and we lost track of his grave," says Schwader.

As mother and son traveled through Laos, they avoided talk of tragedy in favor of food. They spent nine days eating their way from Luang Prabang, the mist-shrouded former capital, to the sleepy modern capital of Vientiane.



Mother and son couldn't get over the serendipity. "We kept looking at each other," says Schwader, "like, 'Did that really happen?'"

Above, from left:
A bánh mì stand on
rue Samsenthai in
Vientiane; Schwader
at Mok's Shop, a
Vientiane noodle bar.

They slurped fish curry at a place where the entire kitchen consisted of a single pot over a fire. They ate rice porridge for breakfast, prepared by a vendor who has made nothing else for decades. They hunched on too-small plastic chairs at an open-air restaurant where a 12-year-old did most of the cooking, dishing out fermented pork belly and papaya salad. Then, as they had done almost 40 years earlier, the two crossed the Mekong into Nong Khai. "When my mom saw it on the itinerary, she was like, 'Why do you want to go there?'"

It was a valid question. Today, Nong Khai is little more than a stopover for backpackers crossing from Thailand into Laos. Yet when he'd gone back, in 2011, Schwader had paid a brief visit to Nong Khai, where he stayed in a small, randomly chosen hotel and had a chance conversation with the owner, who mentioned that there had once been a refugee camp just 500 yards away. Schwader flew home without further exploration but couldn't shake the idea that this was the same camp where his family had lived—and that, just maybe, his father was buried nearby. "I'm not a spiritual person, but I felt his presence at that hotel," he says.

Returning to Nong Khai, this time with his mother, Schwader saw his chance to get answers. Souphanh peppered the driver with the kinds of questions that her son—who speaks better kitchen Spanish than

Clockwise from top left: Schwader's mother making papaya salad for the family's celebration of their return to the village; Schwader's relatives gather at Wat

Pha Thangone for a ceremonial meal; the view along Vientiane's avenue Kaysone Phomvihane, looking toward the Patuxai monument.



Lao—wasn't able to ask on his previous trip. "I'm nudging her the whole time," he recalls. "Mom, ask him about the refugee camp! Mom, ask him about the temple!" In fact, the driver said that he did know of a Buddhist temple, called Wat Don Sawan, near the site of an old camp.

The following day, mother and son walked to the temple, where they met a monk and asked about Schwader's father. "I don't know that name," he replied, "but you're welcome to look through the cemetery." At first, all they saw were rows of discouragingly pristine tombstones, most of them clearly newer. But just before giving up, they came upon a cluster of older stones, decrepit and obscured by foliage, their Lao inscriptions nearly faded away. Except for one, Schwader noticed, with a barely legible engraving: THONGSAVANH VILAYTHONG. His father's name.

At dawn the next morning, Schwader, with his shaggy mane and cargo shorts, and a monk with close-cropped hair and a long orange robe paired up to lift the top off the stone tower, revealing a hollow where the jar of bones and ashes was kept. Five monks had formed a line beside the grave and began chanting in unison. Per Lao tradition, Schwader cleaned his father's bones and placed them in a bucket, along with flowers, candles, and incense. Soon, he and his mother were in a boat on the Mekong, gathering handfuls of the bowl's contents and scattering them on the river.

On the long plane ride home, mother and son couldn't get over the serendipity. "We kept looking at each other, like, 'Did that really happen?' If I hadn't stayed at that hotel four years ago, or hadn't come back with my mom, or even if we'd waited one more year, his name might have been gone."

The subject eventually returned to food, as most of their conversations do, and both of them hungrily reminisced about all of the dishes they had eaten together—fish curry, rice porridge, bamboo shoot soup, beef jerky, and *naem khao*, fried balls of coconut rice mixed with curry and fish sauce. His mother recalled the *laap* they'd eaten in Vientiane. "It was good," she told her son. "But I like yours better." —JJ GOODE