

LONG BEACH

Cambodian restaurants get chance to shine for week

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The inaugural Cambodian Restaurant Week, a celebration of the Southeast Asian country’s cuisine and culture that has been in the works for years, kicks off today. The event, co-organized by a local chef and the nonprofit United Cambodian Community, runs through March 26, although an all-day kickoff party took place Saturday at Long Beach City College. Throughout the week, participating businesses will offer discounted menus to lure customers. Tarak Visoth Ouk, a chef who goes by Chef T, got the idea for Cambodian Restaurant Week about 2018 while working as executive chef of the now-defunct Federal Bar in downtown

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Long Beach. He got in touch with the marketing team at Long Beach Food and Beverage, an organization that supports local restaurants through free business consultations, marketing and event planning. “They suggested that we’re in a city that has the most Cambodians in the world besides Cambodia and we don’t have any type of restaurant stuff about them,” Ouk said in a Friday interview. “Then I was like, well, maybe we should do something.” Ouk got to work quickly. He canvassed the community, spoke to Cambodian restaurant owners and tried to get them on board with participating in the event. But, Ouk said, he encountered a roadblock that would delay his vision for years: The lasting impacts of trauma. Cambodia endured years of civil war in the 1970s. The communist Khmer Rouge seized control of Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital city, on April 17, 1975, and went on a brutal killing campaign. By the time the regime fell in 1979, about 2 million people had died in what is now known as the Cambodian Genocide. In the early 1980s, after the regime fell, hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees flocked to the United States, seeking safety from ongoing violence. Many settled in Long Beach. But the horrors endured by so many, Ouk said, still linger. “The Cambodian community just wasn’t biting — they were still stuck in the old genocide style of not trusting anybody,” Ouk said. “Even I, myself, went to try to go beg and plead — and they still said no.” Long Beach designated a mile-long strip in the center of the city as Cambodia Town in 2007, making it an official busi-



Rathana So wears a traditional Cambodian silk outfit, known as a Sampot Bot, as part of the kickoff event for the first Cambodian Restaurant Week on Saturday at Long Beach City College.



Chinitos Tacos’ Beeline Krouch prepares Cambodian specialties Saturday.

ness corridor. Yet, besides store names written in Khmer, there are relatively few cultural signposts or flourishes on the businesses there — with most of the buildings having the plain, utilitarian architecture common to many dense urban centers. That’s a stark contrast

to other commercial hubs that have traditionally anchored ethnic communities, such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo or even nearby Little Saigon — the latter of which may be the most natural comparison. Like Cambodia, Vietnam suffered through a lengthy war that ended in a communist regime

taking over in April 1975. South Vietnamese refugees fled after Saigon fell, with many settling in Orange County. Portions of Garden Grove, Santa Ana and Westminster comprise what is now known as Little Saigon. The Vietnamese community in Little Saigon, particularly those who lived

through the war, also has dealt with persistent trauma. The initial generations of refugees faced discrimination and language barriers as well. As a result, Little Saigon formed as an insular community wary of outsiders. But that enclave eventually opened — and has wielded local political and economic power far greater and longer than Long Beach’s Cambodian community. And Little Saigon’s commercial hub, on Bolsa Avenue in Westminster, has multiple buildings that reflect Vietnamese culture and architecture — with the Asian Garden Mall serving as its iconic anchor. It wasn’t until about six months ago when Ouk became the executive chef at Gladstone’s Long Beach that he and the United Cambodian Community were finally able to persuade Cambodian restaurant owners to sign on to the event. “They kind of like listened a little bit more,” Ouk said. “It took my own

guts and blood and tears to actually go out and show them that I’m willing to do this. It’s all worth it to me in the end. It wasn’t really about me; it was about them.” Saturday at Long Beach City College’s Liberal Arts Campus. Cambodian Restaurant Week vendors — including local restaurants, designers and artists — gathered in the E Quad building to showcase Khmer creations. Ouk left Gladstone’s about a month ago, he said, to pursue his own culinary ambitions and focus on spotlighting his Cambodian cooking in Long Beach. He unveiled his new food truck, Phoenix’s Den Rising, at the LBCC event and is working on opening a Cambodian fine dining restaurant in the next few years. Ouk also said he wants to help increase the number of Cambodian executives in Long Beach. But more than that, he said, Cambodian Restaurant Week is chance to start breaking down the cultural barriers that have long insulated his community — a chance for Cambodia Town to open its doors to outsiders like the Vietnamese community has done in Little Saigon. “The purpose of it all is to bring money back into Cambodia Town,” Ouk said, “to bring other people into Cambodia Town.” Participating businesses — including Phnom Penh Noodle Shack, Sophy’s Cambodia Town Food & Music, and Kim Sun Kitchen — are offering \$5, \$10, \$15 and \$20 menus. The deals are listed on the United Cambodian Community’s website. “They can order the tickets there,” Ouk said. “But actually, Cambodians are willing to open their hands and open their doors. If you don’t have anything, you can come in to order the special(s) too — that’s how they are.” More information about Cambodian Restaurant Week is available at ucclb.org.