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Clockwise from top left: Gambas al ajillo (prawns) and grilled vegetables; Sangria; Lemon and garlic-infused clams; La Plaza owner Javier Sola and his partner, Sina Sar.

# Tapas a La Plaza

The bold flavors of Spain are served in abundance at one of Phnom Penh's newest restaurants

BY LAUREN CROTHERS • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

In conversation with Javier Sola, one thing is immediately clear: he is as passionate about computers and software as he is about food. And while his work with computers has been the bedrock of the past few years, the future looks decidedly gastronomic with the opening of La Plaza, his wildly popular Spanish tapas bar on Street 278.

Mr. Sola's relocation to Cambodia in 2003 came as a result of things not quite panning out back in Spain.

"I was working in Spain in the early 2000s; I ran the Spanish Internet User's Association—

but then the bubble exploded. I had made some money, but then I was out of work," said Mr. Sola, who is from Saragossa. "I decided to travel, and I hadn't been to this part of the world, so I decided to start in Cambodia."

That was almost 10 years ago and Mr. Sola has now settled in Phnom Penh. While he had been left idle in Spain, he was soon able to put his computer expertise to use in Cambodia by working for an NGO that helped handicapped children in Battambang.

"I was trying to give them training on how to use computers, and it didn't work, because

the computers were in English. So I started looking at translating computers to Khmer and looked up free open source software. I figured out it could be done, so I came to Phnom Penh and started doing it," he said.

Mr. Sola began working with Open Forum of Cambodia, which led to work with the Ministry of Education in 2007. His time working with the government turned out to be a stepping stone on to work for the Open Schools Program, a joint initiative between the Open Institute and the Ministry of Education which integrates computers into schools.

But behind all of this, the dream of opening a Spanish restaurant had been bubbling away.

"I love to cook, but never had anything to do



## Seafood Paella

with a restaurant," he said. So in April, he and his partner, Sina Sar, who he met during his first few weeks in the country, opened La Plaza on a quiet part of Phnom Penh's popular Street 278, just west of street 57.

"The Spanish community had been saying 'we should have a tapas bar.' In the end, together with my partner, we decided it would be a good idea. She's the heart behind the place. I could never have done it by myself. It was a joint idea to do it," he said.

"The final decision was when the place came available in December," he added.

Holding the reins of the restaurant is Sina, and while she may not be Spanish, the time she spent in Spain found its way into the food that she produces from La Plaza's kitchen.

"She was in Spain for a year and she learned quite a lot," Mr. Sola said. "She understands taste."

La Plaza opened on April 20, and Mr. Sola said the intention is to slowly and casually introduce more of a Spanish atmosphere to the place. That began with terracotta tiles throughout and Andalusian-style lamps that adorn the walls. The rest, Mr. Sola said, will come as time goes on.

Mr. Sola imports several Spanish products: paprika, olive oil and bomba rice for paella.

Lunch is a smattering of Spanish classics. We start with the gazpacho (\$2.50), which is creamy but light.

"It's from the south of Spain," Mr. Sola said. "Spanish food is about tradition—years of developing dishes. It's an evolution."

A plate of cold cuts includes a chorizo that melts on the tongue, while the patatas bravas (\$3) are done in a simple, smoky, paprika sauce without any mayonnaise that Mr. Sola said is in keeping with the traditions of the dish.

The sauce is robust, but the flavors are delicately balanced.

The gambas al ajillo (\$2.50), or prawns, are plump, juicy, not too oily and served with a garlic accompaniment. So too are the clams whose taste are accentuated by lemon and garlic.

The Verduras a la plancha (\$4), or grilled vegetables, are grilled soft and dressed lightly with Spanish olive oil.

The piece de resistance, however, is the golden-colored paella marinera (\$24, and one of four paellas that La Plaza does), which is beautifully put together and has the distinctive, slightly burnt base that any good paella should.

The prawns are succulent and the squid is tender. The bomba rice, brought over from Spain, retains the flavor of the dish's seafood components, from which a stock had been made. This one is definitely one for sharing. And it goes down well with a swig of La Plaza's sangria, which also had the input of the Spanish community.

Still less than two months old, La Plaza is doing a roaring trade on weekends but, Mr. Sola said, his focus now is to draw in the lunch crowd.

To that end, the restaurant has a separate \$6 lunch special, which Mr. Sola hopes will do just that.

"Right now it's a hobby," he said. "I lose weight—I'm standing all day long and it's very healthy food."



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### Ingredients:

- 450 ml Fish/Shrimp heads stock
- 200 gr rice (bomba variety)
- 100 gr squid
- 100 gr clean white fish
- 100 gr peeled shrimp
- 100 gr fresh full shrimp
- 50 gr clams
- 1 tomato, grated
- 1/2 an onion
- Garlic
- Saffron
- Paprika
- Olive oil

### Preparation:

- Make the stock by boiling the fish and shrimp (heads mostly) for 20 minutes, you can cook it longer to let it reduce further for more flavor, but the fish and shrimp should be removed after 20 minutes.
- Fry the garlic until slightly brown in a special paella dish (flat, round and shallow). Then add the chopped onion and when it is starting to change color add the grated tomato. After a couple of minutes, add the white fish (cut into cubes), and after two more minutes the squid.
- Add the full shrimp (unpeeled), cook

quickly on both sides and reserve.

- Add the peeled shrimp and cook briefly.
- Add the stock and bring it to a boil.
- Add the salt, paprika and saffron to taste.
- Add the rice, distribute evenly and place the clams over it.
- The paella should be cooked for about 17 to 20 minutes, until the rice is cooked and all the liquid is gone. The most difficult part of making paella is to control the heat of the stove during this period, to ensure the water does not evaporate too quick or too slow and that the paella is not overly burnt at the bottom.

• The shrimp that was reserved is placed on the paella about five minutes before the end of the process. It is customary to increase the fire during the last two or three minutes of the process to slightly burn the bottom of the paella. This increases the flavor of the rice.

• Remove the paella from the fire and let it sit for about five minutes. If the rice is not fully cooked, then the paella is covered during this time (traditionally with a newspaper). If it has more liquid than desired, then it is not covered.

### La Plaza Spanish Tapas Bar

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