# Cocktail Culture and Distilleries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

We passed down the unimaginatively named Street 830 twice before stopping in front of a nondescript wall. Unsure whether I would be trespassing on someone's home, I tentatively stuck my head through the opening in the gate, hoping it wouldn't get stuck. As so often happens in this city, another world awaited us, hidden on the other side. In this case, a sleek glass and wood building that contrasted starkly with the pile of rubble and peeling paint in the vacant lot across the street. A small sign announced I reached my destination: the Samai Rum Distillery, the first of my distilleries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

This contrast between the old and new is a common theme among the distilleries in Phnom Penh, which over the past decade have developed a buzzy presence around the city and the region. Like so much of Cambodia, looking behind the fading architecture of old regimes reveals the creative and dynamic workings of a country often ignored in favor of its bigger neighbors.

In Phnom Penh, look beneath the usual construction of high-rise office buildings and condominiums and you'll notice sitting side-by-side with carts selling bamboo sticky rice, yakitori chicken skewers, and chet chien (fried bananas), a different form of creative, sustainable development. Emphasizing local flavors, these spirit houses are at the forefront of a new energy in entrepreneurship, and Phnom Penh has become a hotspot for an innovative cocktail culture appealing to locals and visitors alike.

### Samai Distillery

Entering Samai Distillery, the sweet-sour smell of their rum mash is the first thing you notice. The high-ceilinged space is headquarters and distillery for Samai's rums. On Thursday nights, it is also a bar with a rotation of bartenders, DJs, and themed cocktails. Tables made from barrels crowd the small space and the room fills with an eclectic crowd sipping rum and nibbling on antipasti or pizza delivered from a neighboring restaurant.

Samai is the only rum distillery in Cambodia. When asked why focus on rum, Daniel Pachecho, the co-founder and manager, explained that, as a native of Venezuela, he missed rum as a taste of home. "You couldn't find rums in Cambodia," Pacheco said. "There are sugar cane fields in every corner of the country, but no one was using it to make spirits. And it is a very good quality sugar cane, so we thought 'why not?"

### Samai's Distinct Well-Received Flavors for Both Sipping and Cocktails

Samai Distillery was founded in 2014 and, in the intervening decade, has refined its products under

the direction of Head Distiller Darachampich (Champich) Moang, one of only a few female distillers in Southeast Asia. Samai makes four spirits: white rum, gold rum, rum liqueur, and Kampot pepper rum, which provides a spicy kick from Cambodia's famous red pepper. The rums are rich and smooth, delicious on their own – our table ordered a bottle of Samai Gold for sipping – and in a variety of cocktails, some of which come with a stick of sugarcane for nibbling, and others like the *WakeUp Bong*, which is Samai's version of an espresso martini using its rum liqueur, provide a nice jolt. Judging by the size of the crowd at closing time and the number of rum bottles littering the tables, these efforts are paying off.

**Seekers Spirits: Gin and More**

In contrast to the hip urban vibe of Samai's Thursday nights, the weekend at Seekers Spirits is more like an open-air garden party. Located at the end of a long dirt lane, Seekers glows amidst the neglect of the surrounding buildings. An outdoor patio, dotted with pots of the herbs used in the gins and cocktails, is strung with lights dancing in the breeze over wooden tables. The turquoise and wood bar dominates the light-infused indoor space. A giant bowl of fruits and plants in the center showcases the local flavors used in Seekers' products.

Best known for gin, Seekers was started in 2018 by Marco Julia Eggert who, along with his partner Tania, arrived in Southeast Asia 20 years ago to work in the hospitality industry. Like fellow distillers Pacheco and Ryuji Nukata of Mawsim, they fell in love with Cambodia and decided to start their own business. They named it Seekers because, in Marco's words, "we are all seeking, looking … always."

**Seekers' Local Flavors and Ingredients**

Entering the soaring space, I was greeted with a gin and tonic made from Seeker's signature spirit, the Mekong Dry Gin. The green swoosh on the bottle's label depicts the Mekong, representing Seeker's use of local flavors from countries along the mighty river. The orange liqueur uses oranges from nearby Battambang. The Mekong Gold gin has vanilla essences from pandan, ubiquitous in Southeast Asia. Seekers Coffee Liqueur, which would be amazing over vanilla ice cream, mixes Arabica and Robusta beans from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia. Seekers most unique offering is its Jason Kong gin, a product perfect for the younger, social media savvy crowd driving Cambodia's cocktail culture. Made with butterfly pea flower, it has a sweeter flavor and a deep violet color that changes to pink when tonic is added. The bottle depicts a vibrant one-of-a-kind design reflecting its tagline: "Life in Full Color."

**Mawsim: Distillery by Day, Concept Bar by Night**

If finding Samai and Seekers was a scavenger hunt, locating Mawsim was akin to searching for the lost city of Atlantis. Even the tuktuk driver was wandering back and forth with us looking for the entrance. Finally, with the help of an amused fruit vendor, we found the stairs to take us up to a tiny, non-descript door with an even tinier wood sign. But don't let the location throw you. Mawsim, open only by appointment, is another hidden jewel. Squeezing through the old wooden door, slightly too small for our American-sized bodies, we entered a dimly lit room dominated by the bar in front, the still in back, and a few tables. Mawsim's bottles are made of an aqua blue glass that glows invitingly when backlit on the bar, creating an ambiance of an old jazz club in the room.

### Mawsim's Unique, Sustainable Gins and Tonics

Launched three years ago, Mawsim is the newest of the three distilleries and it only sells two spirits. When asked why they developed only two products, Ryuji Nukata, Mawsim's developer/distiller/bartender/chef, explained they wanted to "focus on local tastes" and gin is especially suited to the Cambodian climate. Mawsim's base alcohol is uniquely sustainable, using the plentiful water weeds from nearby Tonle Sap lake to make the base ethanol, which is then infused with other local flavors.

Mawsim's gins are truly one-of-a-kind; easily quaffable on their own or mixed into a cocktail. One, Tropical Citrus, was light and fruity, with flavors of mango, passionfruit, pineapple, and green Battambang oranges. The other, Spices & Herbs, almost sparkled with notes of Kampot pepper, Mondulkiri red pepper, ginger, galangal, cardamom, and lemongrass. Though impossible to pick a favorite, I slightly preferred the Spices & Herbs, only because it went so well with Mawsim's homemade tonic, which is blushed orangey-pink by local fever tree bark.

### Craft Cocktail Culture: A Rapidly Growing Cambodian Interest

The spirits shine at all three distilleries, each of which has won numerous awards at regional and global competitions. While craft cocktails are still a relatively new phenomenon in Cambodia, their popularity is rapidly growing, especially among young Cambodian professionals. When Sami first opened their doors in 2014, the clientele was 100% expats. By 2019, according to Pacheco, they began to see a change, as "more and more young, professional Cambodians began to take cocktails seriously and expand beyond Angkor beer and rice spirits." Now, about 90% of the crowd for their Thursday night open bar is young Cambodians. "It is impressive how quickly the cocktail scene has developed," he continued, "the growing middle class in Cambodia wants to try something new, and that includes new cocktails."

### From Expat Fan Base to Just as Popular with Locals

At Seekers' weekend gatherings, Marco said that attendees are usually about "50% expats and 50% locals" This represents a change from the company's first years, when it was almost 100% expats. Moreover, Marco continued, "many of the expats now are from other Asian countries, not Westerners, which is also a change." At Mawsim, the high-end gin still attracts more foreigners than Cambodians, but according to Ryuji, Mawsim is actively working to change that, focusing more on young Cambodian professional because "they have the power to identify what is 'hot' and they want to try something new."

**Peek Behind the Walls: Enjoy Distilleries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

For the visitor, finding these distilleries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia,  dotted throughout the city's maze of streets is an adventure, providing unique glimpses into the transitions happening beneath the surface in this crazy, eclectic town. While all three distilleries are interested in eventually expanding towards export markets, for now the best way to enjoy these spirits, which lovingly reflect the flavors of the Mekong, is to peek behind the walls and join the crowds for cocktails in Cambodia.

Choul mouy;  that's "cheers" in Khmer!

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