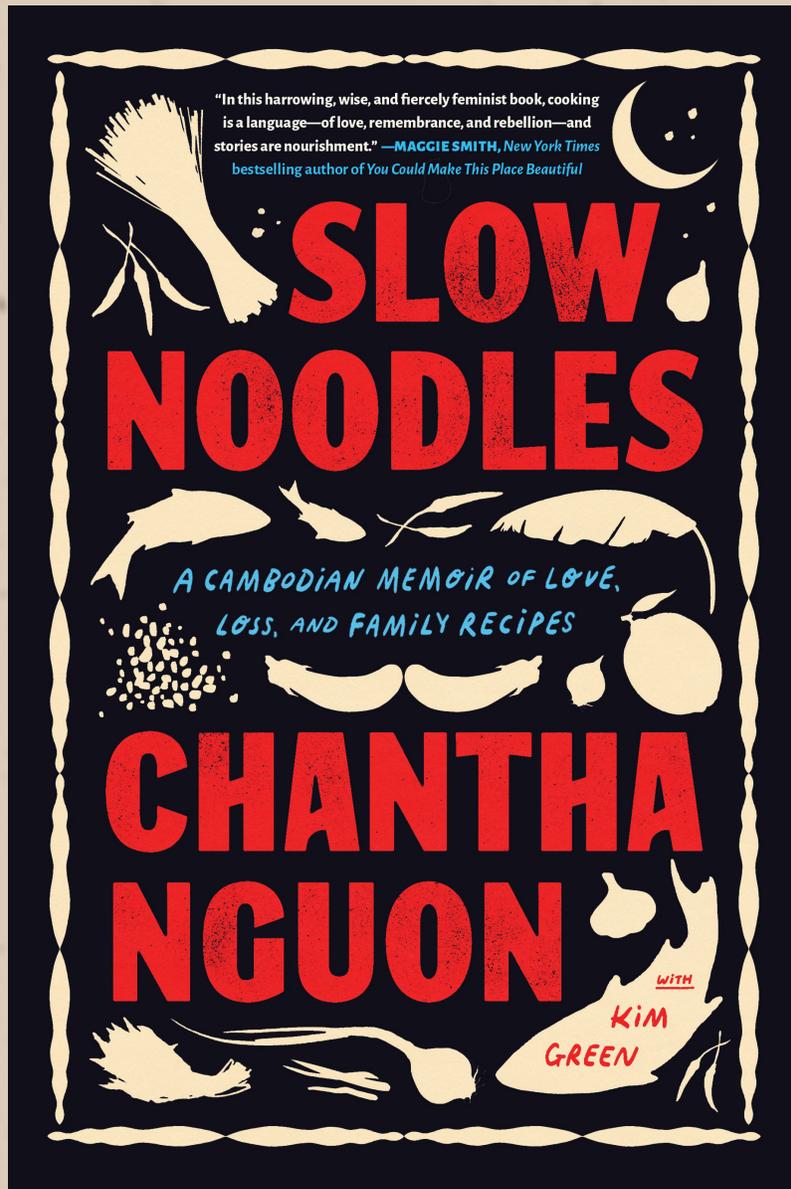




BOOK CLUB KIT





QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In the prologue, Chantha explains her “slow noodles” philosophy in the kitchen and in life. What does that phrase, and the book’s title, mean to her?
 - Chantha writes that “the Khmer Rouge informed the Cambodian people that we had no history.” What did “Year Zero” signify to Pol Pot and his revolutionaries, and to the people who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975 to 1979?
 - Why did Chantha include so many food descriptions and recipes in her memoir? Why do you think there’s such a powerful connection between food and memory?
 - What sets Cambodian foodways apart from the cuisines of neighboring countries like Vietnam and Thailand? Why do you think Cambodian food has gotten less attention from food-curious Westerners than other national cuisines?
 - How does preserving Cambodian culinary history, something so important to Chantha, dovetail with the strength of women—and their bonds—in this memoir.
 - Chantha writes about the “Rules for Women” (the Chbab Srey) and quotes a Khmer saying: “Men are gold; women are cloth.” What do the Chbab Srey and the proverb have to say about women’s and girls’ roles in the Cambodian traditions of Chantha’s childhood? In what ways does Chantha fulfill or defy those expectations in her own life?
 - On the surface, “Silken Rebellion Fish Fry” is a recipe for rehabilitating a too-old fish using “the art of culinary disguise.” What deeper truths about resilience and defiance does this recipe suggest? What does Chantha mean by the phrase “silken rebellion”?
 - When Chantha and her husband, Chan, were in the refugee camps, she saw a headline that said, “Charity Gets Tired.” What does that mean? How can we avoid “empathy fatigue” when there are so many refugees fleeing wars, revolutions, and dire poverty, and so much uninformed rhetoric surrounding immigration policy?
 - A major theme of this memoir is the question of whether her mother’s middle-class values prepared Chantha to survive alone as a young, penniless refugee.
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She often calls herself “spoiled” and “soft.” Do you think Mae’s lessons, beliefs, and recipes made Chantha too soft for a hard world or gave her the strength she would need to survive and rebuild her life?

- What does it mean to Chantha, her mother, and her sister that she was born in the Year of the Buffalo? How do Chantha’s belief in astrology and her Catholic faith intertwine? How do her beliefs about fate and agency evolve over time?
- What does the Elephant Fish fable say about a mother’s influence in a daughter’s life, even after the mother is gone? Why do you think Chantha ends her book with this story?
- In the epilogue, Chantha’s daughter, Clara, writes, “If there’s one thing I learned from my mother, it’s that losing everything is not the end of the story.” What does she mean by this? Do you find Chantha’s story of survival and resilience relatable or inspiring? Are there ways to apply her experiences to your own struggles and losses, even if your life is very different from hers?



Chantha Nguon was born in Cambodia and spent two decades as a refugee, until she was finally able to return to her homeland. She is the co-founder of the Stung Treng Women’s Development Center, a social enterprise that offers a living wage, education, and social services to women and their families in rural northeastern Cambodia. A frequent public speaker, she has appeared at universities and on radio and TV news programs, including NPR’s Morning Edition. She cooks often for friends, family, and for private events. An excerpt from *Slow Noodles in Hippocampus* was named a Longreads Best Personal Essay in 2021.

SLOW NOODLES PORRIDGE WITH CHICKEN AND PORK (BOBOR BÁNH CANH)

My mother's version is slightly different from traditional Vietnamese bánh canh, in which the chewy noodles are usually made with rice and tapioca flours. In her preparation, the soup is thicker, like porridge, and she uses only rice flour, which makes the noodles softer and less springy. For this recipe, I replace some of the rice flour with unbleached all-purpose flour—this helps bind the noodles.

In Cambodia, we love to include the bone-in cuts of meat right in the soup bowl. But you can pull meat from the bone to serve the soup, if you prefer.

Serves 4 (and keeps them busy before dinner)

Ingredients:

For the noodles:

1½ cups rice flour

Boiling water (up to ¾ cup)

½ cup unbleached all-purpose flour

For the soup:

¼ to ½ cup neutral oil

2 heads garlic, minced

1 pound chicken pieces, such as thighs and drumsticks (or boneless thighs)

1 pound pork ribs or neck bones, separated (or pork shoulder)

Salt

1 teaspoon sugar (optional)

2 cubes Knorr chicken bouillon (optional)

For serving: 3 scallions, thinly sliced; ¼ pound bean sprouts; a few sprigs cilantro; Thai red chilies, sliced; Asian-style ground chili-garlic oil; freshly ground black pepper

Make the noodles:

Place rice flour in a large bowl. Slowly add boiling water, mixing well with a spoon until the dough just comes together. (You may not need the whole ¾ cup.) Incorporate all-purpose flour with your fingers until dough is sticky and tough, then knead with your palms until smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. (If the water isn't hot enough, the dough will be brittle instead of stretchy.)





Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and dust with flour. On a lightly floured clean surface, divide dough evenly into golf ball–size portions, then use a rolling pin to gently roll into small, thin ovals (slightly less than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick). Use scissors to cut into thin strips about 2 to 4 inches long, transferring noodles as you work to prepared baking sheet, taking care not to crowd the noodles. If you want your noodles a little bit slower (and more noodlelike), roll strips into cylinders about the width of the small end of a chopstick. Toss a little flour over noodles and set aside in a cool, dry place.

Or roll them Mae’s slow-noodles way:

Mix the dough as described above, then lightly oil a clean wooden surface (and your fingers) with canola or vegetable oil. Pull off blueberry-size pieces of dough and roll them out with your palm on the oiled surface until they are about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and about the width of the small end of a chopstick. Recruit lots of assistants. Laugh and talk for hours as you roll noodles together. Maybe make a cocktail. Lay out noodles on a parchment-lined baking sheet as described above.

Make the soup:

In a medium skillet, heat oil over medium heat and fry garlic until golden and crisp, about 2 or 3 minutes. (Don’t let it get too dark, or the garlic will be bitter.) Remove garlic from skillet and set aside. Do not wipe skillet.

In the same skillet, sauté chicken and pork in garlic oil over medium-high heat until the exterior is light golden on all sides, about 2 minutes each side. Add a pinch of salt.

In a stockpot, bring 3 quarts of water to a boil. Add chicken and pork. Reduce heat and simmer gently, periodically skimming foam, until the meat is cooked through, about 25 minutes. Remove meat, pull from bone, and set aside for serving. If you’re using sugar and/or chicken bouillon, add them now. Season with salt.

Add noodles gently into the simmering broth, including 2 tablespoons of flour from the baking sheet. Do not stir. When broth resumes bubbling, reduce heat and simmer, stirring very gently from the bottom once or twice, for 3 to 5 minutes. When the noodles float, they are most likely cooked through—they should be tender and slightly chewy.

Serve in a large, deep bowl. Top with fried garlic, scallions, bean sprouts, cilantro, and chilies. Drizzle with chili oil and season with freshly ground black pepper.





NOTES ON INGREDIENTS, TECHNIQUES, AND SUPPLIES

annatto seeds—Brick-red seeds from the achiote tree; also called achiote. They have a mild, nutty flavor and give foods a red-gold color. Stir annatto seeds in hot oil for less than a minute—just enough to redden the oil—and then remove oil from heat and discard seeds. Any longer, and the seeds may burn and make the oil bitter. You can find packages of annatto seeds in the dried chili section of Asian or Latin American groceries.

banana flower—Long, conical purple blossoms that grow from the end of banana bunches. We Cambodians use them in salads and as soup toppings. To prep banana flower, mix two cups water, a pinch of salt, and the juice of one lemon in a small bowl. Peel away the reddish outer leaves and petals of the flower to expose the inner white leaves (bracts). Roll and thinly slice the white leaves. Submerge slices in lemon water as you go; otherwise they will turn brown and taste bitter.

bobor (borbor, babaw, b’baw)—Essentially congee, or white rice porridge. Bobor is inexpensive comfort food eaten at all times of day in Cambodia, often in street stalls. It can be served solo or cooked with meat or seafood and topped with lots of condiments, such as fish sauce, pickled vegetables, chili oil, sliced scallions, fried garlic, or fresh ginger.

chả lụa—A Vietnamese pork roll that’s made from lean pork that is pounded, seasoned, tightly wrapped in banana leaves, then steamed or boiled. It’s sliced and served atop noodles and soups and is delicious in a num pang dak sach (cold cut sandwich; bánh mì chả lụa, in Vietnamese). You’ll find chả lụa in the deli or freezer section of some Asian groceries and international supermarkets.

chili paste (dried)—To make this paste (for amok), use mild, dried red chilies, like New Mexico, ancho, or guajillo. To rehydrate, put dried chilies into a medium bowl and pour 3 cups boiling water over them. Let chilies soak until they’re soft, 15 to 30 minutes. Drain. Remove stems and seeds, then grind chilies in a blender until a paste forms. (Drizzle in a little of the soaking water to help chilies blend.) In a skillet, fry paste in 1 tablespoon of neutral oil for five minutes over low heat. Freeze any leftover paste you don’t use.

culantro (ngò gai, sawtooth herb)—An herb with long, serrated leaves that tastes somewhat like cilantro but has a stronger flavor and can withstand cook-





ing. Find it fresh in Asian groceries or international supermarkets, often labeled “ngò gai.” To store, wrap in damp paper towels and refrigerate.

fingerroot (rhizomes, Chinese keys, Chinese ginger, lesser galangal; krachai or grachai in Thai; k’jeay in Khmer)—A yellowish rhizome resembling long, slender fingers and related to ginger. Sometimes you’ll find jars of pickled rhizome in Asian groceries. There’s no ideal substitute, so omit it from the kroeung if you can’t find it.

galangal (greater galangal, blue ginger, Thai ginger, romdeng in Khmer)—A cream-colored rhizome related to ginger and used as an earthy and citrusy spice in some soups and kroeungs. Not to be confused with fingerroot, or lesser galangal. Peel and slice it as thinly as you can (it’s quite tough) before pounding or processing it. If you don’t find fresh galangal in an Asian grocery or international supermarket, look for (or order) galangal paste or powder. Substitute 1 teaspoon of galangal powder for 1 inch of galangal root. Ginger isn’t a good substitute—the two flavors are different. Slice leftover galangal and freeze for later use.

Kampot pepper—Prized peppercorns, cultivated in the southwestern Kampot Province for centuries. These are Cambodia’s champagne of spices—they even have their own geographic indication (GI). Splurge on an order and grind these over grilled meats, soups, or *pâté de foie*.

long beans—Green, snakelike beans that stay crunchy when cooked, so they’re great in stir-fries. For curries, chop and add them near the end so they aren’t in the liquid for too long. You’ll find bundled long beans in many Asian groceries, but if not, you can substitute green beans.

makrut lime leaves—Shiny paired leaves from the makrut lime tree that add a citrusy flavor to curries and soups. Fresh leaves are superior to dried. When using for kroeung, remove the central vein and cut into slivers before pounding or processing. You’ll find fresh leaves in the produce or freezer section of some Asian groceries. Buy extra and freeze for later use.

morning glory (*Ipomoea aquatica*, water spinach, Chinese spinach, water convolvulus; rau muống in Vietnamese, trakuon in Khmer)—An edible green with long, thin leaves that grows abundantly in waterways or wet soil throughout Southeast Asia. To prep, trim off the bottom inch of stem, remove older leaves near the ends of stems, and cut the rest into 4-inch sections. Blanch before using as a soup topping. You’ll sometimes find morning glory in Southeast Asian groceries, in cities where there are large Vietnamese or Cambodian diasporas, but it’s illegal to cultivate in some states and can be tough to find. Substitute watercress or spinach.





prahok—A gray fish paste made from salted, fermented fish—usually trei riel, or mud carp. For generations, prahok has been a staple protein source of the Cambodian diet—and an essential, defining ingredient in the national cuisine. A small amount adds intense savory umami to some somlors, kroeungs, and dips. You might find prahok on the condiment aisle of some Southeast Asian groceries. Look for jars of gray paste labeled “mud fish sauce” (or “mắm cá lóc,” in Vietnamese). A little bit goes a long way. Be prepared for a powerful aroma when opening the jar. Substitute anchovies or shrimp paste.

rice paper wrappers (bánh tráng)—Edible sheets, usually made from rice flour and tapioca starch, used for wrapping fresh summer rolls and fried spring rolls. (I prefer the lacy crunch of fried rice paper rolls over the wheat-based wrappers, but the rice paper ones don’t brown as easily.)

shrimp paste—A Southeast Asian staple made with fermented shrimp and salt. A small amount of shrimp paste packs a concentrated umami punch in dishes like amok. Look for small jars of pink or brownish paste labeled “shrimp paste” or “shrimp sauce” in the condiment aisle of Asian groceries. If you can’t find it, substitute 1 teaspoon of shrimp paste with 2 teaspoons of fish sauce. Keep refrigerated.

tamarind paste—A concentrated reddish-brown paste made from the sour fruit of a tamarind-tree pod. Tamarind is one of the sources of that famous sourness in some Khmer soups, stews, and sauces. Find small jars or plastic packages of sour (not sweetened) tamarind paste at Asian or Indian groceries, gourmet supermarkets, or online retailers.

wood-ear mushrooms—(Tree ears, cloud ears) Edible fungi that look like crinkled brown ears and are chewy and earthy. You’ll find them, dried or fresh, in Asian and international groceries, and the dried version in some supermarkets. Reconstitute dried wood ears in warm water for 20 to 30 minutes before using.

