

Sofitel Phnom Penh Features 8 Restaurants – Travel Weekly Asia, 24th Feb 2011

Eight Restaurants and Bars debut in Sofitel's new Phnom Penh Hotel



The Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra fired up the grills at Fu Lu Zu for the first time last week, ushering in the eighth of its new restaurants and bars and trumpeting the dawn of a new culinary day in Phnom Penh.

The cornucopia of options include Chinese, Japanese and Italian restaurants, a chocolatiere, an Old World bar, two poolside eateries and La Coupole, where Western and Asian buffets anchor every meal.

“Each restaurant and bar is a deliberate dining experience, as distinct from its neighbor as any other restaurant in the city,” said Dider Lamoot, the hotel’s general manager. “There is not one dining experience at the Sofitel; we’re sounding eight individual notes.”

Six of those outlets are open to the general public.

The hotel’s flagship eatery, La Coupole, was named for a landmark Parisian brasserie. Like its renowned counterpart, the restaurant is expansive, seating 160 in a dramatic space that mirrors the entrance lobby. Grand columns and an artful arrangement of tables demarcate the restaurant into a collection of more intimate spaces. A custom-made Molteni stove anchors a resplendent show kitchen, and three wrought-iron chandeliers hang from seven-meter ceilings.

La Coupole’s menu is just as deep with Western fare as Eastern. To Asia’s shrimp and pomelo salad, the West answers with homemade foie gras as an option among the starters. To the West’s roasted salmon, there is the Khmer’s amok, morsels of fish baked in banana leaves.

Housed in its own building overlooking the pool deck and canal, and steered by an Italian chef, Do Forni opens as just one of a half-dozen Italian restaurants in Phnom Penh. An imposing, brick pizza oven dominates the 64-seat restaurant’s show kitchen, hence the name Do Forni (From Ovens). A timber-frame ceiling and semi-circular leather couches play up the ambiance of a big-shouldered steak house out of the American Midwest.

But the wine list is long on Italy, with 60% of more than 150 labels straight from the Old Country. German flatware and royal, bone china from Thailand set the stage for pizza, gnocchi, ravioli or tortellini. Beyond Italy, the selections take in an Australian rack of lamb, Wagyu beef fillet and crispy red snapper.

Two East Asian restaurants run lines into the culinary heritage of China and Japan. At Hachi, the aesthetics are all-Japan, from the slate black floors, rice paper screens and tatami mats in six private dining rooms. The hotel’s director of food and beverage traveled to Japan to invest in chinaware, bento boxes and sake.

“There are 23 types of sake, most of which comes from small, not very well-known breweries in Japan,” said Giuliano Callegaro, director of food and beverage. “Our highest grade of sake is sourced out of a 700-year-old distillery in Kobi, where the quality of the water determines the quality of the brew.”

While Hachi occupies a spot in the main hotel building, midway between La Coupole and the lobby, Fu Lu Zu cultivates

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age-old ambiance in a separate building near the sports club. Here, diners fishing for delicacies as various as shark's fin and braised bird's nest or such mainstays as lobster, crab and barbequed pork can retreat to one of six private rooms or enjoy a more communal experience in an 82-seat dining room.

Plush red seats and a dramatic coffered ceiling are dominant notes in the restaurant's atmosphere. Saturday and Sunday mornings are reserved for dim sum. Unlike most restaurants in Phnom Penh, Fu Lu Zu will remain open until the small hours of the morning.

In the hotel lobby, Le Bar's food menu is casual, running from quarter pound beef burgers to wonton soup. But its drinks menu is anything but. Eight kinds of martinis vie with eight champagne-based cocktails as preludes to a long evening. Nearly 20 labels of single malt scotch lord their pedigree over as many blends.

The lounge area itself is Old Shanghai, with deep, leather club chairs nestling in an alcove banked with Palladian windows, beneath a mezzanine crowned by a baby grand piano. The piano comes into play most afternoons for high tea.

Just beyond the lobby, the delicious smell drifting through the lobby is sourced at Chocolat, a small, European style gourmet shop where a chocolate fountain defines the ambiance. They're turning out all things chocolate here, from éclairs to candy to fondue. But there'll be all manner of pastry and bread. The espresso experience aims to be the best in town.

"You can buy a kilo of espresso locally for USD 10, but we're spending more than three times that," said Callegaro. "We want people to remember their espresso at Chocolat."

Callegaro signs the purchase orders for things. He know what things cost, from the espresso to the USD 110,000 Molteni stove in La Coupole to the USD 33,000 rotisserie in the Phokeethra Sports Club Bar. The sports club menu is built around the rotisserie and runs long to chicken and lamb. This out-of-the-way outlet is open only to hotel guests and sports club members, who may appreciate the long list of healthy juices.

Likewise, Aqua is open only to hotel guests. Open from 10 in the morning to 6 in the evening, the poolside restaurant seats guests pavilion style, serves them from bento boxes and promotes views over the canal to the Mekong.

As the hotel's team of five head chefs season their individual operations, they'll expand beyond their kitchens to special food and beverage events around the hotel. Callegaro expects to host at least a wine dinner per month. He imagines MICE spreads all over the hotel grounds. He wants each chef to conduct a cooking class "There's a whole world of food here," he said. "And a city that, we hope, is plenty hungry."

Source: travelweekly.asia