

The Chef & The Frog

An multicultural restaurant puts downtown Whiteville on the map as a dining destination.

BY MELISSA SLAVEN WARREN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL CLINE

Among the Southern kitchens and barbecue joints in Whiteville, you might be surprised to find The Chef & The Frog, a multicultural, Asian and European-influenced restaurant.

“Dinner at The Chef & The Frog is an adventure,” says Guillaume Slama, co-founder, owner and husband to national award-winning Chef Sokun Nuon-Slama. “It’s not just about the food; it’s an invitation to learn about other cultures.”

The walls of the eatery are sprinkled with photos of the restaurateurs captured among exotic sights around the world, including their homelands of Cambodia and France. Their hope is that their customers, when dining here, figuratively cross borders and open themselves to learning about different people, traditions and, of course, food.

Generally, restaurants of this quality might develop a reputation as a special occasion destination. But Slama, who says the restaurant has



Husband and wife team, Guillaume Slama and Sokun Nuon-Slama, co-founders of The Chef & The Frog.



a loyal following of regulars, describes their casual fine dining experience as “unpretentious, affordable and authentic.” They even have an extensive wine list with selections from Oregon, California, Italy, Argentina and beyond that offers something for every budget.

The Chef & The Frog is part of the vibrant downtown scene inside Vineland Village in Whiteville, which is 45 minutes from both Wilmington and Myrtle Beach. Nuon-Slama reimagines modern American and European dishes with



an ever-changing menu. Her creative chef specials and her skill of blending common dishes with exotic fare have landed her numerous accolades and awards, including membership to the prestigious Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, the oldest international gastronomic society honoring masters of the culinary arts.

Nuon-Slama is a self-taught chef who learned from talented culinary experts in Italy, France and Spain, among other countries, and is inspired in part by her father’s cooking ability, which actually saved her family members’ lives. In the mid-1970s she and some members of her family were captured during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. “My family was spared due to my father’s ability to pose as a cook,” she says. “He offered his skills in return for our safety.” She and her family eventually escaped and moved to France, where she grew up — and where she would meet her prince charming, Guillaume.





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“It was a hot day in June of 1994,” Slama recalls. “We were both visiting the Champs-Élysées in Paris.” They were each with their significant others but met in line at a café while ordering lunch. And that is where the fairytale began. They were kindred spirits, sharing family histories of plight and persecution. Slama’s own family fled to France after enduring violence and

aggression during the German occupation of the Netherlands. They eventually fell in love, married and moved to America in 1997. In 2009, after having run a successful restaurant outside of Athens, Georgia, that fell victim to the recession, the pair relocated to Whiteville when an opportunity presented itself to begin a new restaurant.

The building that the Slamas moved into was that of a previous restaurant called The Southern Kitchen, a long-standing traditional cooking establishment in the heart of Whiteville. Though Nuon-Slama would be cooking and serving Asian-fusion cuisine, the landlord refused to let them change the name on the side of the building. The restaurant had a soft opening in September of 2009, with 30 people lined up at the door. While most were instant fans, there were those who were taken by surprise.

“People came in expecting a Southern kitchen,” Slama says. “You won’t make it if you don’t serve Southern food, people told us.” Wisely, they ignored the advice and continued to do things their way. Eventually the Slamas bought the building across the street and rebranded the outside of the restaurant: The Chef & The Frog.

Even the menus read like a fairytale, beginning with the words “Once Upon a Time” and “In the Beginning” for the appetizers. There’s even an “Evil Witch Advisory” reminding diners of the dangers of consuming undercooked and raw foods. The offerings are eclectic, with items most diners wouldn’t expect to find together on a menu, including common Southern bites like fried green tomatoes and exotic tastes like escargots. Very few items repeat across the brunch, lunch and dinner menus, with the exception of a few staples like soups and salads.

One dish diners will find on both the lunch and dinner menus is Nuon-Slama’s signature entree — Cambodian Beef. The tender sliced beef, along with her rib eyes and filets, are sourced directly from an Angus farm. Made with herbs and hot peppers from her own garden and served with warm, soft jasmine rice, there is no questioning why her

Cambodian Beef has taken national honors in culinary competitions across the country.

Another customer favorite is the Chef's Breast, a plump double chicken breast glazed with honey and spices, served with grilled pineapple and creamy grits. Not to worry for the non-meat lovers. The Chef & The Frog serves a variety of other dishes including salmon, tuna, shrimp and grits, and pastas.

Nuon-Slama makes everything from scratch: breads, dressings, croutons, sauces, pickles, pastries and ice cream, and she even grows the lettuce, vegetables and herbs. Perhaps one of her defining ingredients is her homemade curry that she uses in her Cambodian dishes.

"My curry is my mother's recipe, and it was her mothers' before that, and her mother's mother, etc.," explains Nuon-Slama.

Ordering pre-made or pre-manufactured ingredients never occurred to her when she started cooking. "I started the hard way, and once I got started, I realized I wouldn't have it any other way."

Fresh, quality, healthy and local are at the essence of their establishment. The Slamas travel hundreds of miles during their days off, driving to Asian grocery stores in two different states to get the freshest ingredients and hard-to-find items like baby bok-choy, yu-choy and soy beans. They support local agricultural businesses buying local cheese and honey from area farmers.

At The Chef & The Frog, customers don't have to worry about whether or not the Roasted Pork Belly has the same amount of chimichurri sauce this time as it did the last time they ordered it, or if the Chef's Breast will be overcooked or undercooked instead of just right. That's because Nuon-Slama



cooks every single dish and oversees every aspect of its preparation. Consistency and quality are key to the restaurant's success. She once hired a sous-chef to help her out so she could have a night or two off, but her customers weren't fooled. "They were asking before making a reservation if I was cooking or not," she says.

For Nuon-Slama, it's not just cooking. It's art, and it's a medium she's passionate about. She blends Asian spices, French culinary techniques and Southern ingredients to "come up with a unique pallet of tastes and flavors" that complement each other, not compete with each other. The Slamas

have one wish for those who visit The Chef & The Frog — "get out of your comfort zone and try something new."

"I would like nothing more but for you to trust me and try what I have concocted for you," Nuon-Slama says.

Thanks to an active downtown development committee, of which Slama is a member, the revitalization efforts of Whiteville have made it possible for unique shops and restaurants like The Chef & The Frog to thrive, providing an intercultural dining experience to residents and visitors without ever having to leave their hometown. ■



Want to go?

The Chef & The Frog

605 S Madison Street, Whiteville
(910) 640-5550
chefnc.com

The restaurant is open for dinner Thursday through Saturday, for lunch Tuesday through Friday and for brunch on Sunday.