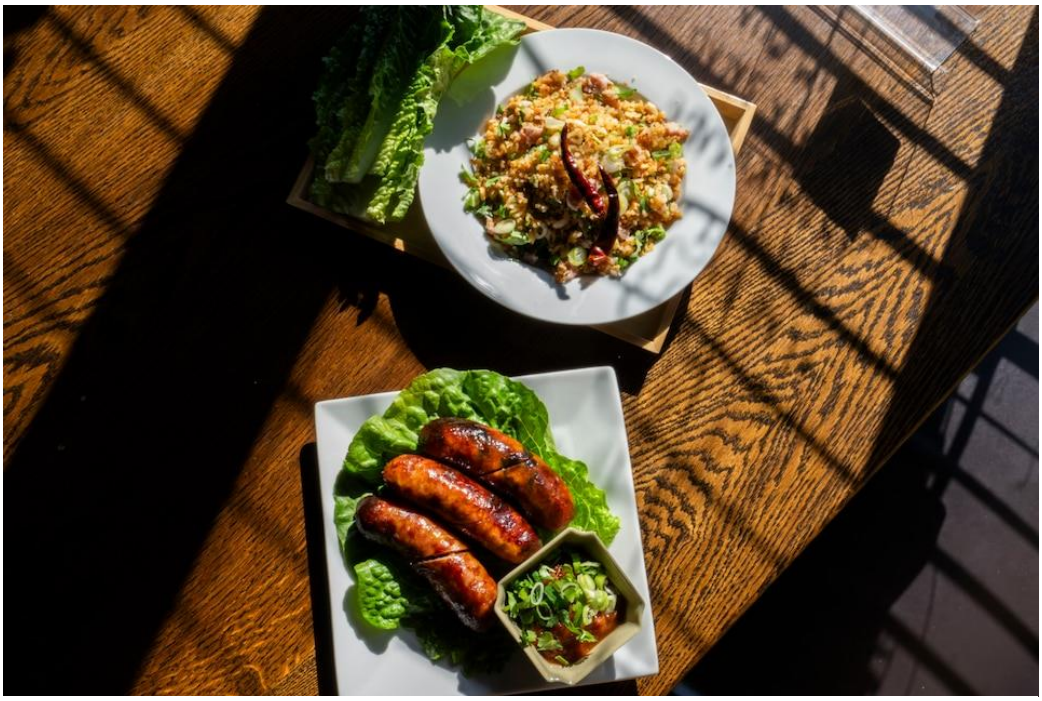
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Is there room for Laotian food in Baltimore?

Matti Gellman 2/28/2025 5:30 a.m. EST



Lao sausages and stir fry are menu staples at Charming Elephant. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

Some customers walk into Charming Elephant asking for Vietnamese food. Others request that the restaurant lower prices, calling the cuisine an "offshoot" of Thai.

In Baltimore, where a small Laotian community resides, the restaurant heralded as the area's first distinctly Laotian eatery barely scrapes by.

Empty tables and chairs line the dining room during most weekdays. On evenings, a trickling of visitors filter in, as well as the occasional regular, with many opting for a quick stop-in for takeaway.

There are still misconceptions about what Laotian food has to offer, according to Vanessa Sipayboun, manager and co-owner of the restaurant on 2324 Boston St. "A lot of people don't know us, they don't know Lao [food]," she said.



Khamphoui Sipayboun, Vanessa Sipayboun's father, prepares a dish in the kitchen at Charming Elephant. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

The 700-mile wide stretch of land hugging Southeast Asia between Thailand and Vietnam shares many similarities with its neighbors. On Charming Elephant's menu, you'll find pho, papaya salad, curries and even calamari. But the Lao versions of these dishes tend to be saltier and more sour. Fermented fish sauces and shrimp pastes create a stronger umami flavor, accompanied by the generous use of herbs, from cilantro to lemongrass. Most dishes are eaten with sticky rice, which is used to pick up food utilizing your thumb and three fingers.

While Thai pumpkin curry leans heavily on coconut milk as a base, the Charming Elephant's is less rich and more savory, opting for chili paste, garlic and turmeric (it's delicious). The famous Thai larb or laap salad of mint, cilantro, toasted rice powder and minced meat that many order at restaurants is slightly more pungent here with the addition of padaek, a funky, fermented fish sauce. And a rich, Charming Elephant red curry, known in Laos as kapoon, deviates from its Thai cousin by adding vermicelli noodles, cabbage and carrot.

The differences are a testament to the disparate histories of Thai and Laotian immigrants in the United States. At the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. government was more inclined to let in Thai refugees than Laotians, who were viewed as fleeing economic hardship instead of political oppression. At the time, Laos was still recovering from being heavily bombed by U.S. forces, a fate Thailand avoided by serving as a base for the American military.



The Charming Elephant restaurant is one of the few Laotian businesses in the Baltimore area. (Kaitlin Newman / The Baltimore Banner)



You'll find familiar dishes on Charming Elephant's menu, but the Lao versions tend to be saltier and more sour. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

The largest surge in Laotian migration came late in the 1980s and early '90s, while people emigrating from Thailand came earlier and in larger numbers, with more money and

resources. Immigrating Thai entrepreneurs opened restaurants as a means of making a living, disseminating the cuisine across the country. Thai food became sought after.

"What I've noticed from Lao people in the area is they're kinda scared to put the name Lao out there," Sipayboun said. She believes the restaurant has had slower business because of it. "It's more marketable to say you're a Thai restaurant."

But that's not what Sipayboun's family wanted. The Canton restaurant opened in October 2020 inside a space rented to them by Baltimore Seafood, the eatery next door. "My parents always wanted to open a restaurant," she said. A vacant lounge became a dining area and a former closet became a kitchen. They figured people would want to try something new while in COVID lockdown. They named it Charming Elephant, both for Charm City and because Laos is known for their elephants.



Vanessa Sipayboun helps manage the Lao restaurant that she co-owns with her parents. (Kaitlin Newman / The Baltimore Banner)

It was the chance to pass down a livelihood to Sipayboun and her brother, Dillon. Their father, Khampoui, wanted the fare to be authentic and less Western. Khampoui grew up cooking with his mom and dad, just as his children did, and learned how food could carry family memories and culture.

"It doesn't come to me as nostalgic," Dillon Sipayboun said. "It's a part of me."

No recipe was written down. It was taught without measurements as a "labor of love," Sipayboun said. The Lao sausage, served with a side of sweet and savory jeow bong sauce, is ground by hand with chopped onion and seasonings, then stuffed with chili peppers, garlic and lemongrass, among other herbs. It can't be frozen or picked up at a shop. Same for the khao piak, a chicken soup Vanessa Sipayboun grew up eating when sick, with its not-too-hot dried chili flavor and seamless blend of fresh herbs, tender, fat noodles and a rich broth.

Ingredients at Charming Elephant are pricey and not easily found in the Baltimore area. Taro and coconut flavors for the restaurant's region-specific smoothies and juices are shipped from overseas alongside Lao and the occasional Thai seasoning. As prices rise across the country, keeping pace is a concern for Khampoui, who has seen fewer people coming out to eat, despite occasional successes, like surges in customers during restaurant week.

A TikTok shared by Dillon Sipayboun last month attempted to build support. The video showed Khampoui sitting in an empty restaurant with the caption, "pov: my refugee parents working 13 hours a day with barely any customers." While the video temporarily went viral with more than 92,000 views, 10,800-plus likes and hundreds of comments, Sipayboun said the boost in foot traffic was short-lived.

"We try our best to stay afloat just like everyone else," Khampoui said.

Vanessa Sipayboun still holds out hope her family's food will catch on. She alternates between helping out in the kitchen and serving and managing orders, steadfast in her belief that Laotian food is worth trying.

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