

Local fishermen on Myanmar's Inle Lake, known for holding numerous aquatic species that appear nowhere else in the world.

# No. 100 Myanmar Calling

A land of striking beauty and surprising tastes—  
not least of which is ... tomatoes

BY LEAH COHEN

When Myanmar (formerly Burma) opened its borders to tourists a few years ago, I hopped on a plane as quickly as I could. I'd traveled extensively in Southeast Asia before opening Pig & Khao, my Southeast Asian restaurant in New York City, eating fresh spring rolls at market stalls in Vietnam, plopping down at divey restaurants in Thailand, and inhaling steaming bowls of noodle soup laced with lemongrass, bringing back the best of what I'd learned to my diners back home—but Myanmar was still an enticing mystery to me.

When I hit the ground there, the first thing I noticed was the tomatoes. Sure, there were the chiles, the cilantro, and mint I'd seen in neighboring countries, but the base for many Burmese dishes was a vibrant quartet of ginger, garlic, onion, and tomato. Perhaps this appealed to me so much because in my first professional job as a young cook, years before heading for more exotic cuisines, I worked the line at La Madia, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Sicily.

Nix the ginger, and you've got yourself the three main building blocks of most Italian dishes. Traversing the country of Myanmar from top to bottom, I cooked crispy rice cakes with a local vendor by Inle Lake, slurped wheat noodles out of a crisp green shredded papaya salad, and scarfed up crunchy tempura-battered scallions.

When I came home, I brought those flavors back to my menu, as I'd done before. My Shan noodles, inspired by the flavors of the Shan state in the East of the country, were an instant hit. They're made with ground chicken, turmeric powder bloomed in peanut oil, and Shan spice—a heady mix of cloves, star anise and black peppercorn—and built upon, of course, that glorious base of garlic, ginger, onions, and tomato. It's my way of bringing a little bit of Myanmar back to the States, but if you ever find yourself in this country, go visit a few of my favorite places and taste the flavors at the source.

*Leah Cohen is the chef-owner of New York City's Pig & Khao.*

## WHERE TO GO

### Bogyoke Aung San

Hawking everything from antiques to clothing to food, this giant bazaar is a must-visit. *Bo Gyoke Road, Dagon, Yangon; bogyokemarket.com*

### Chauk Htat Gyi

Head to this temple to see a reclining Buddha that's more than 200 feet long. *Shwe Gon Taing Road, Tamwe Township, Yangon; myanmartravelinformation.com*

### Five-Day Market

This rotating market—so named because it moves every five days among villages that ring Inle Lake—is the place to go for fresh produce and handicrafts. *Locations rotate; inlelaketourism.com/inle-lake-floating-market.asp*

### Inthar Heritage House

Feline lovers, take note: Among the attractions at this upscale resort is a Burmese cat sanctuary. *Inpawkhon Village, Inle Lake; inleheritage.org*

### Mr. Toe Restaurant

Accessed by boat, this beloved restaurant showcases fish caught in Inle Lake. *Thar Lay village, in front of Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda, Inle Lake*

### Shwedagon Pagoda

The most sacred Buddhist pagoda in the country. *Singuttara Hill, Dagon, Yangon; shwedagonpagoda.com*