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Cambodia: Phnom Penh's beer scene is chugging away

Microbreweries and beer gardens are making inroads in Phnom Penh as the taste for hops keeps growing.



Kingdom is a German-centric brand. (Kingdom Breweries / November 18, 2011)

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Reporting from Phnom Penh, Cambodia—

[Cambodia](#) might not rank among the world's brewery or beer garden capitals, but change is coming.

From its setting on the banks of the Tonle Sap river, Kingdom Breweries, Phnom Penh's newest boutique producer, opened in October 2010, is gearing up to give local brands Anchor and Angkor a run for their *riël*, using only the best German and Czech hops, premium German malt and top-quality water to produce the brand's flagship pilsner.

"Fancy one?" Chief Executive Peter Brongers asked me, offering a bottle of the brewery's first batch from his office mini-fridge. "The locals think it's a little bitter, but I think it's perfect."

I had to agree. Crisp, light and refreshing, the authentic Czech-style taste was the ideal antidote to [Cambodia's](#) sultry summer heat. Although the taste is distinctly European, Kingdom's branding is unmistakably Khmer: a mystical, protective naga serpent coils around

every bottle neck, and four of the country's more elusive and endangered fauna — the clouded leopard, impressed tortoise, pangolin and rarely seen kouprey, Cambodia's national animal — have been adopted as its brand ambassadors.

Kingdom trades on nostalgia for Cambodia's former French colonial heyday, with its elegant roof-deck bar and beer garden. I was introduced to Rolf "Lanzi" Lanziger, proprietor of Dan's Meats and "the best butcher in town," he claimed. His table was already littered with empties, and he was blissfully chugging another. "I love it like hell!" he said, raising a bottle in cheery *prost*.

But it isn't the expats that Kingdom must convince. Kingdom's bearded German *braumeister* Peter Hauptenthal is charged with being faithful to his proud fermenting and filtering heritage while catering to Khmer tastes. "We're now working toward the final recipe, and we think we're almost there. Unfortunately, making a good beer takes time and we can't speed up the process," he said.

Annual beer consumption in Cambodia may stand at a lowly 7 liters a person (compared with 30 or so in Vietnam and Thailand), but Brongers, from the Netherlands, said that means there's money to be made. He plans to gradually expand Kingdom's output from 150,000 bottles to about 1 million a month, and his grand vision is to raise the standard for Phnom Penh's already buzzing beer scene.

Although Phnom Penh's newest beer is making its way into bars, the small city already has two microbreweries with beer gardens that are growing in popularity. Man Han Lou's brews are palatable, and customers don't seem to be put off that one of them is acid-green in color. The waistcoated staff swarms the brew-house-themed restaurant, delivering pints pulled from plastic keg-like containers while metal fermentation tanks against the back wall silently do their job. Man Han Lou produces four types of beer: Gold, Red, Green and Black stout, from 5% to 6% alcohol per volume, for \$3 a mug. The Green, very light and easy to drink, tastes like the Gold (despite its alarming color), the Red has a delicate fruity flavor, and the aromatic Black gets the thumbs-up all round.

At the [Munich](#) Beer Restaurant on Sotheaous Boulevard, self-proclaimed purveyors of "authentic German brew," the beer is less flavorful. Both the Gold and the Stout — the only varieties offered — lack body and a decent head, but the Munich's garden setting makes the experience. A striped awning provides shelter from sudden monsoon showers, and the terracotta patio tile, verdant greenery and potted plant hedgerow make the Munich a beer and barbecue oasis. The modest beer menu is accompanied by a heavy tome listing hundreds of delicious dishes, including beef with sesame for \$4.95 and goat with Khmer cheese for \$6.95.

Sovanna is a local favorite, where the grub is good and the fifth beer is free if you buy four. Another popular spot is the vibrant 54 Langeach Sros, which is always crammed to its blue-and-white-striped rafters with customers chugging beers as they grill their own seafood, meats and veggies. Here Angkor beer sells for just \$1.75 and Anchor beer for \$2.25, and you can order the usual international suspects by the can, bottle or bucket of ice