



Food & Wine
Social Enterprise

FOUNDING HAVEN

By SARA WALLIMANN

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Editor: Mark Pomeroy



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In December 2011, Paul and Sara Wallimann opened HAVEN Training Restaurant in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Within six months, their self-sustainable social enterprise leaped up TripAdvisor's restaurant ranking to become one of the Top 5 dining establishments in Siem Reap near Angkor Wat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Spoonwiz guest contributor Sara Wallimann writes about their amazing journey of heart, travails and dedication.

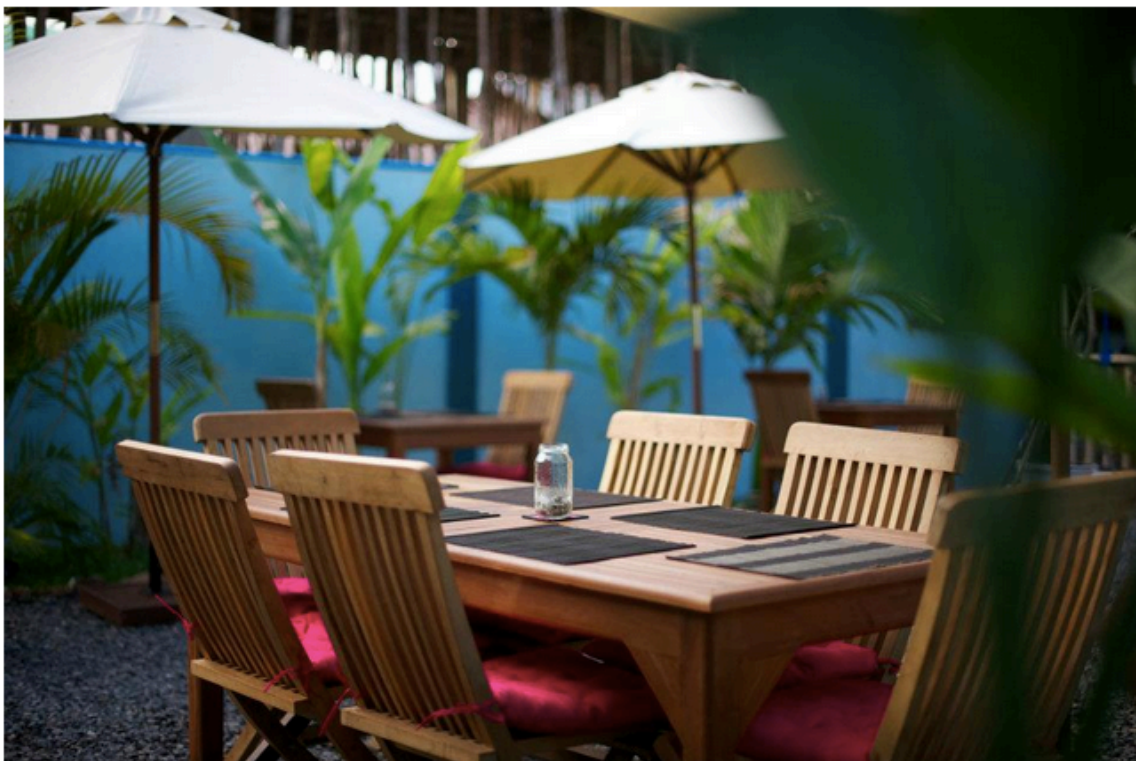
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It's another sweltering day in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where I'm sitting on a pink cushion at one of our long wooden tables on the terrace of the HAVEN Training Restaurant. It's mid-afternoon, so the kitchen is closed and the restaurant empty. I like this quiet time between the lunch service and the busy evening service, when HAVEN is all ours again, our own quiet little haven. Sitting here watching the soft wind play with the huge green leaves of our banana trees in the garden, I try to grasp and take in what we have created here over the past couple of years. A time in which this training restaurant has transformed from what many called a brave idea into a popular dining spot for tourists and expats, and more

importantly into a sought-after training opportunity and employer of choice among the local community.

We never dreamed of running our own restaurant. Though I had been the Head of Marketing for a Swiss vegetarian restaurant chain and my husband Paul had worked as a consultant in food hygienics for restaurants and luxury hotels all over Switzerland (and as a teacher at the Belvoir Hotel School in Zurich), never did we think that we would start our own place. But then, HAVEN isn't about us.

Paul and I came up with the idea during our world trip. On our first leg in 2008, traveling all the way overland and oversea from Switzerland to Indonesia, we came through Cambodia — and got stuck. This wasn't exactly a country we ever expected to get stuck in. Even more so after our first impression, when we arrived in Phnom Penh after dark. It was during a spiritual holiday called Pchum Ben when everyone had left the city to spend time with their families in the countryside, and we had a spooked feeling of déjà vu, after what we'd read in history books about April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge evacuated the capital city.



Even though our first impulse was to leave the country as soon as possible, we moved on to Siem Reap. Not just because it's the gateway to the beautiful Temples of Angkor, but because an English photographer, whom we had met a couple of months earlier in China, had told us about an orphanage outside Siem Reap that was in need of help. (At that time voluntourism and orphanage-tourism weren't issues yet.) When we got there, the orphanage manager asked us if we could teach the kids English. He explained that he couldn't afford any teachers and really needed help with the lessons. We slept on the idea, and the next day we decided to give it a go. We thought we'd stay for about two weeks and then continue with our journey. It turned out that, with only one short break, we stayed seven months.

It was then when we realized that there were no programs for older teenagers who have to leave the orphanage when they come of age. Not all the kids are orphans, but growing up in orphanages, many of them lose touch with their families, their communities, and their cultural identity; by the time they have to leave the orphanage, they have nowhere to go. This worried us and we started asking around about opportunities — only to learn that this was something no one had thought of so far.



That was the turning point in our lives. We knew that we couldn't go back to Switzerland and carry on with our lives as we knew them. We wanted to do something to help young adults from orphanages who needed support in their transition from institution into real life, and so we started wondering, What could be done? We agreed that we didn't want to create yet another organization that relies just on donations and where the kids are kept living off those donations, as is so often the case.

Instead we wanted to create something that was self-sustainable and where the kids too would learn that they wouldn't be the cute orphans who forever get easy money from tourists who pity them. We wanted to create something where they could learn a skill, earn their own money, learn to take care of themselves, become confident and believe in themselves. We wanted to create real-life change for these teenagers, help them realize their full potential.

This was when we had the idea for the training restaurant. To set it up as a self-sustainable social enterprise.

The decision-making was as simple as it sounds here. We've never been people of long "should we / should we not" discussions. When we have an idea and it feels right, we just do it. It helps that Paul and I tick the same way. It was an impulse like this when we got married five months after we started dating. It was an impulse like this when we decided to go on an open-ended world trip (at 32 and 40 years old), saved the money, sold everything we had, quit our jobs and left. And now it was the same again when we decided to give up our lives in Switzerland, to move across the planet and help these young adults. No long discussions, no trying to convince each other. Just following our hearts.



In 2010 we returned to Switzerland to implement our idea. We both found good jobs and Paul worked double shifts so we could save enough money to cover our first one to two years in Cambodia. While he was on his extra shifts, I spent my little free time working on the whole concept and communication web. We founded the Dragonfly Association in December 2010, launched our website and started with the fundraisings for the training restaurant.

The support, from the outset, was overwhelming. Especially considering we were no big organization with numerous success stories, just a little association with a big idea, lots of determination, and some soul. I guess that's what people could see and feel — and wanted to support.

In April 2011 we left Switzerland for good, with only the few things that fitted into our backpacks. We had collected enough fundings to get started with our project and we were eager to get going.

One month after our arrival (and many property-hunting hours later), we found a great location on a small road in the center of Siem Reap. The only downside was, there was no nice building we could have just renovated, but only a worn-down and very sad-looking shed. I reckon the first impulse could have been to turn away in disgust, but "The Ugly Duckling" story popped into our heads and we had a vision for this place. So we signed the contract, started drawing plans, found a contractor, tore down the old shed, got the building permit, started building, stopped building because of the devastating floods that turned the whole country into an underwater world for six weeks, continued building again and finished setting everything up.



This is the super-short version describing what we did over a period of seven months. The reason why it is written this way is because this was when we stopped having a life and started putting everything we had into the project. Yes, I wish I could tell you how easy it

was and how romantic it is to fulfill your dreams. But the fact is that struggles, misunderstandings, different perceptions of quality and consistency, frustrations, cultural differences and depressions were a huge part of everyday life here.

In October 2011, towards the end of the construction time, we were lucky that our friend Stef (who is also a member of the Dragonfly board) joined us in Cambodia. She had originally planned on staying two or three months to help us finish setting everything up, but when she saw our mental state she started helping us big-time. She got so involved, and became such an important part of HAVEN, that she's still here to this day.

In the same month that Stef joined us, we got a phone call from Pardet, a Khmer chef, who had heard about our plans for the training restaurant and wanted to come for an interview. In that interview, we had a great conversation and immediately clicked, but before he left I just had to ask Pardet why he wanted to give up his good job at a five-star boutique hotel to come to a place that was still a construction site and didn't yet have a name or reputation. His answer was, "I like the place where I work now, but there I can only cook. With you, I can cook AND help my people." We hired him on the spot.



In December 2011 the four of us opened the HAVEN gate for the first time. It was an exciting day, and I will never forget that feeling when our very first guest walked into the restaurant. I thought I would faint, I was so excited.

We started small, with eight employees and two trainees (one as a waiter and one as a cook) to set up the whole training program and get the restaurant up and running. We were surprised how fast the word spread and how many guests we welcomed from the beginning. We had a great start, and this gave us the positive energy we desperately needed, because that first year was tough for all four of us and challenged our relationships in many ways.



Instead of breaking us, however, we got through it together and have become close friends and a very strong team. The four of us run the HAVEN Training Restaurant, do all the teachings, take care of our trainees and our employees and have made HAVEN what it is today. Our reward for the hard work is our wonderful HAVEN Family and our beautiful guests who give us so much support.



HAVEN is now in its second year, with five trainees, 12 employees, delicious food, attentive service, and great ratings on TripAdvisor. Based on the success of HAVEN, we have now decided to widen the range of vocational trainings and open a small training guesthouse, to be able to give more young adults a real chance in life.



Many people ask us where we get the energy. The passion? The strength? These are questions I have been thinking about a lot lately. Wondering about them, myself. But then I always come to one answer. And as cheesy as this may sound, the answer is to appreciate the small things in life.



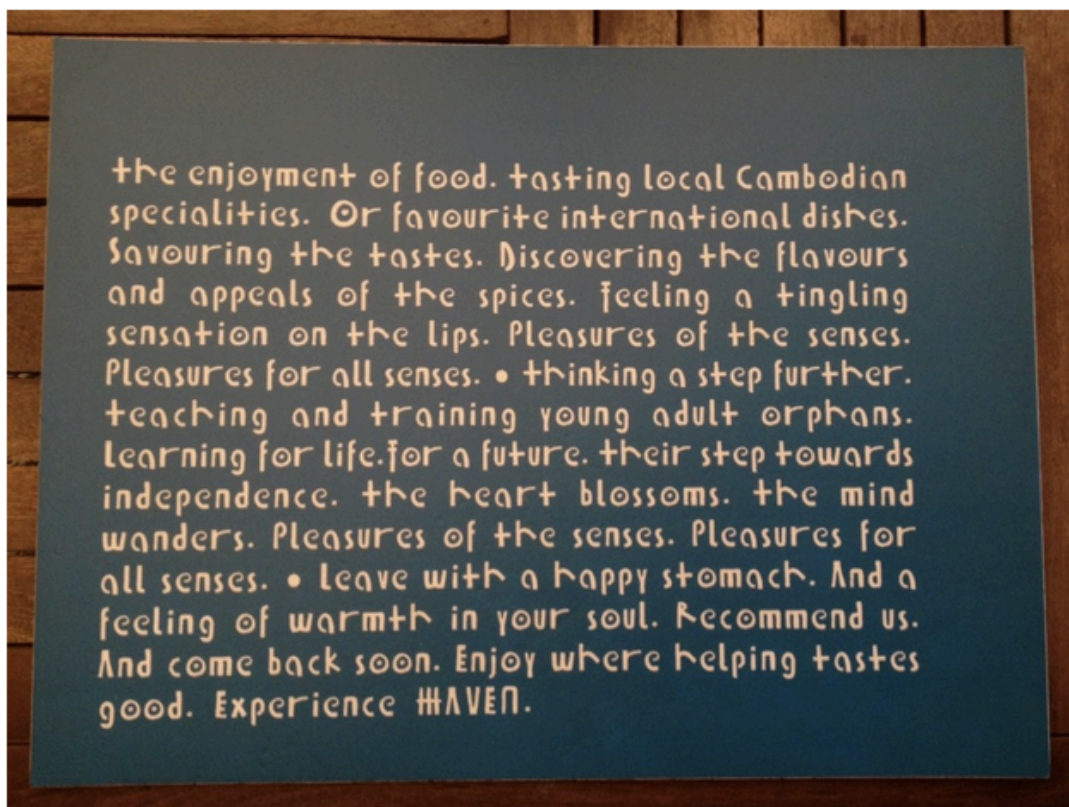
For my part, I love the sound of purring cats. I love the smell of fresh-cut grass. I love the taste of durian ice cream. I love the feel of the monsoon rain on my skin, I love looking at clouds, I love collecting stones. I love the Cambodian dust dancing on the wind. I love watching my husband when he doesn't feel watched. I love seeing our trainees grow in confidence. I love Cambodia and its people.

It's seeing the beauty and loving the little things just as much as the big things that gives me the strength and ultimately outweighs everything.

So even though we have gone through the toughest years in our lives, when anyone asks us if this project was worth all the worries, frustrations and crises, we can answer with a clear YES!

Every single trainee we have had so far was worth the whole effort. And every single future teenage kid to whom we can give hope for a safe future will be worth it too. Because what we see when we look at them is not the hard work we put into getting them here. We see the beauty of their confidence and the happiness they gained through this life-changing opportunity that we could help give them.

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