



STARCHEFS

## “I have appointed myself as an ambassador”

Tanja Grandits on her deeply moving experiences with Mariya Un Noun at Smiling Gecko in Cambodia.

By David Schnapp

### TANJA GRANDITS, YOU’VE RECENTLY RETURNED FROM CAMBODIA. WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR THE TRIP?

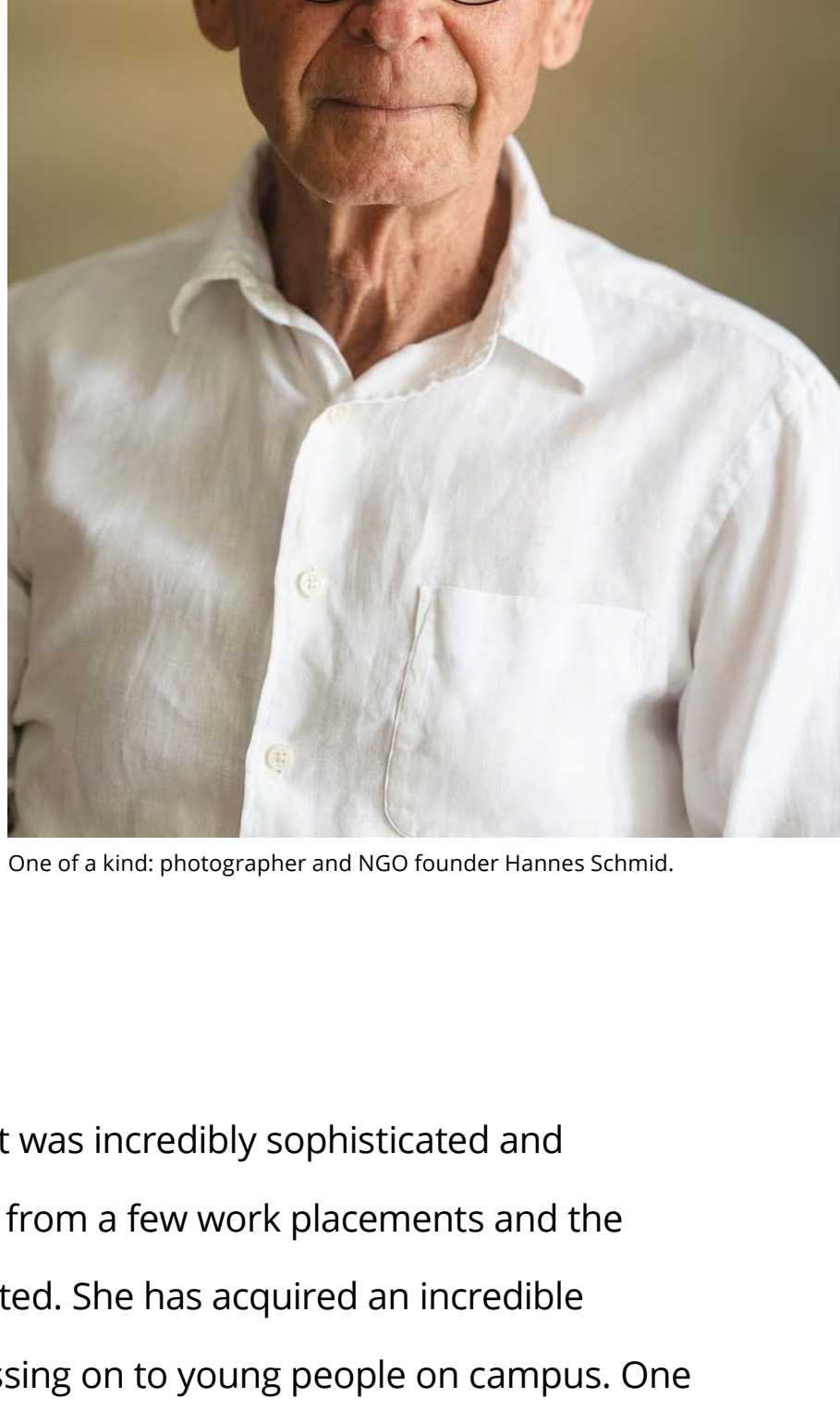
On the one hand, I’d been wanting to go back to Bangkok for a long time, and on the other, I’d been keen to finally see the Smiling Gecko campus, located north-east of the capital, Phnom Penh. It was founded by the Swiss artist and photographer Hannes Schmid – a fantastic project comprising a school for Cambodian children, kitchens, a hotel and a huge farm. However, due to the conflict on the Thai-Cambodian border, there were travel warnings at times. Fortunately, though, it all worked out in the end.

### WHERE DOES THIS INTEREST COME FROM?

The cook Mariya Un Noun, who works on the campus, was over at my place in the ‘Stucki’ not too long ago for a meal together. She is a fantastic colleague, and I have great affection for her. Added to that is my respect for the work of Hannes Schmid. I have never met anyone like him who makes such a tangible difference to the lives of so many people. Mariya used to live in the slums with her two children and was then given the opportunity by Hannes to work at the hotel on campus.



“A fantastic colleague”: chef Mariya Un Noun.



One of a kind: photographer and NGO founder Hannes Schmid.

### WHAT SETS MARIYA’S CUISINE APART?

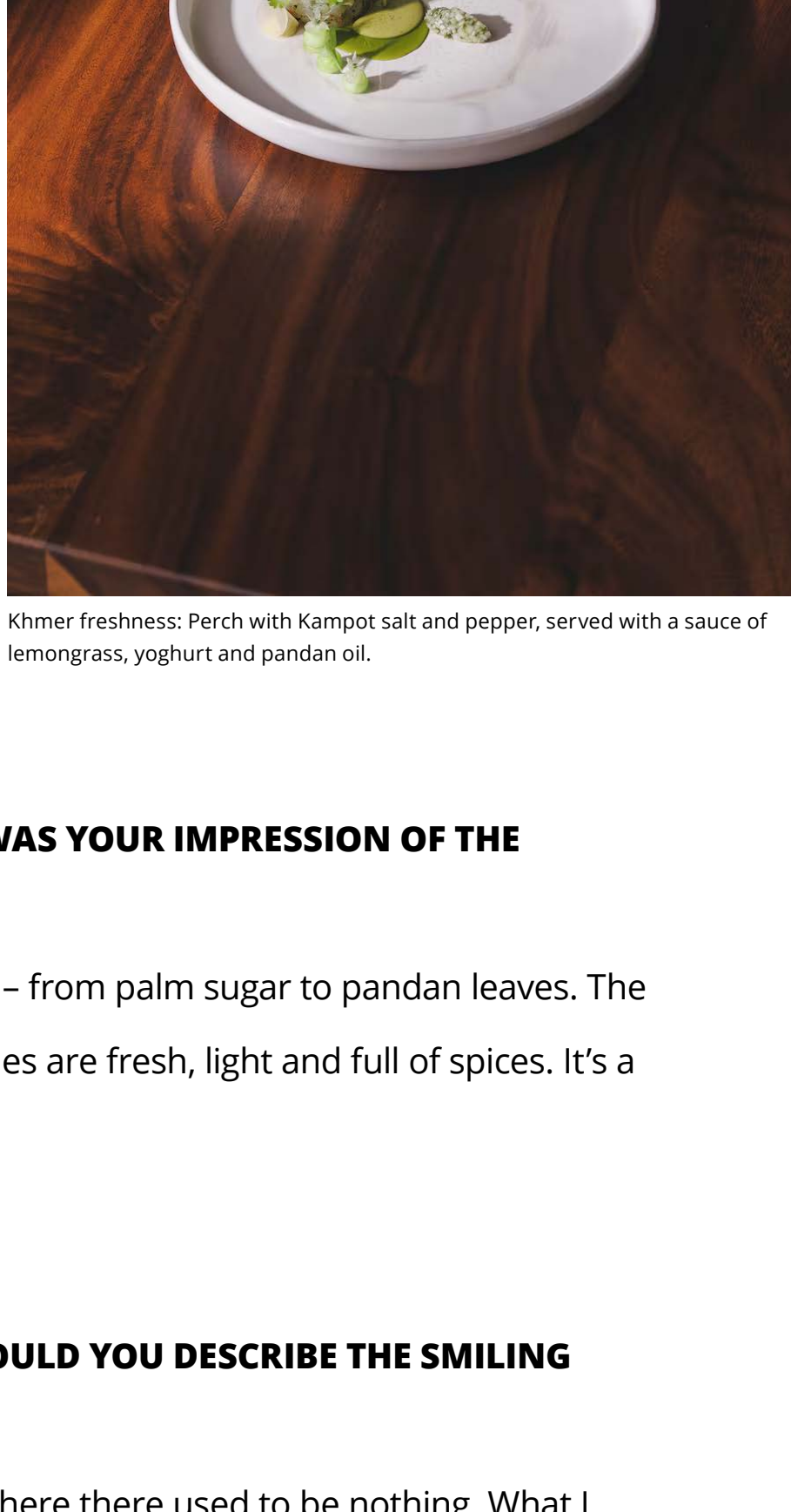
She served me a menu at a Chef’s Table that was incredibly sophisticated and refined. Yet she is largely self-taught – apart from a few work placements and the Uccelin Foundation programme she completed. She has acquired an incredible amount of knowledge, which she is now passing on to young people on campus. One dish that will remain unforgettable was a salad of green and ripe mango, arranged like a flower. It was served with a sauce made from passion fruit, pandan oil and herbs. The lovely thing about it was that all the ingredients were grown on the Smiling Gecko farm. In any case, I enjoyed it so much that I spontaneously appointed myself as an ambassador for Mariya and Smiling Gecko.

### WITH WHAT AIM?

I want to make their work known to a wider public. She would, for example, deserve a place on the ‘50 Best Restaurants’ list in Asia or even a Michelin star. At the same time, I’m trying to help her in practical ways. For instance, with tips for her first cookbook, which is currently in the making.



“Refined and delicate”: Papaya and mango salad with fresh herbs and passion fruit sauce.



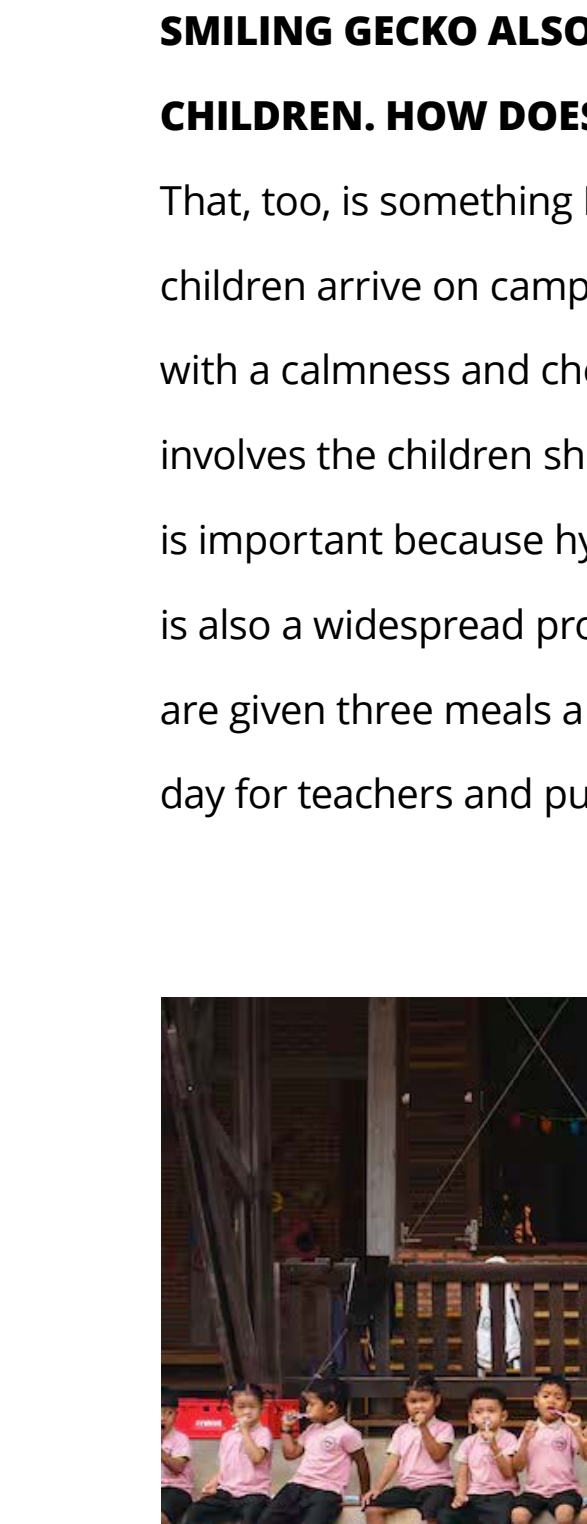
Khmer freshness: Perch with Kampot salt and pepper, served with a sauce of lemongrass, yoghurt and pandan oil.

### AFTER TEN DAYS IN CAMBODIA: WHAT WAS YOUR IMPRESSION OF THE COUNTRY’S CUISINE?

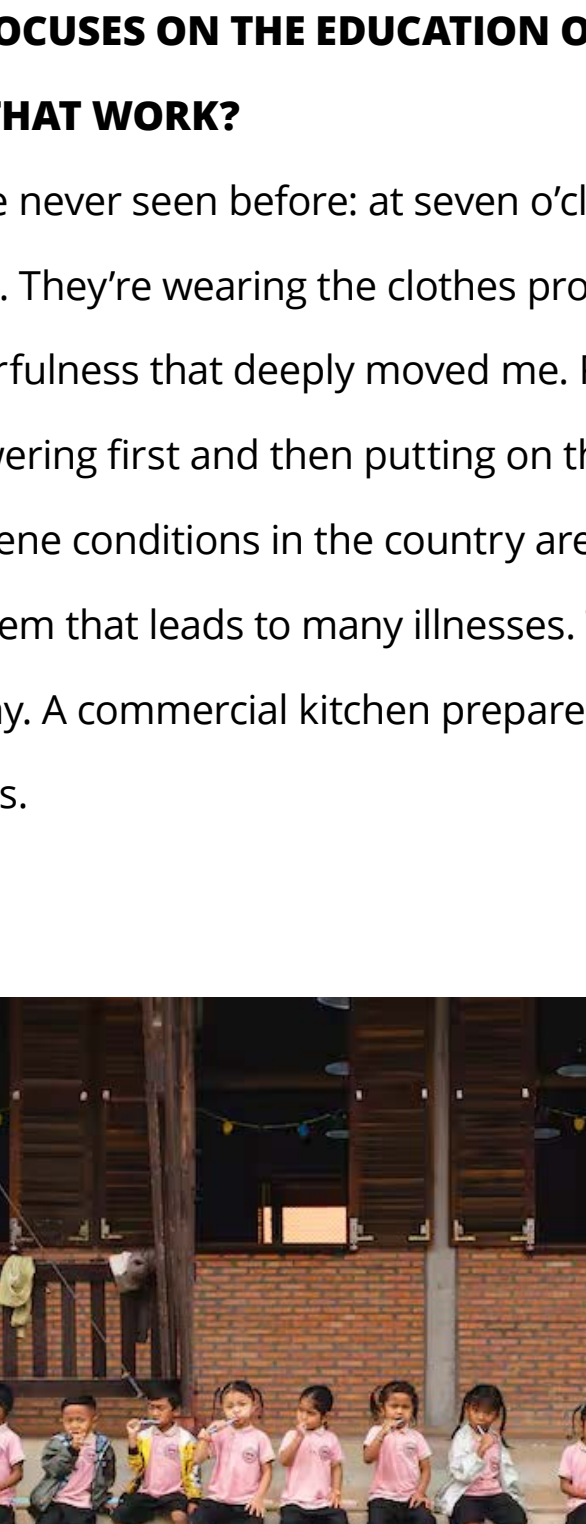
There’s an impressive variety of ingredients – from palm sugar to pandan leaves. The cuisine is similar to that of Vietnam; the dishes are fresh, light and full of spices. It’s a flavour that makes you happy.

### AS SOMEONE WHO STAYED AT HOME, COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE SMILING GECKO CAMPUS TO ME?

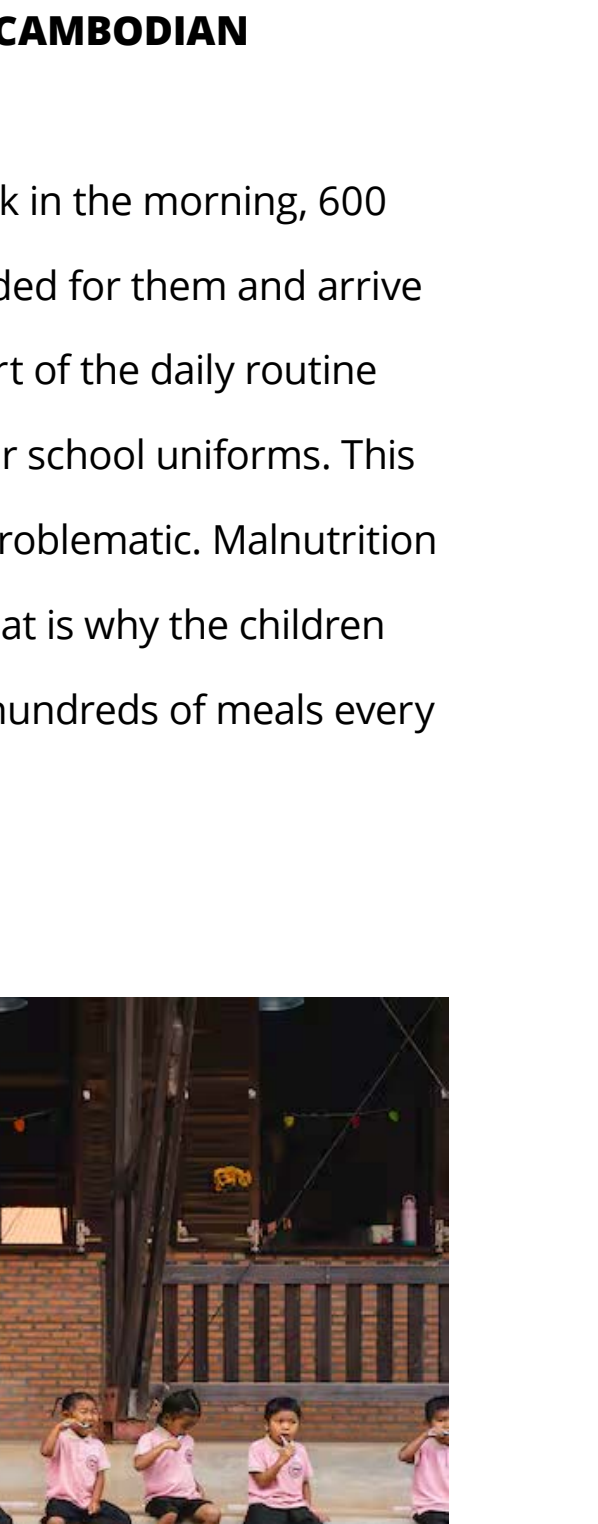
It’s a huge site in the middle of the jungle, where there used to be nothing. What I particularly liked as a chef is the diversity you see there. Fish, chickens and pigs are farmed there; top agronomists work there; researchers from ETH Zurich are involved; an incredible amount of fruit and vegetables grows there, and even vanilla. Anyone who knows how demanding vanilla cultivation is can only marvel.



A wide variety: fish farming on the Smiling Gecko campus.



“It’s truly amazing”: Tanja Grandits and Mariya Un Noun in one of the greenhouses.



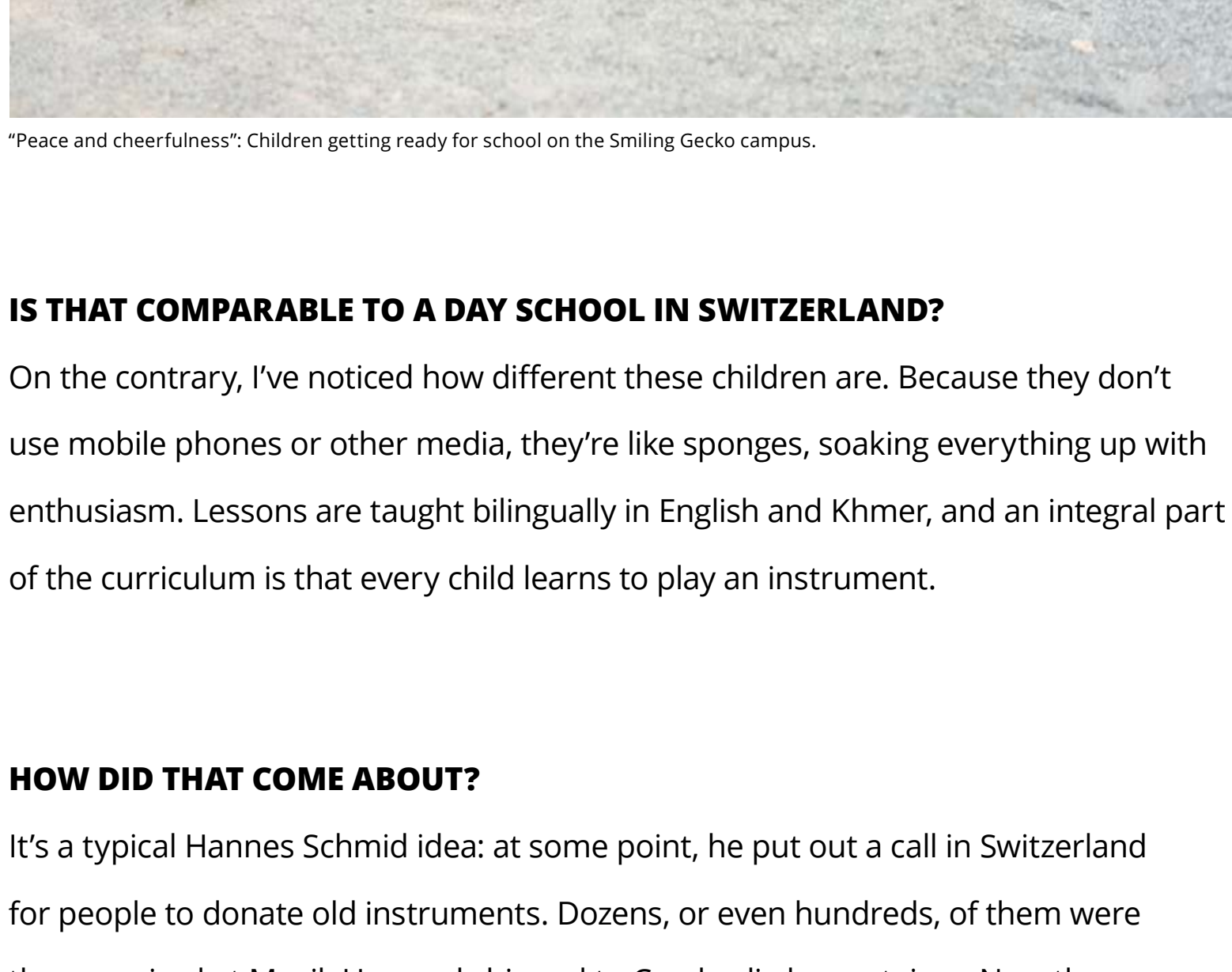
A demanding crop: even vanilla grows on the farm in the jungle.

### SO THE CAMPUS IS SELF-SUFFICIENT?

‘Farm to table’ has become a buzzword that you hear a lot in the catering industry these days. But I’ve never visited a place where this principle is put into practice as consistently as at Smiling Gecko.

### SMILING GECKO ALSO FOCUSES ON THE EDUCATION OF CAMBODIAN CHILDREN. HOW DOES THAT WORK?

That, too, is something I’ve never seen before: at seven o’clock in the morning, 600 children arrive on campus. They’re wearing the clothes provided for them and arrive with a calmness and cheerfulness that deeply moved me. Part of the daily routine involves the children showering first and then putting on their school uniforms. This is important because hygiene conditions in the country are problematic. Malnutrition is also a widespread problem that leads to many illnesses. That is why the children are given three meals a day. A commercial kitchen prepares hundreds of meals every day for teachers and pupils.



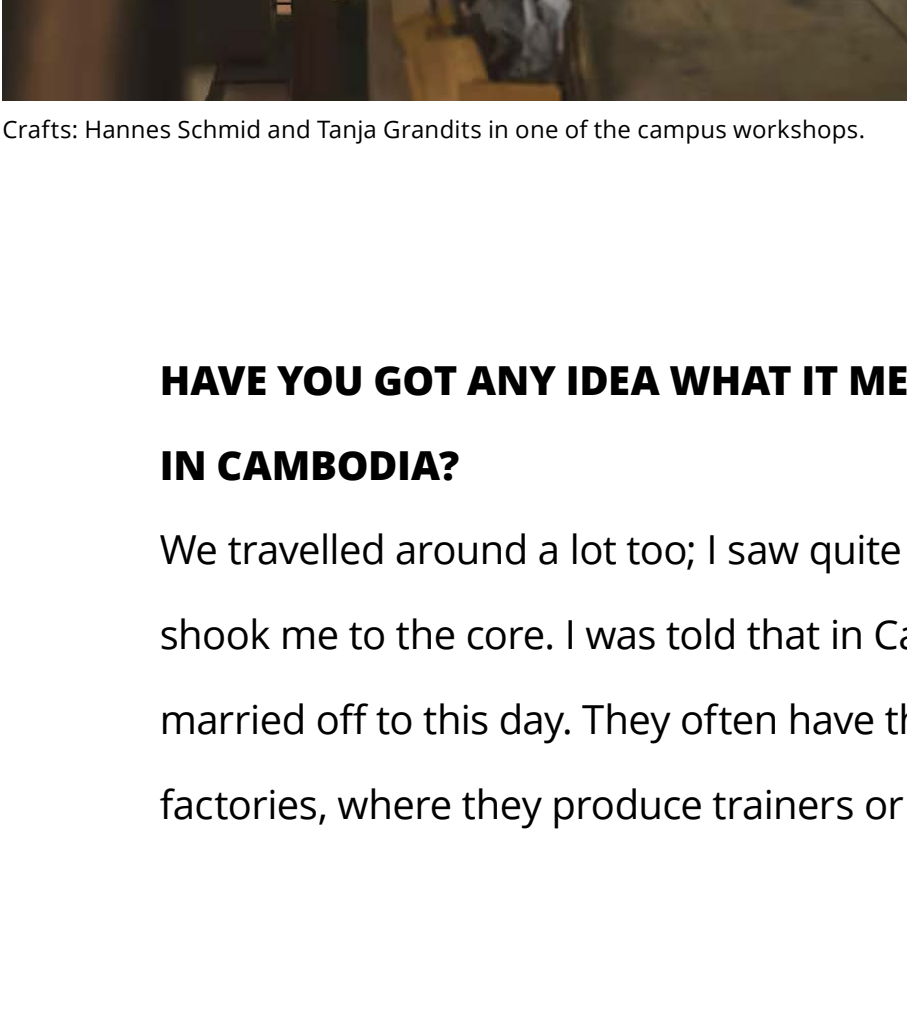
“Peace and cheerfulness”: Children getting ready for school on the Smiling Gecko campus.

### IS THAT COMPARABLE TO A DAY SCHOOL IN SWITZERLAND?

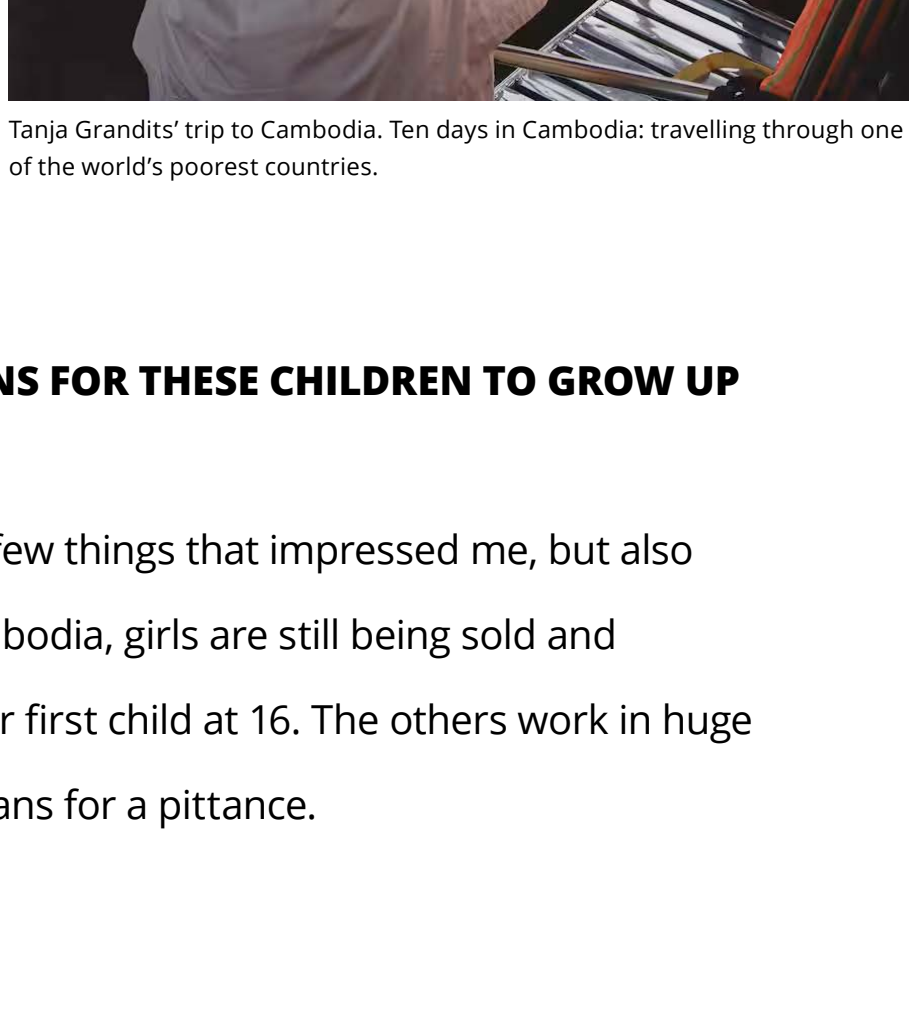
On the contrary, I’ve noticed how different these children are. Because they don’t use mobile phones or other media, they’re like sponges, soaking everything up with enthusiasm. Lessons are taught bilingually in English and Khmer, and an integral part of the curriculum is that every child learns to play an instrument.

### HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

It’s a typical Hannes Schmid idea: at some point, he put out a call in Switzerland for people to donate old instruments. Dozens, or even hundreds, of them were then repaired at Musik Hug and shipped to Cambodia by container. Now there are grand pianos, timpani and much more there. The children are currently rehearsing a musical to be performed at the opening of another school. The most beautiful sentence I heard on campus was: “These children will one day have a better life.”



Crafts: Hannes Schmid and Tanja Grandits in one of the campus workshops.



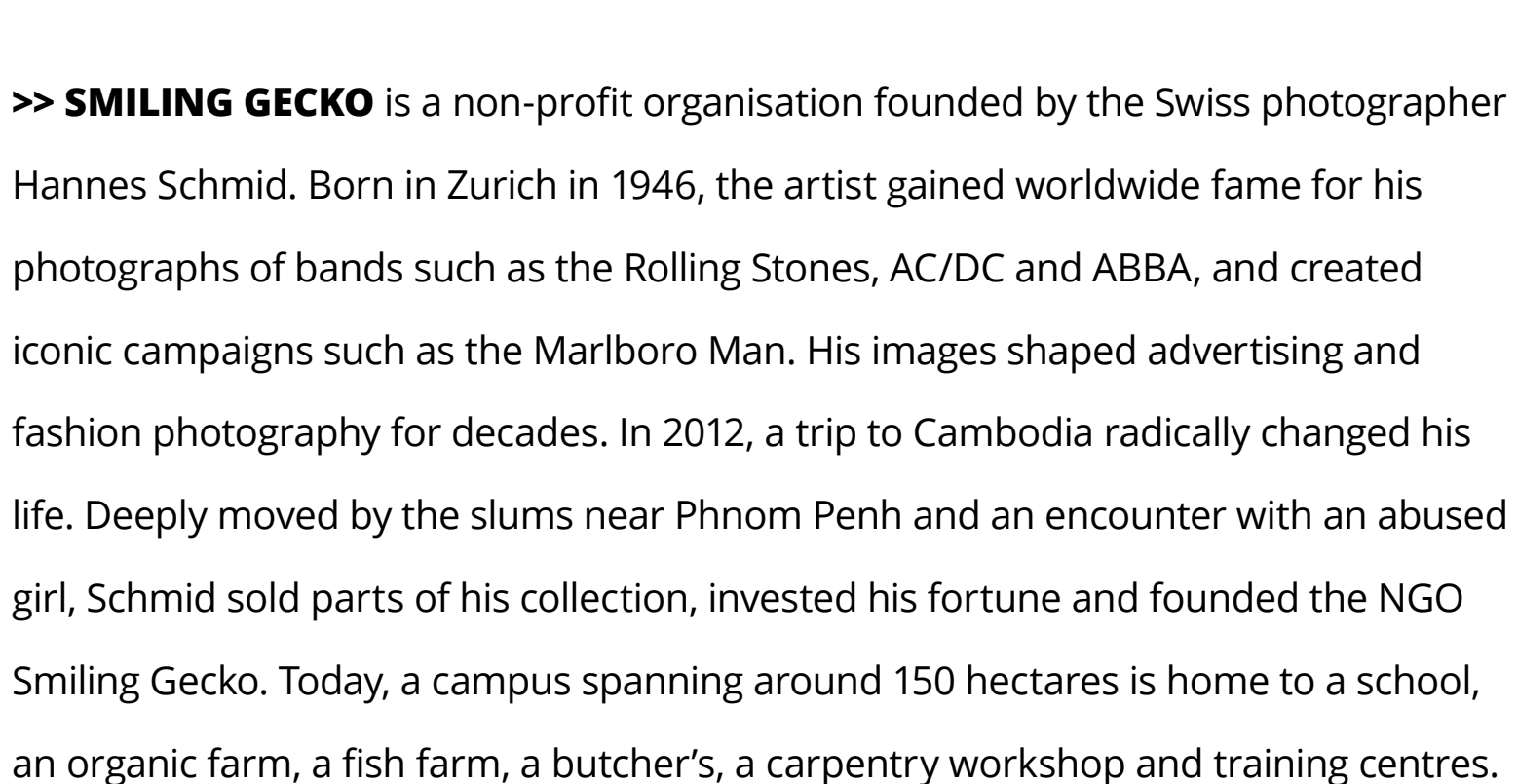
Tanja Grandits’ trip to Cambodia. Ten days in Cambodia: travelling through one of the world’s poorest countries.

### HAVE YOU GOT ANY IDEA WHAT IT MEANS FOR THESE CHILDREN TO GROW UP IN CAMBODIA?

We travelled around a lot too; I saw quite a few things that impressed me, but also shook me to the core. I was told that in Cambodia, girls are still being sold and married off to this day. They often have their first child at 16. The others work in huge factories, where they produce trainers or jeans for a pittance.

### WHAT WILL YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THIS SPECIAL JOURNEY?

Apart from the many formative impressions, I was almost blown away by the realisation that ultimately one person alone – in this case Hannes Schmid – can make such a difference. Hannes has helped thousands of people and improved their lives. That’s why I tell everyone who wants to hear it – and even those who don’t want to hear it – just how incredibly wonderful this place is.



His greatest work of art: a primary school on the Smiling Gecko Campus founded by Hannes Schmid in Cambodia.

>> **SMILING GECKO** is a non-profit organisation founded by the Swiss photographer Hannes Schmid. Born in Zurich in 1946, the artist gained worldwide fame for his photographs of bands such as the Rolling Stones, AC/DC and ABBA, and created iconic campaigns such as the Marlboro Man. His images shaped advertising and fashion photography for decades. In 2012, a trip to Cambodia radically changed his life. Deeply moved by the slums near Phnom Penh and an encounter with an abused girl, Schmid sold parts of his collection, invested his fortune and founded the NGO Smiling Gecko. Today, a campus spanning around 150 hectares is home to a school, an organic farm, a fish farm, a butcher’s, a carpentry workshop and training centres. Children and young people receive an education, vocational training and the chance to lead self-determined lives. The integrated Farmhouse Resort & Spa partly funds the projects and creates jobs. Schmid himself works on a voluntary basis and sees the project as his greatest work of art – a model for a dignified, sustainable life in one of the world’s poorest countries.



**David Schnapp** cooks, travels, eats and writes: our author is deeply passionate about good food and visits chefs both at home and abroad.