

A Taste of the Tropics

Who would have associated Thailand with wine? However, as **Joel Payne** discovers, this Asian country takes its winemaking seriously

Old block Syrah grape bunches ripening on the vine at GranMonte vineyards in Thailand

Using a “wine thief” in her nimble hands, 25-year-old Nikki Lohitnavy drew a sample of her 2011 Syrah l’Orient from a Taransaud barrel. This could have been a scene straight out of Château Angelus in Saint-Emilion, where she once worked, but we are at GranMonte in the Asoke Valley in Thailand, about 200 kilometres northeast of Bangkok.

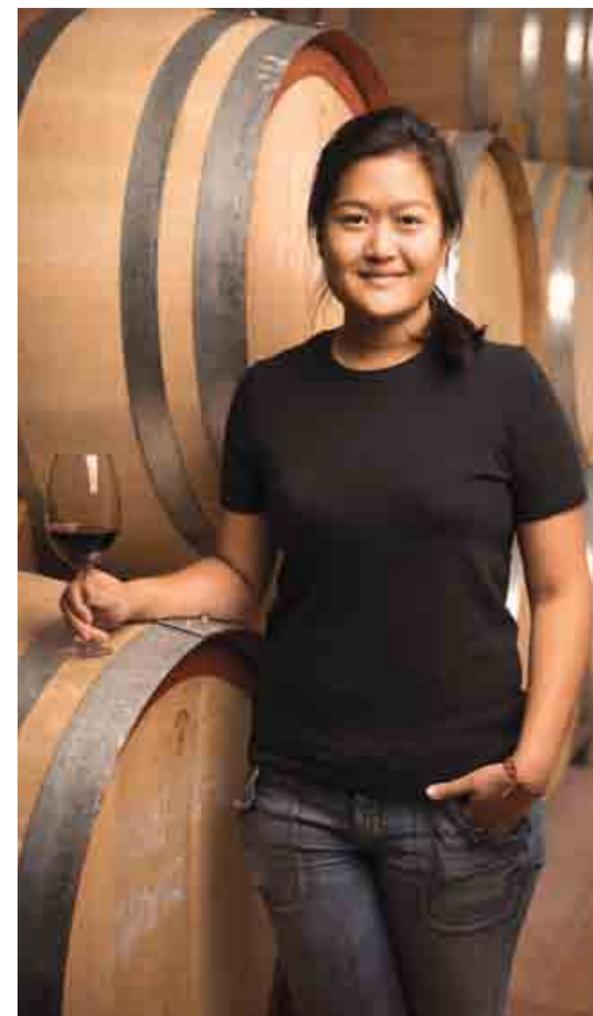
The young oenologist studied winemaking in Australia, graduating from university in Adelaide in 2008. Since then she has worked with Bruno Prats, formerly of Château Cos d’Estournel in Saint Estèphe, at Quinta de Roriz in Portugal and at Anwilka in South Africa before returning home.

Her 45 acres of vineyard were created by her father, Visooth in 1999. He had studied mechanical engineering in Germany and worked at Rentokil before discovering wine. Together with Dr Richard Smart, the Australian viticultural consultant, he planted primarily Syrah and Chenin Blanc – even some on their own rootstock – in the red clay soil of the estate. These were the two varieties that the Australian specialist thought most apt for the site, but Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Viognier and Verdello are now also being grown on an experimental basis.

Visooth chose this corner of Thailand because of the climate. Not only is it somewhat drier here but the higher altitude also means that it is somewhat cooler than most other regions in this otherwise tropical part of Asia. Further, the limestone subsoil is reminiscent of geological formations that have always been considered best for vines. His choice of location may also have been influenced by yet another factor. This region at the foot of the Khao Yai mountains is



Siam Winery resident winemaker Katherin Puff inspects the grapes in the vineyard. Siam Winery is the best known Thai producer of wine



Above: Nikki Lohitnavy, GranMonte’s owner and in-house oenologist

PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK

Most wineries in Thailand have their own restaurant as well as guest rooms where one can spend a comfortable night. Perfect examples are Château des Brumes’ Village Farm Restaurant, GranMonte’s Vin Cotto and the Hornbill Restaurant at Khao Yai Winery. The landscape is idyllic and the national park, close by, is well worth a detour.

In Bangkok itself, the Nahm restaurant run by celebrity chef David Thompson in Hotel Metropolitan is highly recommended. Australian by birth, Thompson won a Michelin star for Thai cuisine in London before he brought his Thai wife back home. His well-researched and simply written book on street food in Thailand’s capital is a masterpiece and a valuable guide for all who would like to understand the diversity of the local cuisine.



Celebrity chef, David Thomson’s Nahm restaurant at the Hotel Metropolitan in Bangkok



Left: Intensive work on Syrah ferments at GranMonte. The ferments get pumped over manually about four times a day



Workers picking grapes at Khao Yai. The winery's main brand is PB, the initials of the founder, Piya Bhirombhakdi, who also owns Singha beer

also home to one of the most famous national parks in the country, an extremely popular destination for residents of the Thai capital. Experts believe Bangkok, with a population of 13 million, will this year replace Paris as the most visited city in the world and many tourists will probably also find their way there. The area should thus benefit in the way the Napa Valley once did from neighbouring San Francisco.

In recent years, new vineyards have sprung up all over Thailand, from the small Mae Chan Winery in Chiang Rai that sells only about 8,000 bottles a year or Alcadini near Khao Yai, which produced its first wine in 2005, to just founded Silver Lake vineyard in Pattaya, the infamous beach southeast of Bangkok, which is better known for its dubious night clubs. Nonetheless, the entire country has barely 500 acres of vineyards, less in total than a single producer in many parts of the New World. In many cases, it was the *nouveau riche* adding an exotic flavour to their holiday homes, who planted vines, but the tropical climate made producing wine a tightrope act.

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One of the pioneers in the country was Château de Loei. Its wine was served to China's Li Peng, Indonesia's Suharto and even to France's Jacques Chirac at an international summit in 1996. It was whispered at the time that the French president said nothing impertinent about the wine but neither did he ask for a refill.

Château de Loei was founded by Dr Chaijudh Karnasuta in the highlands of Phurua in northeast Thailand. In 1995, his label was the first Thai wine to be commercially available in the market. Fortunes, though, come and go. Today, it is virtually impossible to find. The six members of the Thai Wine Association (www.thaiwineassociation.com) currently enjoy not only the best reputation in the country, but also produce the lion's share of its wine. They formed their association in 2004 to set minimum quality standards for indigenous wines and, of course, to boost their common image. Together, for example, they take part in fairs such as Vinexpo in Bordeaux.

Given its brief history, it would be exaggerated to say that Thailand has a wine culture. In fact, that word would be an euphemism, coming to the country as it did along with cheap tourism of a sordid kind. A bottle of light red wine served with lunch is often not chilled in a bucket, instead ice cubes are added directly to the wine in the glass. As a general rule, this does not matter much as most of the imported labels

THE BEST OF THAILAND

GRANMONTE

2010 Heritage Syrah Viognier (12% alc) Smoky aroma of herbs. Rich blackberry fruit, the addition of Viognier lends the aromatic Syrah a sweet hint of honey. Quite young, high in tannin and with ageing potential. Nevertheless, good with barbecued meat.

2009 Asoke Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah (14% alc) Deep ruby red. Opulent aroma of cassis mint and cedarwood. Rich fruit concentration; could almost be Australian. Aftertaste accompanied by delicate woody notes.

2009 L'Orient Syrah (14%) Rich colour. Aroma of ripe plums, cloves and tea leaves. Dark, rather earthy fruit paired with coffee, chocolate and exotic wood. A convincing wine from Thailand made from genuine vines, surpassed only by the 2011 vintage from the wooden barrel.

GranMonte, 52 Moo 9 Phayayen, Pakchong
30320 Nakornratchasima. www.granmonte.com

CHÂTEAU DES BRUMES

2005 Château des Brumes Prestige (12.5% alc) Brilliant pomegranate red. Classical aroma of dark berries, vanilla



and pencil lead. Rich fruit with ripe tannic structure, reminiscent of a Cru Bourgeois from the Médoc. Harmonises perfectly with red meat.

2005 Château des Brumes La Fleur (12.5% alc) Brilliant brick red with amber tinge. Splendid aroma of ripe cherries, coffee, cloves and orange tea. Complex, with barely perceptible tannins underpinned by aroma of herbs, the wine still has strength, length and more ageing potential. *Château Des Brumes, Village Farm Winery, 103 Moo 7 Thaisamakkee, Wang Nam Keow, 30370 Nakhorntchasisima. www.villagefarm.co.th*

KHAO YAI WINERY (PB VALLEY)

2010 Pirom Chenin Blanc Reserve (12.5%) Delicate honey colour. At first somewhat closed, then peach, almond and cinnamon unfold in the glass. Velvety texture. Mature and fresh at the same time. Elegant lingering finish. 88

2010 Reserve Shiraz (13.5%) Rich purple-red with bluish tinge. Aroma of redcurrants, herbs and tobacco. Very straightforward wine, well-balanced, with integrated tannins and a delicate aromatic finish. Good value for money.

Khao Yai Winery, 102 Moo.5 Payayen, 30320 Pakchong
Nakornratchasima. www.khaoyaiwinery.com

SIAM WINERY

2010 Cuvée de Siam Blanc (13%) Bright yellow-green. Aroma of hay, wild herbs and bitter almonds. A marriage of Colombard and Chenin Blanc from the hilly landscape around Hua Hin. The wine, with its clear fruit and crisp freshness is reminiscent of the Loire. Perfect accompaniment to fish and seafood in this tropical climate.

2008 Cuvée de Siam Rouge (13%) Dark cherry red with violet crown. Wild aroma of forest berries, lilac, and tobacco. A marriage of Shiraz and Sangiovese from vineyards in Tap Kwang, reminiscent of similar marriages on the Tuscany coast. Off-dry and tannic, the wine holds out the promise of good ageing potential.

Siam Winery, 9/2 Moo 3 Tumbon Bangtorud Mueang District,
74000 Samut Sakhon. www.siamwinery.com



The Lohitnavy family: Lohitnavy daughters, Nikki and Mimi, flanked by parents, President Sakuna and CEO Visooth Lohitnavy

scarcely deserve a second glance. Given the high import duties, the simplest table wine here costs as much as a Grand Cru does in Paris; better wines are seldom seen.

The blame for this situation rests squarely with the government. Not only does it impose high import duties, but also daunting taxes. Taken together, they increase the price of an imported bottle four-fold. Of course, government employees and members of the military with a weakness for “grape juice” do not pay such prices, but receive instead their wine delivered directly to their homes “duty free”.

Officially, the high taxes are justified on the grounds that most other wine drinkers, in particular tourists visiting the country, have enough money to pay these prices and that the general population must be protected against alcohol abuse.

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The reality is, however, that the Thai liquor industry would not like to see any serious competition for its beer brands like Singha, Chang and Thai. Further, the local wineries are the beneficiaries of this mismanagement, problems which will certainly sound all too familiar to the Indian reader.

The best-known Thai producer today is, without doubt, Siam Winery. Its main cellar is situated on the coast about 200 kilometres south of Bangkok. While the winery has vineyards in Tap Gwang close to Khao Yai, it is better known for its vineyards in the Hua Hills. This is the summer residence of the King and, above all, home to the floating vineyards in Samut Sakorn, where grapes, primarily Malaga Blanca, are transported in boats to the press for crushing.

Last year, the winery, which is run by the German winemaker Kathrin Puff, processed almost four million litres of wine, but only about 450,000 bottles contained genuine juice from Thailand. The rest was imported in bulk and bottled at Siam. Their label Mont Clair, imported as bulk from South Africa, is one of the best-selling wines in the country, but Penfolds is certainly the leading brand. That

said, according to Ron Batori, the general manager of their importer Bangkok Beer and Beverage, 70% of the bottles with the iconic label are smuggled across the border, primarily via the Malaysian island of Langkawi.

The two finest wines from Siam are Cuvée de Siam Rouge and Blanc, both considered to be among the best Thai wines. Still, the company’s main turnover is from wine coolers – it sells 135 million units of the Spy brand annually – and from readymade cocktails with exotic names such as Kamikaze, which are popular with the tourists on the beaches of Koh Samui and Phuket.

If Siam Winery is haunted by a German spirit, the Château des Brumes is defined by French *esprit*. Here Jacques Bacou of Château du Roc from Corbières in the Languedoc has taken Virwawat and his daughter Virvadee Cholvanich under his arm. They had been managing an organic farm for over 20 years, but their first wines appeared on the market only in 2002. They also grow flowers, welcome guests in a quaint hotel equipped with a natural spa and, like many of their colleagues, serve them in their own restaurant in the winery.

At Wang Nam Khieo, which is the name of the estate in Thai, the grapes are plucked at night to preserve their freshness. Most of the 40,000 bottles produced each year are in the style of Beaujolais and sold with the Village Cellars label. The Château des Brumes, made in smaller lots, is their best wine in terms of quality. In addition to the simple estate bottling, an upper level Prestige and, in certain years such as 2005, La Fleur are the premium wines.

The last of Thailand’s leading wineries also has a German connection through Prayut Piangbunta, who studied oenology in Weinsberg from 1995 to 1997 and has been the director of the Khao Yai Winery since he returned in 1998. The winery’s main brand is PB, the initials of the founder, Dr Piya Bhirombhakdi, who also owns Singha, the popular Thai beer. Not surprisingly, he too acquired his brewing skills in Germany.

At first, both of them intended to produce wine from a variety of exotic fruits native to the country, but soon noticed that grapes – and they grew more than 50 varieties on an experimental basis – make the best wine. Following the European example, they have even planted vines in the Chiang Rai mountains. Although the weather there is cooler than in Khao Yai, the experiment has not been crowned with success because the constant fog in the area causes serious outbreaks of rot.

Another major problem in Thailand is a kind of cancer caused by pruning in a tropical climate. Almost a third of the vineyard area at many estates has already been destroyed.

WINEMAKING IN THE TROPICS

Given where it is found in the wild, the vine feels most comfortable on chalky soils in a northerly Mediterranean climate. To do truly well it needs long days in July and August and, even more importantly, a period of hibernation in winter. A tropical environment is not only too warm and humid, but the midsummer days are too short. Furthermore, without a proper winter, the vines flower irregularly, which means that hormones like Dormex have to be brushed onto the buds to enable the plant to blossom at the right time and bear fruit. If producers want, however, they can yield over two crops a year in the tropics.



Rotting grapes

In Thailand, as in much of India, one crop would be destroyed by the monsoon rain and is usually removed. In addition, there are insects that make it difficult for the grapes to ripen as well as fungal infestations such as black rot, which not only impact on the quality of the grapes but can also be fatal for the vines. Squirrels and bats are only too happy to eat the few grapes that do manage to ripen. Therefore it comes as no surprise that yields are meagre and quality unpredictable.

There is, of course, also the problem of rain during flowering and the effect of mildew throughout the growing period. Filling 160,000 bottles, as they do, with good quality wine (their 2010 Chenin Blanc Pirom is their best offer) is no mean achievement.

Even Nikki Lohitnavy from GranMonte struggles to produce 80,000 bottles from her 44 acres. This was one of the reasons that a tropical viticulture conference was held in Chiang Mai in November 2011. The participants included Dr Monika Christmann from Geisenheim in Germany and the aforementioned Dr Richard Smart. The Australian viticulture consultant summed up the situation succinctly in his lecture: “While it is becoming increasingly easier to somehow manage to produce acceptable grapes, vines feel less comfortable here than do the tourists on the beach.” ❖