

# From vines . to Wines

Laurence Civil explores Khao Yai's beautiful GranMonte Estate, which has expanded to offer its guests overnight stays in addition to fine wines and delicious cuisine



The GranMonte Estate is conveniently located in Asoke Valley, adjacent to Khao Yai National Park, 160kms northeast of Bangkok. Immaculately laid out, the vineyard sits at an elevation of 350 metres covering 40 acres planted with Shiraz, Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, Viognier and

experimental plantings to see what other varieties will grow here.

Its story started a decade ago, beginning with two major investments: the planting of the first vines and the owners sending their daughter Nikki to Australia to study, where she recently graduated as Thailand's first internationally-trained female wine maker. Now they are seeing a return.

"Sometimes I feel it was just like yesterday," says Visooth Lohitnavy, CEO and managing director. "You couldn't imagine how much we had to overcome and sacrifice, like sending our beloved daughter away to study winemaking overseas; spending most our time away from the civilisation of Bangkok and tending the vines no matter rain or shine! Generally speaking



GILDAS D'OLLONE OF CHATEAU PICHON LALANDE (LEFT) AND HUBERT DE BOUARD DELAFOREST OWNER OF CHATEAU ANGELUS (SECOND RIGHT) JOIN VISOOTH, SAKUNA AND NIKKI LOHITNAVY

most things went as we planned, our wines are recognized locally; they have been winning awards in Thailand and overseas and we have become one of the landmarks of Khao Yai."

Previously GranMonte's wines were made under contract. Nikki's graduation as an oenologist from the University of Adelaide, Southern Australia and the completion of the GranMonte Asoke Valley Winery - where she will be the winemaker - marks the dawn of a new chapter at the estate. She will be making her red wines in collaboration with Hubert de Bouard of Chateau Angelus.

"My style will be medium to full-bodied reds, with some oak influences," says Nikki. "The wines will be clean, fruity and the best expression of our grapes. My whites are clean, crisp and have tropical fruit characteristics, aged in steel rather than oak barrels. With the 2009 vintage we launch our first rosé which, with our whites, will be under screw caps which I think are best to preserve the style of our wine."

Let's look at three of the best recent wines from GranMonte. The 2005 Fiori unfiltered Syrah displays characteristics of bouquet garni, stewed plum and rhubarb. It was intentionally made unwooded to uncover the lush attributes of the fruit, revealing a wine that's full bodied and well balanced with good intensity. The 2006 Primavera Syrah - again unfiltered - has flavours of wild fig, green peppercorn and vanilla from the use of French oak. Being unfiltered the characteristics, integrity and colour of the grapes has been preserved resulting in a wine with poignant structure and

finish. Finally the 2008 Fiori unwooded Chenin Blanc, one of the best harvests with generous sunshine, a cool ripening period and scarce rain resulting in the grapes maturing with the fragrant varietal characteristic retained. It's a

different style to previous vintages; the wine is fruity and floral yet with a refreshing kick of acidity.

Good wine needs good food and VinCotto, the estate's family-style restaurant, has expanded from 40 seats when it first opened to a total of 120, with 60 seats in the main air-conditioned dining room and 60 seats on the wooden patio, 'The Terrace', overlooking the lotus pond.

"The menu has over 50 dishes,"

says Sakuna, president and creator of the menu, "all made in home-style cooking adapted from our family recipes with no fancy presentation. I serve food with real, good taste, generous portions and a good serving style just as we normally do at home. The special menu of the month uses the best possible ingredients available at that time. Visitors enjoy walking around the estate and then having a lovely meal in our restaurant. I would strongly suggest advance booking for the weekends."

The estate is poetically beautiful and now, with the completion of the seven-bedroom Vine Nest, set against the forest and mountains overlooking rows of Cabernet Sauvignon, overnight stays are possible. As one who has been privileged enough to stay at the estate I strongly recommend the experience of an early morning walk through the vineyards - it's magical. **▀**

## TASTING NOTES



### GranMonte 2005 'Fiori' Unfiltered Syrah

Unwooded to uncover the luscious attributes of 'New Latitude' Syrah, GranMonte '2005 Fiori Unfiltered' displays a complexity of bouquet garni, stewed plum and rhubarb. It is full-bodied and well-balanced with good intensity and freshness. The wine will benefit from a few years of cellaring but should be enjoyed from now to the next three years.

### GranMonte 2006 'Primavera' Unfiltered Syrah

Unfiltered to preserve the characteristics, intensity and colour of 'New Latitude' grapes, the wine exhibits its poignant structures and finish. The '2006 Primavera Unfiltered' Syrah, with wild figs, green peppercorn and fragrant French oak, is recommended with cheese, red meat and spicy foods. It is ready to be enjoyed and is suitable for a few years of cellaring.



### GranMonte 2008 'Fiori' Unwooded Chenin Blanc

2008 is of one the best harvests of GranMonte's single vineyard Chenin Blanc. With generous sunshine, cool ripening period and scarce rain, the flavour of the grapes matured while retaining the fragrant varietal characteristics. This Fiori Unwooded Chenin Blanc is of a different style compared to GranMonte's previous vintages. The wine is fruity and floral, yet with a kick of refreshing acidity. It is ready to be enjoyed now or cellared to reveal more surprises. Best served cold.