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Thailand's first
female oenologist,
Visootha Lohitnavy,
and her life amidst
the grapevine

Lady of the
VINEYARD





PHOTOS: THANARAT SONNHUR

feature

WINE AT
HEART

'Muse' hears about Thailand's first female oenologist, Visootha 'Nikki' Lohitnavy, through the grapevine, writes **Arusa Pisuthipan**

Getting a chance to sit down and talk with Visootha "Nikki" Lohitnavy is now as hard as tracking down a superstar for an interview. "I usually work like crazy from 7am until 1am the next day, especially in the first half of the year when we harvest grapes and start making wine," says Visootha. However, no matter how tight her work schedule is, Visootha still wears an adorable, casual, friendly smile — one that makes everyone around her happy. She shows no signs of weariness even under the strong sunlight in the grape plantation where her conversation with 'Muse' took place. She talks freely and voices her opinions — Visootha is, in fact, a lot more mature than her age.

The 21 year old came back to Thailand in December last year after graduating with a Bachelor of Oenology from the University of Adelaide, Australia.

Right after settling foot in her homeland, the new graduate took up a posting as a full time oenologist as well as a vineyard and winery operation director. She is Thailand's first, and so far only, overseas-educated female wine-maker.

Although the young lady's responsibilities require her to spend most of her time at the winery, leaving her only a few hours to rest, she never considers it a strain or burden. Wine-making is indeed her *raison d'être*, she says, and that is why she usually speaks with a soft yet powerfully enthusiastic voice overwhelmed by an air of liveliness when it comes to discussing topics about grapes and wines.

Despite being new to the business, Visootha is in fact no stranger to the wine-making industry. Her father is none other than Visooth Lohitnavy, founder and owner of the famous GranMonte Family Vineyard in Asoke Valley, Khao Yai. Visooth, who is also the president of the Thai Wine Association, bought a piece of land and made a smart investment on the family vineyard a decade ago. This 100-rai estate welcomes thousands of guests each month and is now Visootha's workplace.

Like father like daughter. Visootha has followed in her father's footsteps since she was just a little kid. For the Lohitnavys, growing and taking care of plants, grapes to be

precise, has always been a regular topic of discussion at the dinner table. Visootha herself has also been passionate about botany since she was young. Along with her family's support, her interest in trees, fuelled by her familiarity with grapes, paved the way for her future career.

"I had thought, since I was in school [in Australia], that one day I would come back to develop the wine-making industry in Thailand and to make it known to the world," she recalls.

For other girls her age, it might have been just a daydream — a vague desire to grab something out of thin air. But to Visootha, her big dream was definitely not beyond her reach.

And she is now on her way to weaving that dream into a reality.

Upon her arrival from Australia as a full-time wine-maker for the family business, her father invested over 30 million baht on GranMonte's very own winery which now functions as Visootha's office.

So what exactly does she, as a wine-maker, have to do?

"My job starts right at the vines. When the grapes start to become ripe, I have to constantly taste them to see whether they are ready for production. I have to check how sweet they are as eventually the sugar in the juice will become alcohol. I also have to calculate how many grapes we need to pick in a day, manage to bring those grapes into the winery and have them crushed and processed," Visootha explains with sparkling eyes before getting up from her chair, taking a few steps to pick a small bunch of grapes from a vine and tasting them.

"In short, I look after grapes until they end up in a bottle."

Thai wine-makers are rare, and count only four in number to be exact. But Thai female wine-makers are even rarer. Notwithstanding such a fact, Visootha does not see any reason as to why a female cannot gain solid ground in such a male-dominated industry.

"In our highly technological world wine-making does not require as much hard labour as before. We wine-makers do not need to carry heavy oak barrels like in the old days. So females can do it and gain acceptance



from this job too," comments Visootha, adding that females in fact have a better perception of taste than males, which is extremely essential in the wine-making process.

Generally speaking, characteristics of wine can say something about the person who makes it. But to Visootha, when it comes to the production of wine, it is not just the wine-maker that counts. More important to her is how to make the drinker appreciate the alcoholic beverage she creates.

"Many times, wine-makers love to experiment and try to come up with several new types of wine that they like. But for me, your creativity means nothing if nobody drinks your wine. I think people are different and thus people love many different types of wine so it is my job to create a wide variety of wines to answer all those needs."

Given the oenologist's age, it is unusual to see her in charge of over five dozen vineyard staff. Even though managing people is certainly no piece of cake, Visootha has her own simple yet practical strategies.

"In running a good business, first you need to find efficient staff. You don't actually need many. If they are proficient, only a few of them will do."

And, to the wine-maker, age is indeed just a number.

"I don't think it's a problem managing this business at the age of only 21. I am not saying that I am a know-all because there are still lots and lots of things that I need to learn. But, to me, success depends on determination as well as experience. If you are determined, you can be as successful as people who are, say, 30."

Unfortunately, in her view, the development of the wine industry in Thailand is full of challenging difficulties. Apart from high alcohol taxation, wine manufacturers also face a ban on the advertisement of alcoholic drinks. But Thailand's wine industry has had a good beginning, she notes. Now people all over the world are starting to learn about and enjoy wines produced in this tropical country.

"The Thai wine industry is still small, yet we have been doing quite well so far. Take a look at many other countries and we will see that it took them hundreds of years until their wines became famous. With expanding knowledge and forthcoming technologies, I think Thai wines still have room to grow," she remarks.

After the interview and the photo shoot finishes, Visootha politely excuses herself and goes straight to the winery. Visootha really works hard especially during vintage, so much so that even her considerate mother says that her dear daughter deserves to take a few days off and go to the beach.

But when asked whether the wine-maker herself is bored of making, drinking and tasting wines every day, she laughs loudly and shakes her head almost at the same time.

"I am not sick of drinking wine. But I am sick of eating grapes. I think I do it enough during work. So when I see grapes being served at the dining table, I prefer to have something else," she says with a giggle.

From that noticeable head shake, it is crystal clear that vinification is not just Visootha's job. It is her passion, obsession and, perhaps, her true love.