

A woman's touch to Thai wine



Nikki, the 22-year-old graduate now wants to 'prove I can do the job as well as a guy can'. -- PHOTO: AFP

KHAO YAI (Thailand) - STROLLING by row upon row of grape vines nestled in the lush green Asoke valley, the first Thai female oenologist explains why she thinks women are naturally better winemakers than men.

THRIVING DESPITE HOT CLIMATE

Internationally however, there is serious interest in 'New Latitude wines' - the term coined to describe wine from Thailand, Brazil, India and other countries beyond the areas commonly thought suitable for harvesting grapes.

'In the past people thought it wasn't possible,' said Kim Wachtveitl, business development director at Southeast Asia's biggest producer, Siam Winery, which exports up to 75 percent of its 300,000 bottles per year to 19 countries.

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'First of all women have better taste perception than men,' Nikki Lohitnavy says, with a smile. 'And paying attention to small details, I think sometimes guys don't do that.' She walks on through her family's GranMonte vineyard, which sits by the mountainous Khao Yai National Park 155km north of Bangkok, to the winery that she set up in December.

The ten-year-old estate used to take its grapes to a neighbouring vineyard which had the equipment to make wine, until Ms Nikki took on the job herself after four years studying oenology - the science of winemaking - in Australia.

The 22-year-old graduate now wants to 'prove I can do the job as well as a guy can', as she takes charge of the new enterprise and its all-male employees.

'In Thai society, girls in any kind of job are still seen as inferior to men,' she told AFP. 'Other countries have passed that already, but in Thailand it is still like this.'

After explaining the science behind the winery's huge stainless steel tanks, tiny test tubes and French oak barrels, Ms Nikki suggested gender issues are not the only hurdles she faces as a winemaker targeting Thailand's domestic market.

While her family's business is expanding, with a vineyard guesthouse opening for 'agro-tourists' and the launch of its first rose wine, she said sales of the 60,000 or so bottles produced by GranMonte each year are 'definitely down'.

On top of a damaging recession, Thailand's wine consumption is stymied by high luxury taxes, a ban on advertising alcohol and stiff competition from the country's cheaper and more traditional tipples of whisky and beer, she said.

Visooth Lohitnavy, GranMonte's CEO and president of the Thai Wine Association said, 'Wine is not our culture but the more educated people with good disposable income drink wine - it's quite a social drink,' he said.

'The younger generation love to learn but the older generation still think only French wine is good.' -- AFP
