

Thailand's golden slopes

One of Thailand's most popular tourism destinations, Khao Yai is also home to several Thai wineries, where right now the 2010 vintage is being harvested

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Thailand is a wine-growing country. Not a very big one, not a very old one, and at one time not a lot of people around the world knew about it. But all that has been steadily changing.



Some of GranMonte's award-winning wines.

Never mind that Cistercian monks developed the vineyards of Burgundy 1,000 years ago, or that the Antinori and Frescobaldi families have been making wine in Tuscany for 17 generations. This is Thailand, and no one had ever thought that it would provide suitable soil and conditions for growing grapes and making wine until about 20 years ago.

The Thai pioneer viticulturists invested in land with viable soil and climate conditions, experimented with grape varieties, planted vines, made the wine, marketed it, sold it and often won awards for its quality - and they are still there at the head of the companies they formed.

Now they have made their mark and we can see a second generation moving up into line. The vines are older, the wines more mature; accumulated experience and winemaking technology have added their value and the world is now aware that "Thai wine" is not an exotic oddity but a desirable reality, a growing industry and a prime example of what Frank Norell has called "New Latitude Wines."

In 2004, seven Thai wine producers joined forces to form the Thai Wine Association dedicated to raising standards, developing output and putting the wine of Thailand on the world map. The association's current president is Visooth Lohitnavy, and his own winery on the edge of Khao Yai National Park 160 kilometres from Bangkok, is now celebrating the 10th anniversary of its first vintage.



The family, from left, Nikki, Sakuna and Visooth Lohitnavy.

His is definitely a family affair with Visooth as CEO and managing director and his wife Sakuna as president of the company. Their son Sanya is business development director, while daughter Nikki is technical director of viticulture and winemaking and her younger sister Mimi is also a director.

Nikki Lohitnavy's job description is well merited. Thailand's first female winemaker, she received her degree in oenology with viticultural honours from the University of Adelaide in 2008. While still a student she was awarded a Fosters Wine Estates Prize for Excellence in Winemaking. Her practical work included a spell as a vintage winemaker with Brown Brothers winery in Victoria in 2007, and with Wolf Blass in Barossa Valley in 2008.

The following year, the long-awaited GranMonte Asoke Valley Winery went into action with gleaming, temperature-controlled fermentation tanks and the most advanced equipment imported from Germany and Australia alongside the traditional oak casks. Previously, their winemaking had been contracted out; now on her return from Australia, Nikki took over the job of making and supervising all the wines.



Harvest competition at GranMonte early this month.

She had also spent three months working with Hubert de Bouard de la Forest, owner of Chateau Angelus, one of the precious few premiers grands crus of St Emilion in Bordeaux, and president of the Conseils de Vin de St Emilion. He is also a consultant with 15 high visibility estates in the Old and New Worlds including the Pauillac "super second", Chateau Pichon Lalande - and now at GranMonte he is a frequent visitor giving advice and assistance in fine tuning the quality of the wines.

With his son, Mathieu, he made the journey to Khao Yai to join the 10th anniversary celebrations. The glorious natural setting of Khao Yai has always been a popular destination for local people and foreign visitors alike, and recent developments have extended its natural charm to incorporate more sophisticated pleasures, like the health spas, resorts and Tuscan shopping village a few kilometres down the hillside road from GranMonte.

GranMonte, an indirect translation of Khao Yai, both meaning "big mountain", also has an excellent restaurant run by Sakuna. Its name, Vincotto, combines the ideas of wine and cooking, and both names demonstrate the links between the present and time-honoured wine traditions.

Tourism advantages have not been neglected by any of the Thai wineries, who are taking their cue from their counterpart in the Old and New Worlds with picturesque wine trails and comfortable accommodation in pleasant rural settings. Indeed, to the Thai tourism attractions of pristine beaches, beautiful islands, forested mountains and serene temples, can now be added the rows of neatly ordered vines with their bunches of natural fruit climbing gentle slopes in the shade of the neighbouring hillside, plus a taste of the product in the cool of the evening.

It was great fun to see the harvesting contest that was part of the celebrations for GranMonte's 10th anniversary. Teams of two, a total of 54 Thai and overseas contestants with dozens of supporters, lined up at one end of a vineyard section where the grapes were due to be harvested.

Each team was given a pair of scissors, a plastic basket and 30 minutes to pick as many bunches of grapes as they could. The two winning teams both managed to pick a total of 90 kilogrammes, a result that showed how much work has to go into this basic element of vineyard cultivation.

This kind of hands-on activity that directly involves visitors in the life of the vineyard is a perfect demonstration of the tourism opportunities that exist in Thailand's vineyards - which are situated in six other areas of Thailand in addition to Khao Yai.

They offer very good accommodation for visitors, some taking the cosy, rustic route with traditional-style thatched bungalows, others tailoring more modern accommodation to their rural setting.

GranMonte has opted for a well-appointed, boutique hotel style in its seven new, stone-built apartments. On one side, a tall, wooded hill rises steeply outside the window, while the terrace on the other side stands directly beside the vineyard which extends for about a kilometre to the forested hills on the far side. On either side, it's a magical outlook.

But for all its tourism potential, GranMonte is a working vineyard and winery, and one that is still developing.

"We're currently making cabernet sauvignon, chenin blanc, syrah, tempranillo and viognier, but we're continually experimenting with other grape varieties that are right for the climate and conditions here," said Nikki.

This year's may be a landmark vintage, or it may simply be a no-more-than-average one, but either way, the 2010 harvest will mark another step forward in the growth and the worldwide visibility of Thailand's developing wine industry.

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