

# Xp

EXPERIENCE ALL THAT  
LIFE HAS TO OFFER



BENJAWAN in action in the kitchen.



Estonian Ambassador to Austria Eve-Kulli Kala was among the guests at one of the spice markets.



From left, Jan Ganer, Benjawan Wisootsat, Gertrude Salomon, Benjawan's assistant and Bertold Salomon of the Salomon Winery.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FIN

# The way to do wine

## Benjawan Wisootsat's hit 'tour' of Austria spreads the word about Thai cuisine

MANOTE TRIPATHI  
THE NATION

**B**enjawan Wisootsat, half of the duo that runs the wine-import firm Fin, flew to Austria in May with nine pieces of luggage, every case packed with Thai cooking ingredients and kitchenware. She put on four elaborate gourmet dinners in Vienna and Krems, in the wine-growing area.

The Austrians still haven't stopped talking about these meals. How were they to know that this was what Thai food really tasted like if they hadn't come to Thailand themselves?

And how were they to know that Thai food went so well with wine? Spicy Asian cuisine wasn't supposed to do that.

So call Benjawan's mission a success, particularly since she returned home with those same suitcase bursting with fresh ideas. It amazed her how little the Europeans knew about Thai food when Thai cooking classes are so popular there.

"Since the Austrian events I've had lots of requests to do more cooking classes with wine events there," says one of the few Thai women who are professionally promoting wine appreciation here. She's the queen of Thai wine parties, organising almost weekly events.

Benjawan's passion takes her overseas a lot, especially where there is interest in Thai cuisine. She shows up with the goodies and the expertise, usually backed by her Swiss husband and business partner at Fin, Jan Ganer, although it was just her and a pair of assistants working the crowd in Austria.

They organised two "spice market" outdoor gatherings, a wine luncheon and a full-scale wine party. Each drew about 50 guests. "The only thing I *didn't* do was invite the guests," she laughs.

Benjawan's parties in Thailand introduce boutique wines from Austria, Lebanon and other sources that are less well known but popular overseas. By her count she deals with 200 labels from 17 countries. For the Austrian events she teamed up with the famed Salomon winery on vintages to match the Thai dishes she cooked herself.

"Wine parties are about atmosphere plus quality food to match the quality wine," she says. "You don't need to stick to Bordeaux alone these days. There are many quality wines from other countries besides France. Austria is one of them."

Benjawan left Bangkok for Austria laden with fresh ingredients but many of the vegetables spoiled within days and it wasn't cheap or easy finding the garlic, white pepper, red onion and coriander to replace them.

"I prepared the things like chilli paste in Bangkok. For overseas events you need to be well prepared before departure since you depend on yourself a lot when you get there and you tend to encounter unforeseen problems. In this case the kitchens weren't designed to handle intensive cooking for 50 people, the help was inadequate and the pots



BENJAWAN WISOOTSAT imports great foreign wines and exports authentic Thai cooking.

NATION/SUKOL KERDINAMONKOL



Lisl Wagner-Bacher



Benjawan and her assistant brought the real taste of Thai food to Austria.

and pans didn't fit my Thai cooking style." And they had no rice cooker. "In all my life I've never cooked rice the traditional way because it's more difficult – I've always used cookers. So I asked my staff to get some tips before we left."

Benjawan stuck to authentic recipes, though. For the spice markets she prepared fish mini-puffs (*pun sib sai pla*), grilled pork salad (*num tok moo yang*), green curry, minced pork salad, rice crackers with pork curry and yellow curry with chicken and potato.

She celebrated the 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thai-Austrian diplomatic relations with a luncheon attended by celebrated chefs like Lisl Wagner-Bacher of the Landhaus Bacher, one of the world's top 100 restaurants.

That feast included papaya salad with fried chicken wings, stir-fried chicken with cashew nuts and pineapple, *choo chi* trout and northern sour pork, which is similar to Austrian *sulz*.

The barbecue event offered grilled rack of lamb with holy basil and chilli served with *krapao* sauce and grilled beef tenderloin with garlic and pepper, served with *num jim jeaw* sauce.

And the final wine party had spring roll flutes served on bamboo (a Thai recipe in Chinese style), *tom kha gai* cappuccino with lemongrass chicken skewer, Crying Tiger with *num jim jeaw* and lamb *krapao* with fried quail egg in Thai style.

The guests loved the food and wine and were bowled over by the hilltribe costumes worn by Benjawan and her assistants, and by the *sak yant* tattoos one of her assistant sported.

"It was the first time many of the guests had tried somtam made with papaya – they're used to carrot.

"And I was constantly being asked if particular dishes contained lemongrass or galangal or ginger. I told them that not every Thai dish uses those ingredients! Some Thai restaurants overseas use them in every dish so it 'looks Thai'. That's one of the misconceptions about Thai food in Austria."

Of course Benjawan found an Austrian wine to match every dish. "Food and wine are equally important," she says. "Bad food can kill good wine and bad wine can kill good food."



A selection of modern Thai cuisine