

Absolutely Fabulous

Michael Moore meets wine and lifestyle guru Benjawan Wisootsat and discovers she's bubblier than a newly opened bottle of Champers

A CONVERSATION with Benjawan Wisootsat will soon destroy any of those negative stereotypes you might be carrying around about Thai women. During our interview, I had the uneasy impression Ben was a couple of steps ahead of me and knew the questions I was going to ask before I did. Insightful, quick to understand and mildly conniving, she has a mind like a steel trap.

She's made her mark in Bangkok as the owner and managing director of *fin* – 'fabulous is needed' – a lifestyle company she and partner Jan Ganser formed back in 2003. *Fin*, which Benjawan says was created for people with "taste, class and individual lifestyles," attacks the business world on several fronts: organising events, specialised catering, unique travel experiences, and importing wines from 'boutique' wineries.

Although *fin* is probably best known as a wine importer, during our interview at least, it was organising events that seemed to dominate Ben's fertile mind. When asked what type of events *fin* creates, her eyes lit up.

"We do almost anything," she says. "Private parties, corporate events, weddings, wine dinners and tastings – we do them all. We even do travel tours for small groups who want to see and do something different. We aim to create events that make an impact because of a stunning location, celebrity guest, outstanding food and wine – we want to do something unique and different."

I was surprised at her answer when I asked who did the cooking when *fin* caters an affair. "It is usually me," she replies with a touch of vanity. "I love to cook and have enjoyed cooking and eating since I was very young. When we have an event, I try to create something that will satisfy our clients, but still



communicate that we are in Thailand. I spend a lot of time on research so we can have a menu that is unique, but still satisfying to the guests at the party.

"At a party for the Minister of Finance for Germany, I created a noodle dish similar to khao soi because the German's enjoy noodles. I combined

several German ingredients like Black Forest ham with the Thai sauce. It was popular because it had flavours with which everyone was familiar and like the party was a combination of German and Thai cultures.

"When I travel, I make a point of eating local food and drinking local wine. I often try to find an apartment near a market so I can buy local food and experiment with it in the kitchen. It's a great way to learn about food and ingredients and a great way to meet local people."

Since wine plays such a significant part of *fin*'s business, I asked Ben how she acquired an interest in wine. "I enjoy it and drink a lot of it," she laughs. "Over the years I developed a strong sense of what I like and dislike and I found most of the wine sold in Thailand a big bore." "What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, a few years ago drinking wine in Thailand was all about mass-produced wine from a few large companies based in a handful of countries. The wine was almost always red, and most likely,





Cabernet Sauvignon. I found it boring and started drinking different wines when I could get them. I found I especially enjoyed white and rosé wines and that these wines were actually better matches for Thai food.

“At fin,” she continues, “we look for quality wines from smaller wineries. We are on the lookout for good wines with something about them that makes them unique. We import wines from about 80 producers located in 18 different countries. And we only sell to 5-star hotels, resorts and restaurants. Our wines aren’t available in retail shops. We are a niche company and retail sales aren’t a part of our niche.”

But why the interest in smaller wineries? After all some of the world’s most famous wines are from large wine producers.

“Of course, but they also produce a lot of wine that all taste alike,” she retorts. “At fin we aren’t looking for assembly line wine. We are looking for something different and for wine that

"Private parties, corporate events, weddings, wine dinners and tastings we do them all. We even do travel tours for small groups who want to see and do something different."

has been produced with passion. This is why we sometimes import wines from areas that aren’t generally known for their wines – places like Lebanon, Greece and Switzerland.

When I ask what she currently finds exciting about wine, Ben suddenly seems to wake up. “Organic and biodynamic wines,” she says leaning forward in her chair.

I know organic wines are made from grapes grown according to the same principles as other organic produce and that there is controversy over whether wines with sulphites added during production can be called ‘organic’. But I haven’t a clue about biodynamic wines.



Ben straightens me out. “Biodynamic wines,” she says, “are a lot like organic wines, but with even stricter requirements. When I met Nicolas Joly, the ‘godfather’ of organic wine, he told me that it is all about letting nature speak and not interfering with natural processes. It sees everything as a natural whole, including the phases of the moon and the positions of the planets.”

I wasn’t quite sure I really understood what she meant, but it really didn’t matter. My chat with Benjawan Wisootsat had been a real eye-opener. Gone were many of the stereotypes with which I had started and in their place was the realisation that I had just chatted with a remarkable woman.

For more info about fin see: www.fin-wine.com