

HE SAID, SHE SAID

It's Just Fabulous!*

Interview by Jane Teeling

Pictures by Daniel Corrigan

Location: Evason Hideaway, Hua Hin, Thailand

fin (fabulous is needed) is a boutique events company with a difference, reflecting co-owners Jan and Benjawan's passion for wine, food and the fabulous.

The dining table is in mid-meal swing when the second wave of main courses - three tapas-sized portions - arrives on a tiered tray, along with a goblet of red *Gago do Toro*. It's only when you take a sip, perhaps after a bite of minty chicken tagine spiked with spices and almonds, that you realise you are drinking one of the best Spanish reds on the market. You're not alone: other diners exclaim over this latest specimen, and like some magnetised object, conversation is drawn to the subject of food and wine, as so often happens at one of Benjawan and Jan's signature *fin* (that's 'fabulous is needed') dinners.

That you'll never organise a dinner as good as one of *fin*'s is no personal shortcoming: Benjawan Wisootsat, founder of event company Optimum Group Co.Ltd, and Jan Ganser, who ran the marketing operations for several multinationals, are expert assemblers, coordinators and facilitators of - well, the fabulous. And while Optimum does it grand-scale (think large,

Benjawan enjoying some down-time during a fin function at Evason Hua Hin.



Wine art from Spice Ben!, Benjawan's label.

elaborate events staged in exotic places like Thai temples and abandoned cathedrals in Budapest), *fin* stays exclusive, importing boutique wines and showcasing them at intimate soirées where food and wine fusion reaches combustion levels.

For Jan and Benjawan, *fin* is a venture borne of common interests and business sensibilities. When they first met over 15 years ago, Jan saw Benjawan's potential for event management, and asked her to organise a big event for his company in 1990. It was Optimum's maiden voyage, and Jan was impressed.

"I knew I had to work with this woman," he says. "She had this talent..." In 2003, they decided to create an event and wine import company serving the top-end of the market. But something out of the ordinary: "I want things to be fabulous," he says of his work with *fin*, which is the only lifestyle company in Thailand to aim this high. "I want to make dreams come true." Jan is German, ebullient. His boyish optimism is rather contagious.

"We think in the same direction," says Benjawan, a petite Thai woman whose olfactory memory for wine borders on *savante*. You might notice her at *fin*'s dinners quietly considering the food on her plate, as if cross-referencing the flavours with *fin*'s repertoire of wines. Says Jan proudly: "We have over 100 wines. She knows every single one. It's like she has a computer's memory."

One could say that *fin*, which imports boutique wines for five-star establishments and fine-dining venues, could not have chosen a more



difficult market to break into. Thailand's outrageous luxury tax on wine - a shocking 400% - has thwarted advances in foreign wine culture and appreciation.

But Jan and Benjawan's passion for wine, food and the fabulous - plus their savvy business sense - outweighs the risks. First comes the search: to source wine, they travel worldwide to find winemakers whose approach to the craft is boutique rather than commercial, and whose personalities are as apparent as a strong nose on a glass of wine. Benjawan sometimes adds to the product with her line of Spice Ben! wine art labels, which act as visual tasting notes.

Then fin looks for partners in Thailand: hoteliers, resort owners, sommeliers of five-star establishments - the best in their field. "Our dream is to find more and more people to work with us, not for us - to share our vision," says Jan. Kindred business partners are more likely to pay for quality, which means that everything fin does can be truly fabulous, no matter what the cost.

The finish, if you will, of fin's strategy, is what has earned Jan and Benjawan clients, friends and admirers in Thailand and beyond: it's the Dinner. No two are the same, but all are organised with precision. The winemaker is flown over. The venue is carefully chosen - usually a client's establishment. Benjawan taps into her memory bank of tasting notes and creates the menu. Guests are chosen - media, wine makers and wine critics, sommeliers, local and international businessmen, diplomats. And the stage is set, so that when you come to Face Bar Bangkok's Hazara for an Indian dinner accompanied by German and French wines, you find Benjawan looking fetching in a sari, rose petals around your dinner plate, and henna tattoo artists scrawling Sanskrit on guests' arms. Your average dinner party this is not.

By operating a highly organised wine-and-dine event Jan and Benjawan do their clients the utmost service. Wines are complemented by fine food, and vice-versa. Potential buyers and media meet the winemaker; and the winemaker shares techniques and anecdotes that further decant his personality.

"If you know the winemaker, you know why the wine exists," Jan said to me at a dinner at Evason Hideaway in Hua Hin. Australian winemaker Hunter Smith was describing in an outback drawl his family's vineyard, birthplace of his Isolation Ridge Riesling. "You see how the wine reflects their individuality," added Jan. I saw what he meant.

That night, each dish from Chef Remon Alphenaar's kitchen was preceded by a postcard-sized reproduction of a Spice Ben! art piece, on the back of which were poetic tasting notes of the feature wine and its corresponding dish. Reasoned Benjawan: "Everything has art in the making. What matters is how you express it. The winemaker is an artist. He can express nature." 🍷



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fin and lifestyle + travel will be hosting *Take Two: China*, this magazine's second anniversary bash in June at Hilton Millennium Bangkok.