



Enduring culinary alliance

Thai food and Portuguese wine make amicable partners – especially if you take the historical view.

East meets West cuisine is no modern phenomenon in Thailand; its roots go back almost 500 years, to when the Portuguese came to Ayutthaya.

They were the first European traders to arrive and were given the right to settle, to open a trading station and a church.

By the 17th century, there were said to be some 2,000 Portuguese living in Ayutthaya. Initially, they were suppliers of firearms and ammunition, but they also brought with them chilli peppers from their African possessions. Thai cooks welcomed these culinary firecrackers enthusiastically and proceeded to

make them a significant ingredient in their own national cuisine which has now conquered the world.

Portuguese soldiers served successive kings in the defense of Ayutthaya. After the city was sacked by the Burmese in 1767, they fought in the army of King Taksin, and the Portuguese community was given land rights and a church in Thonburi, the new capital, and later, Bangkok.

Portuguese wines arrived here only recently, though, and Benjawan Wisootsat and Jan Ganser of *Fin*, an exclusive wine importer company, recently featured them in their first "Wine Explorer: Destination Portugal" event. The dynamic duo has been

responsible for introducing many new and rediscovered tastes to Bangkok's wine community.

The Portuguese have been making wine for centuries, and some years ago *Mateus Rose* with its dainty, round bottle, became a worldwide favorite. But, it seems that the wine revolution that began in the New World and inspired so many new ventures and improvements in quality was a late arrival.

Port, the aristocratic dessert wine of Portugal, had a high visibility and worldwide sales, but at first, Portuguese growers did not rush to take advantage of new methods, techniques and opportunities in the



making of table wine. Now however, Portugal's "dry wine revolution" has secured its own place of honor.

Wines of the event came from two companies operating in the steep hillsides of the Port region of Douro in the north of Portugal, both of whom have achieved enviable international acclaim. Their wines were to be tasted in a Thai setting of the Shangri-La Hotel's riverside *Salathip* Thai restaurant, but the evening began further upstream with aperitifs at the Portuguese Embassy.

With the well-balanced proportions of a 19th century grand house and some of the classical elegance of the early years of the century, it must be

the most beautiful embassy building in Bangkok. European in character, it has Chinese and Thai influences too and, seen from the river, always excites the admiration of cruise parties.

Guests were welcomed by Ambassador and Mme Faria y Maya, and while gentle music shimmered in the air, they tasted Portuguese snacks before sailing upriver to the Shangri-La Hotel.

As they took their seats at *Salathip*, the first wine was served. It was from a cooperative in Douro, Lavadores de Feitoria founded in 1999 by 15 of the top growers (or *lavadores*) in the region. They make blended wines from the best-quality local grapes





such as tinta roriz and touriga francesa as well as international varieties merlot and sauvignon blanc, and also, single estate wines. Their obvious commitment to excellence is underscored by the desire to see Portuguese wines achieving their rightful place in the world.

Their 2004 *Tres Bagos* white wine was an aromatic blend of viosinho, malvasia and sauvignon blanc, very fresh, slightly acidic with a little touch of oaky vanilla. Clean tasting with citrus and herbal flavors it was refreshing and perfectly at home with a selection of Thai appetizers.

Pomelo salad with its pronounced, sweet-sour flavor would be a tougher test for a white wine, but 2005 *Tres Bagos* sauvignon blanc had the answer, as the aroma and taste of pomelo could be clearly detected on the nose and on the palate. This was a brisk and assertive sauvignon blanc, but more unctuous than one from the Loire or New Zealand. With the pomelo in a half-shell and a juicy tiger prawn, it tied up a delightful parcel of flavors.

As the next dish, *tom kha gai*, was being served, the delicate "ching-ching" of finger cymbals announced the golden crowned Thai dancers whose willowy performance accompanied each course. With the soothing chicken and coconut soup came a red wine, 2004 *Quinta do Crasto*, whose family estate stands high on a promontory overlooking the River Douro along which boats have carried wine down to the docks at Oporto for centuries.

The wine is a blend predominantly of touriga francesa and tinta roriz and between dry and fruity in character. It has a good depth of fruit, and firm tannic structure and a good, dry finish. *Tom kha gai*, a comforting dish, made a comfortable match with it.

An earlier vintage of red *Tres Bagos*, the 2001, raised the stakes with its intense berry fruit flavor with hints of tar and liquorice. This kind of intensity was just right for Chicken piri-piri. No one is going to claim that

the Portuguese introduced grilled chicken to Thailand, but "piri-piri" is the African name of a small, hot chilli that they make into a piquant sauce. Barbecued chicken and chilli sauce: very Thai and also very Portuguese.

Beef tenderloin with musamman curry and jasmine rice has no Portuguese connections, but 2001 *Tinto Reserva* from Quinta do Crasto has a very strong local identity. At Quinta do Crasto, they continue traditions of proven worth even though they are committed to modern winemaking technology. They still acknowledge the value of the human touch, treading the grapes for certain wines in stone tanks called lagares.

The 2001 *Tinto Reserva* grapes from 65-year old vines were crushed in this way by workers accompanied by dance music. As a reserva, the wine was matured in French and American oak barriques for 18 months. It proved to be a rewarding balance of intense plum and raspberry flavors with spicy notes, smooth tannins and a satisfying finish.

Now was the time to open the port, a 1999 *Quinta do Crasto Late Bottled Vintage Port* served with the golden-yellow desserts based on egg yolks, originating in Portugal but now so much a part of the Thai tradition.

Late Bottled Vintage Ports, or *LBVs*, are among the most refined members of the port family. Most are blends from different years to preserve character and freshness, but ports from outstanding harvests may have the right to declare the vintage and the date of bottling on its label. *LBVs* are usually bottled after four or five years aging in cask.

The *Quinta do Crasto 1999* was rich and smooth, not in any way heavy, but well-rounded and silky on the palate. Gorgeous flavors of plum, red fruit, dried fruit and chocolate lingered on the palate with a long-lasting finish.

The idea of celebrating the fifth centenary of the relationship between Thailand and Portugal is an appealing one. Technically, it won't take place until 2011—but wine lovers will not be inclined to wait. ■