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# A Meeting of Creative Minds

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Phuket luxury eateries flexed their culinary muscles when they were posed with a unique challenge: four days, five meals, and dozens of courses – all paired with select Austrian wines (with occasional side trips to other regions) brought in by wine expert Benjawan Wisootsat's wine-and-travel firm *fin*. JINDA WEDEL tags along to sample the fare

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COME JUNE, PHUKET'S luxury scene is poised to welcome a brand new terminal at the resort island's large international airport, once the subject of much disdain and public jabs, particularly from luxury industry purveyors.

But it should, in the end, become the lavish bookends to high-end experiences already available (and woefully underappreciated amongst Bangkokians) that range from art to dining to hospitality – which were perfectly demonstrated last month.

We were taken through five lavish meals at four restaurants in three days, with a pit-stop at an intimate art-and-jewellery luncheon and soirée that complemented rather elaborately the theme of the culinary trip: Austrian creativity in Thailand.

Here's what we found.

## IN FULL BLOOM

*Chef Jimmy Ophorst at Seafood Restaurant, Trisara*



The highlights of this midday meal came early and beautifully, and shone amongst the five courses – a tuna O-toro enveloped by delicate radish petals and sprinkled with hibiscus powder; a tender squid terrine that

highlighted its brininess with a complementary pumpkin mousse. The rest of the meal was capped by a simple rhubarb sherbet with star anise, lemon and fragrant thyme flavours.

The icing on the proverbial cake was knowing that much of the ingredients are freshly harvested from Trisara's organic and eco-conscious gardens, and that the expansive Trisara locale itself is an avid conserver of electricity, water, and a careful waste manager. The bread is handmade, the butter is hand-churned, and any ingredients

not raised locally are bought from local farmers.

Here *fin* Naturally truly kicked things off with a bang, beginning the meal with a beautiful 2011 Auxerrois Maastricht, Apostelhoeve from the Netherlands' Limburg – an unusual source for a wine of this type. The other wines were from France and Austria, all organic or biodynamic, in keeping with Trisara's philosophy and the subtle theme of the entire experience.

### HIGHLIGHT DISHES

- Tuna O-toro and kimchi, hidden beneath petals of radish, complemented by hibiscus powder and yuzu
- Squid terrine with pumpkin mousse, roast onion, bell peppers and mushrooms

### HIGHLIGHT WINES

- 2011 Auxerrois Maastricht, Apostelhoeve, Limburg, Netherlands
- 2012 FRED Zweigelt, Fred Loimer, Kamptal, Austria

[trisara.com](http://trisara.com)



OPPOSITE PAGE: CHEF JIMMY OPHORST. **THIS PAGE:** BARRAMUNDI WITH ORGANIC CARROTS AND ASPARAGUS, SERVED WITH 2012 FRED ZWIGELT BY FRED LOIMER, KAMPTAL, AUSTRIA.



## THE LANDS OF AUS AND OZ

Executive Chef Laia Pons at the Penthouse, Kata Rocks



It is always a pleasure and an honour to watch a chef at work, as was the case one evening at Kata Rocks' Penthouse kitchen, which had an open layout. At first slated for an open-air, terrace experience, rain forced us indoors to enjoy the expansive layout of the sea-view Penthouse.

We lounged several feet away from Chef Laia's busy hands, bubbling pots and chopping block; occasionally she rounded the kitchen island to briefly introduce each course – indeed, she needn't say more; the flavours did all the talking for her.

The six-course menu was kicked off with imported Fine de Claire oysters paired with an Ultra Brut Rosé Sekt from Salomon Undhof. Indeed, Salomon Undhof's own Bert Undhof Jr. was there on hand to explain his family's eight-generation old wine-making business, which this evening offered us two Rieslings that stole the show: one mentioned below, and the other the 2006 Riesling Undhof Auslese. Clear, elegant and a lovely reflection of the mineral-y soil in which the grapes were reared, they were the perfect complements to both the crab tartar (engulfed in avocado slices), and an indulgent ice-cream-and-brioche dessert.

The king of the courses (though the other diners had their own picks) was undoubtedly the grilled Australian Wagyu rib-eye with prunes and pine-nuts, which was handled perfectly for this calibre and cut of meat – “looks like something got murdered on your plate,” said one diner admiringly.

A pleasant discovery was South Australia's 2008 Finnis River Shiraz, which the Salomons are also responsible for. Aged in metal barrels and carefully handled in the European style, the wine was a fascinating demonstration of the range that Australian-grown grapes can have.

### HIGHLIGHT DISHES

- Steamed Foie Gras wrapped in cabbage; served with ginger and Szechuan pepper
- Grilled Australian rib-eye with spinach, prunes and pine nuts

### HIGHLIGHT WINES

- 2006 Riesling Undhof Auslese, Salomon Undhof, Kremstal Austria
- 2008 Finnis River Shiraz, Salomon Estate, South Australia

[katarocks.com](http://katarocks.com)



**THIS PAGE** (FROM TOP LEFT): EXECUTIVE CHEF LAIA PONS; GRILLED AUSTRALIAN RIB-EYE WITH SPINACH, PRUNES AND PINE NUTS; CRAB TARTAR ENVELOPED BY AVOCADO, GREEN APPLE AND CELERY; **OPPOSITE PAGE** (FROM LEFT): CHEFTINO: STIR-FRIED RED MULLET ON CAULIFLOWER PURÉE AND FRESH GREEN SPINACH; BENJAWAN WISOOTSAT OF FIN



## HOME, SWEET HOME

Chef Supreeda and Chef Tino at Silk Restaurant & Bar, Andara

Andara's Silk Restaurant is already well-established in Phuket, with Thai dishes served in vintage, glazed metal bowls and plates, dedicated to providing an authentic, luxurious Thai experience.

We sat down with Austrian jewellery brand Aenea's founder Costán Eghiazarian and partner Birgit Tomka, and Belgian artist (and close friend of the Austrian community) Christian Develter.

Set in a small gazebo overlooking a cliff that afforded a view of the beach and the town below, the private lunch served up local favourites such as Goong Sarong, which was simultaneously crunchy and succulent, and spicy duck curry with grapes in coconut milk. Executed perfectly and

unapologetically authentic, the dishes were a reminder that Thai cuisine itself is worthy of international celebration.

Dinner was a few steps from the pool in a relaxed ambience; Chef Tino, glistening from his time in

the kitchen, joined us momentarily to explain the progression. The usual comfort foods had been elevated and perfected: hand-made salmon ravioli, for instance, with glazed cherry tomatoes that were like flavour bombs on the tongue; and a beef filet Stroganoff and hand-rolled spaetzle that recall times spent your grandmother's table. Staples of European soul food, perfect for travellers who are a touch homesick.

The opposite of innovative is not dull, as proven by the restaurants at Andara – it is familiar, comforting and satisfying – a rare quality in the luxury scene.

### HIGHLIGHT DISHES

- Goong Sarong prawns wrapped in deep-fried Phuket noodles (Lunch)
- Beef filet stroganoff served with hand-rolled spaetzle and baby carrots (Dinner)

### HIGHLIGHT WINES

- 2012 Riesling Undhof Kögl DAC, Salomon Undhof, Kremstal, Austria
- 2011 Norwood Shiraz Cabernet, Salomon Estate, South Australia

[andaraphuket.com](http://andaraphuket.com)



## NATURALLY DISTINCTIVE

"Biodynamic wines take into account everything," says Benjawan. "Even the moon, when the grapes are harvested." She and partner Jan Ganser run the wine importing company, fin Wines, and together have been profiled widely at specialty wine events across the country.

The various fin (Fabulous Is Needed) spinoffs include fin Naturally, fin Catering, fin Travel and fin Events, of which fin Travel, fin Event and fin Naturally together crafted the fin Deluxe Travel & Lifestyle experience. The one-stop-shop itineraries combine gourmet food paired with often organic or biodynamic wines as well as relaxing get-togethers at luxurious Phuket and other even more far-flung destinations.

Fin Naturally puts the spotlight on small, artisanal winemakers who are devoted to keeping things simple, no mean feat in the wine world. Organic wines like Rieslings from Fritz Haag, for instance, are preferred; sustainable viticulture, where the luxury of organic farming is unavailable, is also prioritised. Meanwhile, the long-emerging popularity of biodynamic wines, a more holistic approach developed by Rudolf Steiner about nine decades ago, is also given attention – thanks to Benjawan's love of great tasting wines that take into account the context and timing of harvesting and producing wines.

[fin-wine.com](http://fin-wine.com)



## STORY TIME

*Black Ginger, Indigo Pearl*



It was a lunch dominated by backstory, history, and context.

Owner Wichit Na Ranong's forefather, Phraya Rasada Nupradit was so integral to Phuket's development that he was awarded a royal title. The Phuket-based family has, as a result, grown as the province as grown, creating Pearl Village (Indigo Pearl's former incarnation) before any other international chain came by. Beaming with local pride, Wichit was our

flavour guide during a lunch at Indigo Pearl's restaurant-in-a-like, Black Ginger, accessible only by raft.

Served Thai-style, the mains included plump crabmeat curry with pungent Chaplu leaves, Phuket Gian Tod crunchy sausages, and sinful stewed pork belly (with Southern herbs), which were carefully paired nearly simultaneously with the citrusy 2013 Vom Schiefer by Ansgar Clüsserath (Mosel, Germany) – hand-harvested selectively, and it shows – a medium-bodied 2014 Tavel Rosé AOC by Château d'Aquéria, and most charmingly, a 2013 El Transistor, Rueda Blanco DO from Spain. (El Transistor takes its moniker from the transistor radio kept playing at the perimeter of the vineyard to scare unwanted animals away).

We gushed over the dishes' bold flavours and strong Southern character, as if rediscovering Thai fare; Chef Piak's dedication to re-creating beloved Southern dishes showed, backed by decades of experience.

The final touch was another twist (fin seems adept at these): the 1598 Fürst Wallerstein Edition Privé beer, which was once produced exclusively for Prince Carl-Eugen's family and dates back nearly 900 years. The amber liquid was soft and full of light fruity freshness, and a reminder: great pairings are not exclusive to wines.

### HIGHLIGHT DISHES

- Southern-style stewed Moo Hong pork belly smothered in herbs and soy sauce
- Pad Pak Mieng Goong Sieb (local Mieng leaves stir-fried with smoked crispy shrimp)

### HIGHLIGHT WINES

- 2014 Moscato d'Asti DOCG, Vietti, Piedmont, Italy
- 2013 El Transistor, Rueda Blanco DO, Telmo Rodriguez, Spain
- 2014 Travel Rosé AOC, Château d'Aquéria, Southern Rhone, France

[indigo-pearl.com](http://indigo-pearl.com)



**THIS PAGE** (FROM TOP LEFT): OWNER WICHIT NA RANONG; SOUTHERN-STYLE STEWED MOO HONG PORK WITH HERBS; SEVERAL DISHES FROM THE INDIGO PEARL MENU; **OPPOSITE PAGE** TANGY PHUKET SHRIMP RELISH SERVED WITH LOCAL VEGETABLES; BERT SALOMON JR OF SALOMON UNDHOFF





## POLAR OPPOSITES

"The first thing you need to know," joked Bert Salomon, Jr., proprietor and wine expert, representing his family's Salomon wines at a dinner, "is that Austria is not Australia."

The second thing, he explained, is how an Austrian wine producer wound up with an estate in Australia (not due to a mispronunciation, however comical that might be) – and with a partnership in New Zealand.

His family's Austrian estate, Salomon Undhof, has created distinctive white wines from along the great Danube since 1792, in the Kremstal wine region. The historic area's wine lore dates back to 15 BCE, with loessy soils that produce aromatic, dry wines; Bert's family's vineyard sites on the western side of the Kremstal had been selected by Capucine monks, who later passed them down to the Salomons. The Austrian locale is famed for its Rieslings and Grüner Veltliner (now gaining in popularity and lovingly nicknamed simply Grüner).

The Australian estate near Finnis River a little less than an hour south of Adelaide, and 10 km from the icy Southern Ocean, meanwhile, was acquired in 1995 by his parents Bert and Gertrud, who fell in love with the terroir. Bert says his family works to avoid the more "jammy" reds typical of Aussie wines, while maintaining a clean, fresh, more typically Austrian Shiraz – or, reflecting its European style, they call it Syrah.

Currently, Bert Sr. and Gertrud shuttle between the hemispheres to oversee the the harvests, though they also spend plenty of time in Thailand, one of their favourite travel destinations

[salomonwines.com](http://salomonwines.com)