

Grape Expectations

VISOOTHA, OR NIKKI, LOHITNAVY, THAILAND'S FIRST FEMALE WINEMAKER, FINDS HERSELF IN THE LUCKY POSITION OF DOING A JOB THAT SHE LOVES, REVEALS SAISA AMRANAND

AS THE YEAR glides to an end and a cool, chilly breeze engulfs the hills of Khao Yai, the grape vines at GranMonte start to bear fruit. Walking side by side on an early morning are father and daughter, Visooth and Visootha Lohitnavy, the CEO and managing director of GranMonte and the vineyard and winery operations director, respectively.

They inspect the grapes, looking for any signs of prospective diseases. "We start harvesting at the end of January and continue through the beginning of March," says the daughter, better known as Nikki. "This is our busiest time of the year. My day starts at seven in the morning and goes until 10 at night. My father and I keep a watchful eye on the vineyard, while my mother, Sakuna, looks after Vincotto restaurant, the shop and the guesthouse." The Lohitnavy family has been growing grapes since 1999, but it was only last year that they built the winery. "We used PB Valley, the neighbouring vineyard, for blending and making our wine. Now that we have our own facilities, we do everything ourselves here," Nikki informs.

As the nation's first Thai female winemaker and oenologist, she immediately became a fulltime worker at GranMonte when she graduated last year from the University of Adelaide, Australia, with a bachelor's degree in oenology when she was 21 years old. "I was so excited to be able to use my knowledge on growing grapes and techniques in harvesting and wine production at

our vineyard." Even before graduating, Nikki had been helping with the family wine business since she was just 17. Into her third year at Adelaide, she was already making wine. Moving on to the fourth year, a scholarship earned her the privilege to intern with distinguished Australian winemaker Wolf Blass. And her education has not stopped even after graduation. Nikki makes trips to Old and New World wine countries such as France and South Africa to expand her knowledge.

Surrounded by a green environment since an early age, she grew up a plant lover. "Khao Yai has always been our haven," she says. "Every Friday after school, we would drive out here to be with nature." It was amongst Khao Yai's leafy scenery that she had her first sip of wine. "I was about 12 years old. My parents were barbecuing in the yard when my father let me smell and sip his glass. They called it vino," the 22-year-old remembers.

GranMonte has come a long way since it was established 10 years ago. Last year was its best with GranMonte's wines picking up 20 local and international awards to add to the 10 it had won earlier. Wine production in Thailand, however, remains a tough business due to lack of government support. But the Lohitnavys continue to work against the odds. New projects planned are GranMonte's own bottling facility and the launch of sparkling and dessert wines. "On top of introducing new products, we also entice our customers to visit our vineyard. Our harvest festival in February every year is a lot of fun, a weekend where visitors can compete in harvesting grapes as well as wine-tasting competitions and many other activities," Nikki shares.

Also fascinated by graphic design, Nikki uses her talent in this area to design wine labels. "I collaborate with my cousin who is a graphic designer." For now, she is not contemplating any further formal wine studies. "I am very happy and settled here, making wine and doing my own research." ■

AT A GLANCE

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HOBBIES

Listening to music and travelling

FAVOURITE VACATION SPOTS

Pranburi and Pattaya

FAVOURITE SPORTS

Archery and surfing

LIKES TO COOK

Simple Thai dishes and chicken korma