

SALT of the Earth

At a youthful and exuberant 21, Nikki Lohitnavy's life may not have quite reached vintage status, but her worldly wisdom and in-depth knowledge of the wine industry puts her years ahead of her game. Hana Borrowman reports

Growing up amongst her family's vineyard, Nikki is clearly a country girl at heart, with an interest in the family business that is about as deeply rooted as it gets. Brought up in Bangkok until the age of nine, her family's love of the outdoors led them to build a new home in the more bucolic surrounds of Kao Yai, which eventually became the site of the family's GranMonte Vineyards.

Schooled in Melbourne and currently at the University of Adelaide studying for a bachelor's degree in oenology (grape growing and wine making), Nikki professes to prefer the quiet life in remote Adelaide to Bangkok's busy pace.

"I like to get out of the city," she says. "I love going wine tasting or spending the weekend in the countryside; the wine regions of South Australia are very close to Adelaide."

Enamoured though she is by her Australian home and friends who are "like family" there, Nikki still considers herself part of a Thai tradition and is in love with the soil of her homeland. So much so that she isn't afraid to get her hands dirty with it. Though incredibly knowledgeable about the multi-layered aspects of winemaking, from tastings to the intricate science behind vine growing and wine production, Nikki professes to prefer the hands-on aspect of the work.

"There is a lot of science behind it," she says, "but also laborious work like dragging hoses around. It's actually much more fun to do the jobs in the cellar than just tasting wines and seeing what needs to be done to them. I love being in the cellar."

Already showing great promise in terms of her future role as Thailand's first female winemaker, last year Nikki was awarded the Foster's Wine Estate Prize and was invited to work at the famous Wolf Blass winery for three months. She says it was an amazing opportunity, but underscoring her passion for the grass roots of the methods she laments that she "didn't get to do much cellar work, like connecting pumps and plunging the grapes." When it's suggested that she sounds as if she might prefer to tread the grapes herself, in the traditional fashion, Nikki laughs and says she probably would.

The romance in Nikki's approach to winemaking is clearly apparent. As she describes the wine process, she explains how each grape harvest tells the story of its season and describes the vines in almost human terms.

"Like us, wine has moods depending on external factors. The vines don't like stresses, for example not enough water or burning sun. They like a gentle wind and can be devastated by diseases. It's why you can never make the same wine each year, because of the weather

conditions, the water, the sun, the soil, even the winemaking process. Large commercial wineries have more chances to make each vintage of a particular range of wine the same because they have more volume of product to play with – to blend. But for us at GranMonte, you'll never find our wines the same each year because we don't have a lot of grapes, just enough to make good wines from!"

Sharing this passion for wine with her father, CEO of GranMonte Visooth Lohitnavy, Nikki says family gatherings are a great time to enjoy a glass or two of good wine. And such is the shared father-daughter passion for the subject, she says, they often bore her mother and sister to distraction!

Nikki says GranMonte wines are a perfect accompaniment to the firesome flavours of Thai cuisine. "Our Chenin Blanc wines go very well with Thai food like tom yum soup and red curry. Our whites are quite crisp and refreshing, not like the Loire style of Chenin Blanc, so the acidity cleanses out the palate when drunk with spicy food."

Growing up amongst the vineyard may make for a romantic sounding youth, but beyond the very genuine passion there's a seriously practical edge to Nikki's approach to the family business and her knowledge of the art of winemaking.

We look forward to tasting the fruits of her labour! ■



"Wine is just something I've always been passionate about. It's very exciting to see the fruit of the vines turned into product in bottles"