

wine distributor

Thailand's 'Wine Queen'

Ben combines her passion for art and for the good life and with her companies generously shares those passions with us

BY PERCY ROXAS

I first met Benjawan (Ben) Wisootsat in the early 2000s when I interviewed her for another magazine. At that time, Ben was already managing director of Optimum, a pioneering Thai event organizing company but she has yet to form her wine import firm called *fin* (fabulous is needed). Twelve years on and Ben, while still very much active with Optimum, seems to have expanded her wings further into the culinary world, not only as owner of the *fin*, which distributes exclusive boutique luxury wines in Thailand, but also a fast rising celebrity chef.

Just a week prior to our interview appointment, Ben had been cooking for the Bank of Thailand functions, at the house of some foreign ambassadors houses, and as of interview time had just completed a "Culinary Journey to Italy" wine dinner. Indeed, Ben is becoming a celebrity chef in her own right, although she limits her culinary demonstrations for very special occasions and very special guests.

Actually, Ben said she can cook anything. As an example, she shared with us what she did at a special dinner at the German ambassador's house, where she cooked a Thai dish but using ingredients they can find back home.

"My goal is for the guests to realize that if they want to cook the food I served at home, they will have confidence they can do it; that can find the ingredients where ever they are," she said. "So sometimes, instead of using papaya for a dish, I use green apple instead. I combine a bit of traditional cooking and give it a little twist but not in a way that is fusion or 'confusion.' Just something they can cook at home as well. And then I also do some interesting dishes, depending on where my guests are from."

Or, where she is at the moment.

In May, she traveled to Austria with nine pieces of luggage packed with Thai ingredients and kitchenware, in preparation for four elaborate gourmet wine dinners she presided over in Vienna and Krem.

Those who think Ben has just recently discovered a love of cooking are mistaken. "I have always loved to cook, as I love to eat. It's a passion I have since I was young," she says. "In fact, whenever I travel abroad to find wine, I try to stay in hotels near markets so I can buy ingredients and cook. Often I rent an apartment with a kitchen so I can still cook and experiment with wines."

Experimenting is the operative word for her, as she didn't take any formal cooking lessons just her own instinctive feel and taste, although she tries her best to learn as much about the traditional dish of any country she visits. Being also the owner of – half of the duo that runs – *fin* Wines, she travels a lot in search of great wines to bring to Thailand.

But those trips are also a way of spreading Thai cuisine awareness in other countries. She loves to be friends with chefs – "Doesn't mean

I want to know his or her recipe or for him or her to know mine," she points out – just a way to explore their culinary passion together,

In a way, her newfound celebrity chef status is a logical progression of her other business ventures in Thailand, starting from Optimum, which has been a leading event organizer for 23 years now; followed up by *fin* Wines, which she launched in 2003, with partner Jan Ganser. In just a little less than a decade, *fin* Wines have achieved success in its own niche, as importer and distributor of exclusive boutique luxury wines in the kingdom.

"You can say they support each other," she says of her mixed ventures. "To fulfill the needs of any event or function you need other things like catering aside from the usual services, and sometimes wines are integral part of it too."

Her team at Optimum also helps in her other activities making what seems like a daunting task for such a delicate woman easier. Imagine, managing an event organizing company, then running a wine company which requires her to travel a lot, organize wine dinners, consult with concerned experts, cook the food herself, even conduct cooking lessons and demonstrations and everything those things entail in-between.

Since 1984, Optimum have been in the events/exhibition design and management industry, where creativity and delivery are the most important factors in making a business successful, where clients always request something unusual and unique, which is not always so easy to deliver.

fin Wines, especially is a fast-growing specialty wine distribution company, although Ben says they aren't really after becoming "big," just "boutique and exclusive – making it also prestigious for our partners to carry our wines. To carry our wines bring out their reputation as well." *fin* Wines now carry 300 labels from 18 countries.

"I think we're successful in the way we expanded," she says. "*fin* is for tailor-made exclusive events, a specialty distributor of handcrafted boutique wines. We only deal with exclusive, boutique luxury wines."

Ben says the so-called boutique wines represent less than 5% of the world wine production today: "More than 95% of all wines produced in the world are commercial efforts and products of industrial farming, and *fin* does not import any of these factory-wines even, which represent about 97% of all wines sold in Thailand."

Ben is among the lucky ones who can combine her passion for art and her passion for the good life (which wine symbolizes). Since childhood she had shown interest and talent in art: drawing, painting, photography; and as she grew older had become more convinced of the importance of art in life – and especially the finer arts of living.

But we who get to meet her are also lucky because she generously shares these, her personal passions, with us ■



Benjawan Wisootsat
Managing Director, Owner
fin Wines (Thailand)

