

# In Good Company

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Wine guru and importer BENJAWAN WISOOTSAT  
shares her tips and advice on how to make the  
experience of enjoying wine even better

Photography: SURACHET H.

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THE WINE INDUSTRY in Bangkok is flourishing. Gone are the days when diners looking for a decent bottle of wine were limited to a few mediocre labels at expensive restaurants or stale hotel bars. The Thai capital now plays host to a wine pairing dinner or promotion almost every day of the week. Good wine is no longer for the enjoyment of a privileged few; today it is all about experimentation, expansion and education.

"The wine industry has become a lot more friendly to the customer," says Benjawan Wisootsat, managing director of Fabulous Is Needed (FIN), a luxury service provider specialising in events, wine, catering and travel. "There is more room for discovery, it is no longer just

about Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc; rather, people are encouraged to discover more and experiment with different grape varieties, regions and countries. It is no longer just French wines that Thais are familiar with – new countries like Austria, Hungary, Greece and even wines from Thailand are becoming popular. You could say the industry has become more approachable and people are not afraid to ask questions."

FIN is an exclusive importer and distributor of artisanal wines from small boutique wineries from around the world and Benjawan regularly curates wine pairing dinners for high-profile clients. The secret to good wine pairings, she says, is not to be too tied up by conventions.

"The general philosophy is that wine and the food has to complement each other, but I think it is also interesting to find pairings that contrast each other, to make things more interesting. For example, there is a general misconception that white wine goes well with fish and red wine goes

with red meats. But that is a very one-dimensional view; if you are fond of red wines you can still pair red wine with fish and seafood.

"I have paired langoustines with a 2007 Pinot Noir "Dechant" from Fred Lolmer from Kamptal Austria, which is light and has hints of pepper. I have also paired grilled turbot, king mushroom and goat's milk with 2007 Moric Blaufrankisch Trocken, Roalnd Vellich, Burgenland Austria, which is a lush red featuring cinnamon and licorice notes and a lot of sandalwood. You can also pair this with a 2014 Durif, a unique Thai wine from GranMonte, which is fruit-driven with hints of figs.

When finding a suitable wine, Benjawan pays close attention to all the ingredients in a dish. "It is not



just a matter of whether it is going to be fish, white meat or red meat," she says. "You have to look at all the ingredients and the way the chef prepares the dish. Some dishes are meant to have a clean approach while others are aromatic with lots of herbs and spices, so it is essential to know not only the ingredients, but also the style and what the chef wants to deliver."

According to Benjawan, a lot of people make the mistake of not using the sommelier. "Don't just tell him or her that you want the best wine on the list," she advises. "Instead, engage in a conversation, tell the sommelier what you like. Wine is very subjective, just like food. Some like their food spicy, some like acidity and some like

a little sweetness. It is the same with wine; some like fruity, some like bone dry. Give the sommelier some hints... do you want something light or powerful? Also, don't forget your dinner partner, maybe you have different tastes and instead of opening a bottle, going for wines by the glass may be a better solution."

One of the most common questions Benjawan gets asked is what wines to pair with Thai food. "Thai food is quite special and interesting because there are many flavours in one dish," she explains. "It is not just spicy, you also have salt, sweetness and acidity. Many Thai dishes contain garlic, fish sauce and some unique smell and taste of shrimp paste, kapi.

"Some people think that makes it hard to pair with wine, but it's actually very fun and leaves a lot of room for experimentation. Some of the wines that go well with Thai food are 2013 Van Riesling Schiefer, from Ansgar Clusserath, Mosel, Germany with aromatic sweet notes

that complement not only the dish but also jasmine rice; or Thai wines like 2015 Verdelho, the cellar collection from GranMonte, Khao Yai, which received many international awards, or red wines from France like 2013 Le Plan Classic Cotes du Rhone Rouge – just to name a few."

The most popular trends right now? The re-discovery of almost-extinct grape varieties, says Benjawan. "As wine is becoming more popular in Thailand, people are starting to discover more grape varieties, such as Gewurztraminer, Muscat Ottonel, Gelber Muskateller, Welschriesling, Gemischter Satz, Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch." 

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