



Direk Upasarn, Wang Thai



The Wang Thai restaurant at the V&A Waterfront will host this Thai feast.

Wining and Thai dining

A taste of Thailand and family – heritage wines marry in the heart of Cape Town

INTERVIEWS TRACY LYNN CHEMALY PHOTOGRAPHS CHRISTELLE BOTHA

DIREK UPASARN COOPERATIVE HEAD CHEF, WANG THAI GROUP

I moved to South Africa in 2004 from Thailand. I'm a self-taught chef who grew up learning about food in our small, family run restaurant.

All the chefs at Wang Thai are authentic – we all come straight from Thailand.

There is no structured meal time in Thailand – no rules for when to eat breakfast, lunch and supper. People tend to eat when they want to eat.

In Thai cuisine, it is customary to order various dishes to share. No knife is found on the table because all the meat is already cut into bite-size portions. We use a fork to push the food into the spoon from which we eat.

Chopsticks are only used for noodle dishes – this is a Chinese influence on our cuisine. Noodle dishes usually come already mixed and stir-fried with sauce.

Although fish sauce is very important in Thai cuisine, I find that in South Africa the flavour is too intense for people and they prefer using more soya sauce and salt to flavour their Thai meals.

Each region in Thailand has its own way of eating. In the south, you'll find more dishes with coconut-milk

flavours and Malay influences, while in another region you'll find yourself being offered ant eggs and farm rats.

Jasmine rice accompanies nearly all Thai dishes. It has no gluten content, so it's rather healthy. To make the perfect pot of rice, only use 100-percent jasmine grain rice. Rinse it with water twice to remove any dust. Place the rice in a pot and cover it with water that sits about one centimetre above the rice. Level the rice in the pot so that it cooks evenly. Cover it with a lid and cook it on a medium heat without adding any oil or salt. You'll know it's ready when it becomes fluffy.

Sticky rice is either eaten on its own or as a dessert with sugar, coconut milk and banana – all wrapped in a banana leaf.

I find Thai food to be very healthy and nutritious, as many dishes include all the food groups. We also use less oil than people assume.

I would describe Thai cuisine as flavoursome, using a lot of herbs and spices. People tend to have the wrong perception of Thai food being very hot and fatty, but I think they confuse it with Chinese, Japanese and Korean

food. They need to remember that each country has its own, unique cuisine. With Thai food, you can select your level of heat.

Try making this easy dipping sauce for beef or chicken: chop some dry chilli, spring onion and coriander and mix it with lemon juice and soya sauce or fish sauce. It's really tasty!

The most important ingredients for Thai cooking are soya sauce, fish sauce, chilli, lemon juice, garlic, spring onion, tomatoes and mushrooms.

If you want to make Thai food, invest in a wok, a wok ladle and a bamboo brush for scrubbing the wok clean.

In Thailand, people drink more beer and whisky with their food than wine. I think it's difficult to pair Thai food with wine because the spiciness of this cuisine is sometimes quite overpowering.

Although I miss some unique Thai fruits, such as the mangotese (it has the shape of an orange but the colour of a brinjal, with a hard skin that has to be broken in order to reveal segments that resemble a litchi's texture), I am loving South Africa's biltong!



David van Velden, Overgaauw

DAVID VAN VELDEN WINEMAKER, OVERGAAUW

I'm the fourth generation winemaker on our family farm, Overgaauw. There's a certain amount of pressure from the watchful eyes of three generations before me, but it's also an exciting challenge and a huge privilege to be a custodian of the wine. It's important for me to leave the farm in a better state for the next generation.

I am fortunate not to sit in an office all day, so it's a privilege to work in our 1909 cellar where my great grandfather first started making wine.

I tasted my first glass of wine at the age of six with my grandfather and father. They used to mix it with water for me. Still having my father's palate around is very valuable.

I also appreciate the fact that I have a very good base to work from – the cultivars that suit each site was already worked out long ago, and this is 60 to 70 percent of the job of a good winemaker.

The essence of Overgaauw is to express the authenticity of the site in the wines. I'm living my passion and expressing it in a product.

Because I live on the farm, I don't go to work – I'm surrounded by it, so there are 24 hours of things that could go wrong. Even when my wife and I take a Sunday-afternoon walk, I'm still at work when I find myself sharing news about the vineyards with her.

We live in the Shepherd's Cottage, built in the 1700s, which has housed the previous two generations of newlyweds in the family. Our Shepherd's Cottage range of wines was inspired by this special tradition.

I choose what wine to open according to what we're having for dinner, my mood and how much we want to enjoy. I like to do benchmark tasting where I try wines from other producers to see how they express their passion and terroir. When you only taste your own wine, you develop what's called a 'cellar palate'.

I love cooking. My food is called 'moerby kos' because I *moer* everything together and hope it turns out well. I also love cooking black mussels and crayfish that I dive for myself.

As South African wine producers, I believe we should focus on expressing a sense of place and cultivar identity in our wines. Many commercial wines that are dominated by chocolate, coffee and mocha do not always live up to this ideal. I like to have my coffee in the morning and chocolate after dinner, and prefer it in moderation in my wine. I do, however, have to respect producers making that style of wine – especially if it means fewer people drinking beer!

Our Sylvaner wine is a single varietal that comes from the Alsace region in France. Since we planted it in 1971, we are still the only producer of this varietal in South Africa. It is part of the Riesling family and has the same hint of Turkish Delight, gooseberry and citrus. It's a special cultivar for our family as no-one was ever allowed to bottle the wine unless my grandmother said it was good enough. Now that she's passed away, we raise our glass to the heavens and hope she likes it!

Overgaauw is one of the pioneers of merlot in this country. We were the first wine estate to introduce a single-varietal merlot to South Africa in 1982.

Our flagship wine is the Tria Corda – one of the first Bordeaux blends in South Africa. It is produced from a very particular selection every year... and bottling it is always exciting.

Pairing wine with Thai food is always a fun challenge because of the various combinations of flavours. Red wine is especially tricky with this cuisine, but our white Sylvaner will always be a good match. ■

ENJOY A DELICIOUS TOP BILLING / SABC3 THAI COOKING WORKSHOP AND FOOD-AND-WINE-PAIRING EVENT

Wang Thai at the V&A Waterfront will host an evening of delicious flavour together with Overgaauw wines. After a cooking workshop, where you'll learn to craft spinach cones, cook a Thai fish dish, make a sweet-melon pudding, and learn how to flavour geang khew-wan, you'll get to dine on your own dishes before enjoying an exotic Royal Thai feast, paired with selected Overgaauw wines. *Top Billing* readers can book for this culinary experience on a first-come first-served basis. **To book, call Nicky on 021-700-1020 or email nicky@topbilling.com. Date** Wednesday 31 March 2010, 18:00 for 18:30. **Cost** R350 per person, includes a 12-month subscription to *Top Billing* magazine.