Matching Rosé to Thai cuisine –
overcoming the hurdles of marketing wine in Thailand

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INTRODUCTION
Although neither grapes, wine or wine-drinking culture are indigenous to the country, wine marketing in Thailand is moving towards a promising future. According to the records of the Excise Department of Thailand, the quantity of taxed wines both imported and locally produced increased almost 10 fold in seven years, from around 11 million litres in 1997 to over 100 million litres in 2003. The recently negotiated trade agreement between Thailand and Australia should help boost wine sales even further.

The marketing of wine in Thailand nevertheless faces a number of hurdles, not the least of which is the fact that wine and food pairing is a relatively new concept in the Thai meal context. Despite the production of wine in Thailand, a wine-drinking culture has not developed to any appreciable extent, largely because beverage choice in this tropical country has traditionally centred on cool and especially iced drinks.

The focus of this report is to explore the appropriateness of Rosé wine, a beverage routinely served well-chilled, as an accompaniment to Thai food.

RESTAURANT BEVERAGES IN THAILAND
The drinks that dominate Thai restaurant menus are fruit juices and beers. Thailand has a plentiful supply of tropical fruits that allow the production of many juices, the popular juices being orange, lime, coconut, guava and pineapple. The price of a half-litre bottle of freshly squeezed juice is only 20 to 30 baht in the general market, but in a full-service restaurant the price starts from 30 baht per glass. This is still much cheaper than a glass of average house wine that usually costs around 120 baht.

Wine is the least likely beverage to be found on drink menus, particularly in restaurants specialising in Thai food. In these restaurants diners tend to be oriented towards traditional drinking patterns that do not include wine.

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
Various wines have been put forward as suitable companions to Thai cuisine – red wines, sparkling wines, and white varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer. When a recommendation is made, the stereotypical hot and spicy character of Thai cuisine (especially from the chilli pepper) is often cited. Thai cuisine is in fact multidimensional. The Thai meal is a combination of various kinds of dishes such as fried foods, soup, curry, salad, sautéed foods and dip; various kinds of ingredients such as pork, chicken, beef, seafood and vegetables; and the mixed flavours of sour, sweet and salt with the use of herbs and spices. If a wine is to be called for to accompany every dish, it should complement as many elements of the meal as possible.

This study focuses on the complete meal, not on any individual dish or flavour. The experimental dining experience consists of a number of dishes that are served as a single course in the customary Thai manner, with carefully selected wines to accompany them. Although the research is exploratory in nature, the aim is to ensure that it takes place in an atmosphere as close to real-life Thai restaurant dining as possible. Two wines are served with each meal with one wine common to all three meals – the ‘reference’ wine. Paired comparisons are made with the hypothesis that a medium dry Rosé (the reference wine) is a better match for the Thai meal than the other wines because of its light body, fruitiness, medium dry character, and chilled serving temperature.

The reference Rosé’s lightness in body is an important characteristic given that the common way of eating a meal in the Thai context is by a set of diverse dishes being placed on the table to be shared by all. A Rosé may be seen by some as an unequal match to the flavour-rich dishes of Thai cuisine. However, it is hypothesised that these dishes will not overshadow the wine because they will be tempered by the presence of steamed rice, the main dish of any Thai meal. In addition, the clear soup that is sometimes included in the meal usually washes down the palate before a drink is taken.

It is further hypothesised that a medium dry wine will better accompany the overall meal because a dry wine such as Sauvignon Blanc will become overly sour in the presence of sweet dishes, while a sweet wine will become overly sweet in the presence of sour dishes. Finally, it is hypothesised that the fruity character of the reference Rosé together with its chilled serving temperature will help balance the hotness of Thai food by ‘freshening’ the palate.

The reference Rosé is Beaumanoir Vin de Table de France, with an alcohol content of 11% and slight sweetness to the palate, priced at 299 baht (750ml bottle). The comparison wines are all recommended styles to accompany Thai food. The comparison red wine is 2001 Taras Bin 421, a rich, spicy Shiraz aged in oak, with an alcohol content of 13% and priced at 650 baht. The comparison white wine is 2003 Hardy’s Stamp of Australia Riesling Gewurztraminer, with an alcohol content of 12% and priced at 790 baht. The comparison Rosé is 2002 Les Vignerons de St Tropez – Cotes de Provence AOC Rosé, with an alcohol content of 13% and priced at 720 baht. This wine differs from the standard Rosé in that it is dry.

METHODOLOGY
Three dining sessions (A, B and C) were organised, each with four participants who were asked to compare the reference Rosé with either the comparison red wine, white wine or dry Rosé. The sessions were scheduled to take place in restaurants specialising in contemporary Thai cuisine, in order to create an atmosphere as close to real-life Thai dining as possible.
WINE BUSINESS

The three selected restaurants were Just One, Plern and Baan-ra-biang-nam, all located in Bangkok, attracting upper-middle to upper class clientele.

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The participants were recruited from volunteers who had responded to notices distributed at the restaurants as well as wine shops and wine clubs/societies. Although frequent wine drinkers, the chosen participants were not required to have a profound knowledge of wine because they would not be required to rate the wines nor make any judgement about wine quality. Their evaluations were restricted to the selection of the most favourable drink to accompany the meal. Group composition was arranged to provide a mix of male and female participants. Within each group, participants were known to each other before the dining session. This allowed for greater participation, as Thai people tend to be shy and quiet when they are amongst strangers.

The main dish of the meal consisted of steamed rice and at least four other dishes that were selected by the participants from the restaurant menu. The reference Rosé was served at the same time as the comparison wine, with all wine tasted blind in order to avoid the biasing influences that may have resulted from the acknowledgement of grape varieties, brands or origin. No information was provided to the participants before the session other than the instruction to select what they thought would be the better wine to match the meal, and to consider the reasons why. At the end of the session, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of basic demographic items (age, gender, education, occupation) together with several open-ended questions. Answers were translated into English where necessary.

RESULTS

The comments from the participants in the three dining sessions largely supported the four hypotheses stated earlier, that is, the reference Rosé is a better match than the comparison wines for an authentic Thai meal because of its light body, fruitiness, medium dry character and chilled serving temperature.

Most participants, but not all, agreed that the reference rosé, as well as the comparison Rosé in the third group, had good matching abilities with Thai food.

Several participants commented upon the neutral character of the reference Rosé, with one likening it to drinking water. The lack of complexity of the reference Rosé meant that the wine didn’t impact negatively upon the flavour of the food, a point mentioned by a number of participants. By the same token, although the food had the potential to overshadow the character of the Rosé, this was a much less mentioned consideration.

Participant B1: ‘[the reference Rosé] served the purpose of a meal accompanying wine better than the red one since it added a special touch to the food but not changed the flavour elements’ (male, 33 years).

Participant C1: ‘Red wines usually have strong characters that would cover up the taste of Thai food while white wines would change when matched with spicy food’ (female, 24 years).

Participant A4: ‘[the reference Rosé] works in the same way as drinking water, it complements the meal since it does not overshadow the flavourful character of the Thai food’ (female, 23 years).

When discussing the food-friendly nature of the reference Rosé, a number of participants referred to the wine’s lightness in body. With respect to sweetness, the comparison red and white wines attracted repeated comments concerning their incompatible levels of sweetness with some dishes, while the reference Rosé aroused no comment in this regard.

Participant B4: ‘The good thing about the [reference] Rosé is its lightness, which makes it easy to drink and easy to match with food... those who do not take wine seriously may enjoy it with the meal’ (female, 27 years).

Participant B1: ‘The light [reference] Rosé can be enjoyed longer since it doesn’t overwhelm the meal with its sweetness’ (male, 33 years).

Participant A3: ‘[the reference Rosé] is like the alcoholic beverages I am familiar with [beer and whisky] for it is not too sweet. The [comparison] white wine was more like a dessert to me and incompatible with Thai food’ (male, 23 years).
Participant A2: ‘The [comparison] white [wine] is sweet and spicy so it is competing with the dishes rather than complimenting them. Also it is sweet when drunk with limy dishes’ (male, 24 years).

Participant B2: ‘The red [comparison wine] is sweet and with a rich berry flavour, which does not match well with Thai food’ (male, 44 years).

The reference Rosé attracted little comment about its claimed ‘fruitiness’. On the contrary, several participants noted the wine’s lack of any distinctive characteristic or flavour. The hypothesis that Rosé’s fruitiness will help balance the hotness of Thai food by freshening the palate is not supported by this study. Although some participants remarked upon the wine’s refreshing ability when having spicy food, it was not completely clear whether this was because of the wine’s fruitiness or some other characteristic such as its serving temperature. The serving temperature was mentioned by several participants, who commented favourably upon the way the chilled Rosé reduced the spiciness of the food.

Participant A2: ‘To me, [the reference Rosé] is another category of alcoholic beverage [not wine] that is quite similar to whisky for its does not have any distinct flavour’ (male, 24 years).

Participant B: ‘[the reference Rosé] is easy to drink but does not give much impression since it has no character’ (female, 30 years).

Participant C1: ‘[at] first I thought that Rosé would be ‘strong’ like red wines. But they [the reference Rosé and the comparison Rosé] are quite refreshing like white wines’ (female, 24 years).

Participant C2: ‘Another good point of the Rosé is that it is served cold. Therefore, it helps reduce the hotness of the food and of the weather’ (male, 30 years).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study clearly shows that Rosé is a better match for authentic Thai cuisine than either red or white wines. One of the key reasons for this is that Rosé, because of its lack of complexity, impacts minimally upon the traditional flavours of Thai cuisine. Thai cuisine was created in the absence of wine, and wine is still seen as an element of Western, not Thai, dining.

From a sensory viewpoint, this study has highlighted that there are some very good reasons why Rosé should be the wine of choice in the Thai meal context. Its light-bodied nature makes Rosé easy to drink, ideal for introducing wine to new wine-drinkers. From a marketing perspective, this aspect is crucial when attempting to introduce a new beverage into a culture. The light fruity character of Rosé together with its low alcohol content at around 10-12% can, to some extent, disguise the sense of alcohol in the drink. So those who are not familiar with alcohol, especially women, will not find it hard to adopt such a drink. In short, Rosé can be the answer to most of the sensory reasons behind beverage choice for Thai diners.

It is acknowledged that this study was confined to an evaluation of the sensory appropriateness of Rosé as an accompaniment to Thai food, and that other factors also play a role in beverage choice. In Thailand two factors in particular are important in drink choice, namely social image and perceived health benefits.

Those who adopt wine drinking into their dining occasions are generally well educated or have been living abroad, especially in developed countries where wine-drinking culture is normal. Expensive drinks have become a symbol of upper class living, purchased by the elite – an indication of a sophisticated lifestyle. Red wines are usually preferred for no other reason than that they are perceived as being more expensive, and a bottle of red is normally opened at a dinner regardless of what food is served. Robert Carmack, an American food and travel writer who prefers to drink white wines with Thai food notes, ‘Just witness the ordering in any Asian restaurant amongst the Asians themselves, and you will be surprised to see that red wine wins hands down’. As long as the chosen bottle is certified or well recognised, the selection can be considered successful whether it complements the food or not.

The second factor advancing red wine drinking in Thailand concerns health. Alcoholic beverages are censured by the Buddhism belief because more than just being of no benefit to the consumer, they can generate disorder in the community as well as to one’s body. Given that Buddhism is the main religion of Thailand – over 90% of the population are followers – it’s not surprising that drinks containing alcohol are looked upon negatively. But wine is an exceptional case because of the perception amongst Thai people, as it is in the rest of the world, that wine (especially red wine) can promote healthy living through its cardio-protective qualities. This is another example of where a beverage is chosen for reasons other than its food complementing abilities.

This study shows that Rosé deserves to be better promoted in Thailand. Berli Jucker, one of the top five wine importers in Thailand, provides the local market with a portfolio of which more than 60% are red wines and just 2% Rosés. Although Rosé may not be perceived currently as conferring the same status or health benefits to the drinker as red or white wine, it is nevertheless a style that has been shown by this study to be exceptionally well suited to Thai food. Furthermore, it can be ideal for introducing wine to new wine-drinkers, especially in a country such as Thailand.

REFERENCES


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