There’s just been a major, but highly localized, earthquake in my apartment on Hackescher Markt in Berlin. It happened under the feet of Bruce Jack when he found out what the red wine in his glass actually was. The founder of Flagstone Wines in South Africa, Jack is one of the new breed of young cosmopolitan winemakers who pride themselves on knowing exactly what’s happening everywhere on Planet Wine. After tasting the wine blind, he had confidently identified it as “Syrah…very good…definitely French.” Back home he produces two pure Syrahs in contrasting styles, so he really knows what he’s talking about. And he was spot-on with the grape, even if the label gives the Australian synonym “Shiraz.” It was on the geography that he was way off. I’ve just told him that the red wine he likes so much is the 2000 Reserve from P.B. Valley Khao Yai winery in the Pak Chong district of Thailand.

I can understand that he had not thought about Thailand, though, because conventional viticultural theory says that quality wines can be produced only between thirty and fifty degrees latitude north and south of the equator. This wine comes from a region between the fourteenth and fifteenth degrees latitude north, with a tropical monsoon climate, no less. According to that theory, it should taste inferior, if not disgusting. That’s the reason my first experience of Thai wine, two years ago in Hamburg, registered 8.5 on the Richter scale. I confidently identified it as “modern French…the Loire.” When I found out that it was actually a Chenin Blanc from Château de Loei in northeast Thailand, the earth shook mightily under my feet. However, this hardly prepared me for the repeated shock waves I experienced when I undertook a ten-day wine tour of Thailand.

I was greatly relieved that my penis remained flaccid the entire night, and that this morning it was also completely limp; nothing was stirring in my shorts in spite of the stimulant I took yesterday evening. Last night’s dinner at B.J. Garden Winery in Klaeng, close to the coastal town of Rayong in southeast Thailand, ended with my hosts persuading me to drink two glasses of a red wine called Château de Klaeng Kra Chai Dum. It was made by fermenting tubers of Kaempferia parviflora, a plant that resembles ginger, except that the flesh of the tubers is the color of red beets. The fact that this plant is also frequently referred to here as “Thai black ginseng,” although it is not related to the Chinese aphrodisiac, says everything about the properties the Thais ascribe to it. It’s supposed to be the best possible thing for the male, and my hosts obviously felt I was suffering from some deficiency in the libido department. The wine turned out to be impeccably made, like all the other “bizarre” wines I tasted at B.J. Garden—a red made from mamoa, or “jungle grapes,” reminded me of good Beaujolais, and another red made from mangosteens tasted like old-fashioned Barolo—but the blindingly intense herbal-bitter flavor of Kra Chai Dum was way off the radar screen of my Western palate.

Now my guide from the Ministry of Commerce’s Department of Export Promotion, Vithaya Silatrakoon, and I are on our way to a winery that actually makes wine from Vitis vinifera grapes. The driver has to shift the minibus down into first gear to master the steep road that winds through dense jungle up toward the summit of Khao Yai, or Big Mountain, a national park. “Are there any animals here?” I naïvely ask Vithaya, observing man-large, roughly globular clumps of fresh dung on the road. “lots of elephants.” I should have recognized that dung from the work of the British artist Chris Ofili, who often props his paintings on dried and varnished elephant dung. Then a sign in English confirms Vithaya’s claim: “Beware Tiger Zone.” We are just two hours’ drive northeast of the smog-blanketed megalopolis of Bangkok.

As we descend the other side of Big Mountain, the forest rapidly thins, giving way to parched scrub and isolated tall trees. At the foot of the mountain, we turn into a rugged valley, where limestone cliffs bearing more than a passing resemblance to those of Languedoc in southern France
loom over verdant vine-clothed slopes; the scene is of absurdly unexpected familiarity. On closer inspection, though, I see something that doesn’t fit into that picture: trees clinging to the base of the cliffs with large, bright orange blossoms high in their leafless branches. Suddenly at the roadside appear two winery signs, right for Granmonte Vineyard and left for P.B. Valley Khao Yai Winery. Earlier in Bangkok I’d had a Shiraz red from Siam Winery that also came from this area, which makes at least three commercial producers. In my book that qualifies as a wine-growing region, not just an anomaly. We turn left.

In front of the modestly sized, modern winery building, which wouldn’t look out of place in South Australia, southern France, or California, the broadly smiling young winemaker and manager introduces himself as Prayut Piangbunta. He explains that the winery and its eighty hectares of vines are owned by Pia Bhirombhadi, one of the partners in the Singha Brewery. Prayut had originally planned to study brewing in Munich before taking a senior technical position at Singha, but instead, he ended up at the Weinsberg wine school close to Heilbronn in Germany. He returned to Thailand just in time for the first crush in 1998. The decision to major in Syrah/Shiraz and Chenin Blanc had been taken three years before on the basis of the results from an experimental vineyard of fifty different varieties planted here in 1992 with the assistance of the German tropical viticulture expert Wolfgang Schaefer.

When we get to the experimental vineyard, it is a bizarre sight, the tropical conditions having turned familiar grape varieties into bonsai and twisted alter egos of their normal selves. In contrast, Prayut’s best Shiraz block looks much better adjusted: the shoot positionings have clearly been done by hand; the foliage-to-fruit relation is well balanced; and although the clusters haven’t begun coloring up yet, they’re an even, moderate size. In short, Prayut is a master of what professional viticulturalists call “canopy management.” Indeed, if you beam this scene over to Languedoc, Barossa, or Napa, it wouldn’t look out of place. The only odd thing is that we’re in the northern hemisphere, and this
is late January. From a conventional viticultural point of view, this is the world stood on its head.

It’s pretty hot here, and the sunlight’s so intense that I’m glad I had slapped on plenty of factor-20 sunscreen early this morning. It’s impossible, however, to draw meaningful conclusions about weather patterns from a single day. So I ask Prayut about the climate, and he answers in a thoughtful tone, “Well, I was in Barossa Valley during their summer, and conditions were very similar to those we have here now, with daytime highs of 30 degrees Centigrade [87 degrees Fahrenheit] or slightly above and nighttime lows around 20 degrees Centigrade [68 degrees Fahrenheit].” That doesn’t explain how viticulture works in a tropical monsoon climate, though. He went on, “We prune the vines in early to mid-October, at the beginning of the dry season, and the harvest is 140 days later, in late February or early March, at the end of the dry season.” The exotic thing is not only the location but also the fact that they are ripening and picking the grapes during the winter! Just forty-eight hours after arriving in Thailand, I think I’ve cracked the mystery of monsoon climate viticulture.

In the barrel room of the winery, Prayut has prepared a tasting of the three vintages of Khao Yai Shiraz so far bottled. The 1998, without the grape variety named on the label and in a peculiar screw-capped bottle that looks as if it should contain a wine cooler, is a pleasantly fruity red wine with a hint of something green. The 1999 is more impressive, with notes of plum and fresh meat. It has more body and substance but is a bit simple and short in flavor. That’s certainly not a problem afflicting the 2000 Shiraz Reserve with its smoke and ripe plum bouquet, rich flavor, and supple tannins.

I had feared that overripeness would result in these wines being inky, heavy, or jammy, but they weren’t. In fact, there’s a mountain freshness to these wines, of the kind you find in many reds from the rugged Pic St.-Loup area of Languedoc and in some Chiantis. Each vintage clearly surpasses its predecessor, leaving no doubt about the seriousness with which quality is being pursued. That rapid progress means Prayut has rapidly mastered the peculiarities of viticulture in a climatic zone where the vine is as complete a stranger as I am in this culture.
As I take my seat on the plane to visit Château de Loei, a silver-haired Australian with a musical lilt to his voice introduces himself as Dorham Mann, a wine producer from the Swan Valley in Western Australia who consults for Château de Loei. “This is my tenth visit in three years, but I’m not the winemaker,” he explains. “The lads make the wines. They’re very conscientious and hard-working.” Given that Dorham’s father, Jack Mann, made his name with dry Chenin Blanc—he created Houghton’s White Burgundy launched with the 1957 vintage, one of the first modern-style table wines produced in Australia—it is appropriate that he should be advising another producer of wines from this unfashionable grape. Likewise, his own role in opening up the great southern region of Western Australia by planting the Forrest Hill vineyard close to Mount Barker in 1967–1968, then making the wines from it until 1975, amply qualifies him to assist another pioneer in a daring new wine-growing location with zero track record.

The short flight is followed by a two-and-one-half-hour ride in a small SUV across a rolling plateau with savannah-like vegetation; it’s late afternoon as we pass through the gateway of Château de Loei. This entrance is bizarrely adorned with a sculpted figure that looks like a love child of Bacchus and the Statue of Liberty perched atop a small concrete dome surrounded by roses. Stopping in front of a huge tin shed with a corrugated iron roof, which is clearly the winery, we are greeted by a petite young Thai woman in shades. She introduces herself as Oraem Terdpravat, the managing director of an estate that, alongside wine, produces a wide range of fruit, vegetables, nuts, essential oils extracted from flowers for the perfume industry, and—when the trees mature in thirty or more years—teak timber.

“We are at 600 to 750 meters above sea level in the Phurua Highlands,” Oraem explains as we walk into a well-kept Syrah block. “This is the dry season, and it lasts longer here than anywhere else in Thailand, more than 150 days.” The fact that the drip irrigation is running underscores the dryness. Dorham adds that this is the only place in Thailand that very occasionally experiences frost, but the vines still won’t go dormant. This means two harvests per year, the second falling during the monsoon season. The monsoon harvest wines are distilled for brandy production; only the dry-season crop is used for wine production.

Though the Syrah grapes have not quite fully colored up yet, they taste surprisingly ripe, without a hint of anything vegetal. “The yield’s a bit more than ideal, but they’re meaty,” says Dorham after tasting the fruit. “Shiraz grapes should taste meaty.” Then it’s on to the best Chenin Blanc blocks. Here the crop level is modest, the bunches are already golden in color with brown speckles, and they taste super-ripe. Dorham is whooping with joy, and Oraem looks quietly satisfied: “They’re almost ready to pick! The most the wine will need is a small tartaric acid adjustment.” Tartaric acid is the only additive used here, a reflection of Thai purism no less than Dorham’s traditionalism.

I am proudly shown a set of wine-making equipment both imported and domestic, off-the-shelf and improvised: a locally constructed sorting table, Bucher pneumatic presses, and rows of European stainless-steel tanks with locally made insulation jackets wrapped around them. I taste the wines with Dorham and “the lads,” Nattawat and Sirkopanun, who are both in their twenties, in the winery manager’s office. A small statue of the cross-legged meditating Buddha above the door reminds me that none of this has anything to do with Christ’s blood. Theoretically, Buddhism rejects all forms of intoxication, and if some Thais have a fundamental problem with wine, it is this belief, rather than xenophobia about westernization.

Both the tank-vinified regular 2003 Syrah and the barrel sample of Syrah Reserve of the same vintage are brimming with blackberry aromas and a whiff of smoked bacon and have a wonderful freshness. The Reserve is denser and more elegant. Equally impressive is the 2003 Extra-Dry Chenin Blanc, which has effusive apple and honeysuckle aromas, a juiciness rare for young wines of this grape, and a drink-me crispness. It’s hard to believe that it is a coincidence that the same grape varieties succeed here as at Khao Yai; rather, it seems to suggest a pattern. This, perhaps, is the first step toward a regional wine identity like those taken for granted by long-established wine-growing regions.

Dinner is at the estate’s own resort, tucked in a steep-sided valley with the only tropical vegetation I’ve seen in this part of the country. Nattawat and Sirkopanun join Oraem, Dorham, and me at the table in a cavernous dining room. Having come here with the prejudice that spicy foods demand white wines with a touch of sweetness, I’m surprised just how well the Château de Loei wines go with the local cooking. The dry climate here dictates sticky rice: there’s no coconut milk so far from the coast, and meat is scarce due to the region’s history of poverty that is just now beginning to change. Only the wonderfully aromatic, sweet Loei-grown pineapple defeats the Chenins and Syrahs. Dorham is in full flight, recounting one anecdote after another. Then he stops dead midsentence and whispers to me, “Did you see that? The lads poured themselves some more wine. They’re actually drinking! That’s never happened before.” Buddhist theology says that for every effect there is a cause. I guess that my presence is the cause of this effect.
All around me are mango and banana trees laden with ripening fruits. At the side of the road stand small wood and bamboo houses out of whose chimneys smoke from cooking fires rises vertically. A few hundred meters away, a row of tall coconut palms is reduced to a silhouette by the haze and forms the effective horizon, the result of humidity of more than 90 percent at 35 degrees Centigrade (95 degrees Fahrenheit) in an utterly flat landscape. All that’s needed to transform this landscape into a missing scene from *Apocalypse Now* is the “whu-whu-whu” sound of approaching ground-attack helicopters. Absolutely nothing about this place makes me think of wine, but I am in the Chao Phraya Delta, just sixty kilometers southwest of Bangkok, to inspect the floating vineyards.

Suddenly, there they are, right in front of us: vines trained on pergolas on long, narrow islands, each supporting three rows, surrounded by murky brown gray water. The water level is a scant half meter below the base of their trunks, so that it really does look as if the strips of earth in which they root are floating. The overall effect is of a bizarre hybrid of paddy field and conventional vineyard. Just about any wine producer from any established wine-growing region, including those who regularly irrigate their vines, would say that this is a recipe for vinous disaster. Never mind about how you get vines in such direct contact with so much water to give grapes suitable for wine making; how do you stop rot from destroying the vines along with their fruit?

“In this area there are four thousand hectares of vineyards of this kind, the great majority of them producing table grapes,” Kim Wachtveitl, the short, wiry business development director of Siam Winery, tells me. He jumps from the road onto one of the islands with practiced ease and gestures that I should follow him. From the vines hang bunches of bright green yellow grapes completely free of rot. “This is the Malaga Blanc grape, which was brought to Thailand from Palette in Provence two centuries ago,” Wachtveitl continues. “The French also brought us the red grape we call Pok Dum.” Vines were one of the presents brought by the first French emissaries to Siam in 1685. (Only since 1949 has the country been called Thailand.) I try the grapes, and though they taste a bit neutral (it’s still a few weeks to harvest), they are neither sour nor bizarre in flavor.

Just half an hour before at the nearby Siam Winery, in a gleaming and cavernous tasting room with the anonymous ambiance of an executive-jet showroom, I had tasted the wines Southeast Asia’s largest winery produces from these grape varieties I’d never heard of before. Siam Winery was founded in 1982 by Khun Chalerm Yoovidhya, the inventor of Red Bull, to produce the Spy brand of wine cooler. The dry white Monsoon Valley from Malaga Blanc grapes is a fresh, fruit-driven wine, which, under other circumstances, I could easily have mistaken for a modern-style light, dry white from the Mediterranean basin. The distinctive herbal aroma and discreetly dry finish of the red Monsoon Valley made it more interesting—not bad for a table grape! “These are the hallmarks of Pok Dum,” Kim told me confidently. “We want to accentuate them and are now working out how to do that.”

The young and ambitious new team Kim has assembled to lift Siam Winery’s products to a new level of quality have all come out to the floating vineyards with us, and very quickly a discussion of the problems peculiar to this situation develops. “The farmers won’t reduce the yields.” “They spray too much and pick too early in order not to risk losing quantity.” “They need to turn the irrigation off earlier to improve the quality.” Such is the chorus of complaints about the grape growers from whom Siam purchases. This vineyard situation is about as strange as it gets, but I’ve heard these complaints from winemakers around the world who work with the grapes they must buy. Suddenly, it all seems very familiar.

If wine making is possible in a river delta between the thirteenth and fourteenth degrees north latitude with conditions like these, then the billion-dollar question is, where would it actually be impossible? Too much water is clearly not an insurmountable problem, whereas too little can be overcome by irrigation as long as there’s a source for the water in the pipes. I’ve already learned from South Australia that if it’s too hot, the vines simply shut down until it cools off, in which case it has to cool off at some time so they can complete photosynthesis. Tropical viticulture has just entered a new phase in which the limits of the possible for quality wine production are being seriously explored. Welcome to the earthquake zone of Planet Wine!