

HEADLINE: Thailand's unofficial culinary ambassador

SUBHEADLINE: Son of a judge and groomed for a career in law, Karl Steppe{AAC}, polyglot and one-time antique dealer, was born in Belgium in 1944. He was in his late 30s when his lifelong passions for Asia, travelling and gastronomy crystallised in L'Ele{AAC}phant Bleu (Blue Elephant), the Thai restaurant he opened in Brussels in 1980 with his Thai wife, Nooror Somany, a native of Chachaengsao. It was to be the start of a remarkable success story. Today the Blue Elephant Group operates outlets in Brussels, London, Copenhagen, Paris, Dubai, New Delhi, Beirut, Lyons and Malta serving royal Thai cuisine plus two restaurants, La Porte des Indes in London and Brussels, dishing up Indian cuisine ``with a difference''. The group employs over 500 people and has annual gross takings in excess of 10 million (618 million baht). The group has bagged numerous awards and distinctions including the GaultMillau Golden Key in 1997 for its Paris branch and the `Good Curry Guide' Best Indian Restaurant and Best Restaurant in Great Britain awards. In 1998, Karl Steppe{AAC} was named Man of the Year at an event organised by Horeca, an alliance of hotels and restaurants, in Belgium. Last year he received the Prime Minister's Award from the Thai government. The group will be opening a Thai cooking school and restaurant in Bangkok in July.

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

`My life is divided between Brussels, time spent outside Brussels and my private life, which I must say occupies only a very small section of the whole.

When I'm in Brussels I spend most of the time at the Blue Elephant. From there, I coordinate various decisions and projects, and look into the conceptual design of new restaurants since our architect is based there.

Usually, I'm away from Brussels three to four days a week. I may be in Bahrain, Dubai, London, Abu Dhabi or Bangkok. When I'm travelling, I try and start off the day with some swimming if that proves possible. I'm not a very

early riser. Anyway, the restaurant business as a whole is more or less a night job, and one regularly goes to bed around 2 o'clock in the morning _ if not later. My role is to intervene in cases where tensions arise between management and staff in the group's various units, and, by extension, between staff and customers. The latter are usually able to detect the electricity in the atmosphere and that, of course, can be detrimental to us. Customers are at the basis of our work, our foundation; without them, we are nothing.

We try and preserve a very family-type atmosphere in our group. As much as possible, I play down problems, bringing matters back to the right proportion. Although one may face hurdles sometimes, it doesn't mean that the world will come to an end. As for a recipe to solve a crisis ... I'd say that in cases of conflict, I think it is especially important to let people express themselves and say whatever they have on their minds. And the probability that they will agree with you is proportionate to the confidence they have in you. Dealing with a crisis requires a special cocktail: A good touch of sincerity, a pinch of Thai tolerance and a great amount of patience to keep the whole issue cool. Which explains why I may sometimes give vent to my anger when I'm with my family!

On the other hand, I also look closely into the quality-control aspects of our business ... making sure that standards of quality are respected everywhere.

Travelling may also be required due to expansion plans or the opening of new Blue Elephant restaurants in other parts of the world. In this regard, in 2002, we are planning to open new units in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and Kuwait. For each of these units, we entered negotiations with very highly placed people. Therefore I was particularly keen to conduct the discussions personally. I may also travel in order to accompany our architect and define a design for a new restaurant. In Bahrain, for instance, we are constructing a Thai village, partly above the sea, partly on land, inspired by a village on stilts in Phuket.

Nevertheless, Thailand is still our umbilical chord, so to speak, and we're not in the least ready to cut it. Our business relies on four mainstays, of

which two are in Thailand and the others are in Brussels and London.
From
Thailand, we import all the objects to decorate our restaurants, as
well as
purchasing and organising weekly shipments of food products and
flowers from
our office in the vicinity of Don Muang airport.

We might also be building special structures in Thailand for
reassembly in
the country of destination. The more things develop _ in particular
because
of the Blue Elephant school and small restaurant which we're planning
to
open in Bangkok in July _ the more time I'll be spending in Thailand.
We
often recruit staff in Thailand for units located in various parts of
the
world and I try to have a hand in that when it comes to finding
people for
managerial positions.

Whenever I'm in Thailand, I usually have appointments with the TAT
[Tourism
Authority of Thailand] or the Department of Export Promotion. There
are
several projects we're working on there, from the launch of a 'Blue
Elephant
Gold' line _ consisting of basic ingredients necessary for Thai
cooking such
as curry paste, coconut milk, rice, etc _ to the expansion of our
'Fresh and
Thai' line of products and the development of a Thai fast-food
concept.

Our 250-square-metre apartment on the Chao Phraya River is quite a
treat. It
has a splendid view of Wat Arun. If I could add to that a villa with
a
swimming pool on Koh Samui, it would be all I could wish for. If, at
some
time in the future, I want to step back from the business then I will
surely
spend more time in Thailand. But that will certainly not happen in
the very
near future. At the moment, I thoroughly enjoy whatever I am doing.

There have been several things in my life which have brought me luck
and
were a part of my success. My first occupation _ as an antique dealer
_ for
sure. My first _ and only! _ wedding to Nooror. My two children. My
discovering gastronomy and the restaurant business. Although she was
very
shy at the start and didn't even know how to boil an egg, my wife,
Nooror,
showed a strong interest in and a real talent for gastronomy. For a
start,
she took a few French-cooking classes with a snobbish but stylish
teacher

because I wanted her to get to know people and communicate [the cooking sessions concluded with the students sitting down to a meal together].
Gastronomy was a revelation to her.

That is how, in the early '80s, my wife, two Thai associates based in Belgium _ Somchai Wayno and Somboon Insusri _ and myself, started up the first Blue Elephant in Brussels. At that time, Thai people were still mostly unaware of the potential and greatness of their cuisine. It was usually put in the same category as low-cost fast and cheap food. But we brought in a very beautiful image of Thailand, combining the food with a touch of class and luxury _ flowers, greenery, silk, dishes and crockery [of unique design], bronze, nickel.

I think we have had a role in creating an image of top quality for Thai food and should Thailand be indebted to us, perhaps it would be precisely on this point. My wish is to bring Thai cuisine up to the level of other popular cuisines and spread its popularity far and wide."