



# BENJI AND THE BEST

What inspired two young **Thai professionals** give up their corporate careers for an island lifestyle?

"I love running with my dog, and cycling," says Best (Benjaphon lamvacharin), a young Thai entrepreneur who moved to Samui just over a year ago. His wife Benji (Monticha) prefers yoga. "But we don't exercise as much as we used to in Bangkok," they both admit. "We're too busy."

Best and Benji left their corporate careers to open Lamphu Thai Botanicals, a health food store and cafe in Lamai. From buying to bottle-washing, banking to doing the books - founding a new business is enormously time-consuming, no matter where one does it. "Yes, it seems that we have less time, but what we do makes us happy," says Benji. "But now I feel in control of my destiny," says Best.



Benji and Best met in the marketing department of a big corporation in Bangkok. He was working on marketing management and strategy, she on the creative side. Benji studied at Poh Chang, one of the oldest design schools in Bangkok and has a degree in industrial design from the King Mongkut Institute of Technology. She also founded and branded her own successful spa business in central Bangkok. Best graduated with first class honours in economics, from the prestigious Thammasat University.

"We were working long days, and at the end of it all I felt we had only money to show - no time for our health," says Best. "I ate badly and I felt under huge pressure to prove myself worthy. So while I was only in that situation for less than three years, I could see the stress building. Even on weekends I still felt compelled to work."

Long talks after work led them to discover that they shared the dream of an alternate lifestyle. "We didn't want to wait until we were too old to live our lives," says Benji. Best explains: "When I was a child my



mother worked so hard to make a good life for me that she sometimes even slept at the office. One day I asked her 'Don't you love your child? Why don't you spend more time with me?' From that day she changed her life. She quit her job, we began eating more healthily at home, and the family spent quality time together. Benji and I want start off in that direction."

When they fell in love they decided that they would make their dream real. Benji grew up Catholic in Sakon Nakhon. "My great-grandparents were already Catholic over 100 years ago," she says. Best's upbringing is Buddhist. "It's no problem - we had two weddings and attend each other's temples," they say cheerfully.

They got married (twice) on 5.5.55 which is the 5th of May in the Buddhist year 2355 (equivalent to 2012 in the Gregorian calendar). "In Thai we pronounce that 'ha ha ha ha'. So that sealed our pact to bring more joy into our lives, especially if we want to start a family in the future," says Benji.

"Our dream was to create a one-stop shop for healthy living that is reasonably priced, and therefore accessible to local people who may not yet know what a healthy alternative is, and what real organic means."



There are lots of shades of green, Best readily admits and Lamphu does not only offer organic goods. "I can help people who have various standards or who are price sensitive to make the best decision. Some organic products are still overpriced because they are rare. There are many fashion trends which are often a kind of 'green-washing' and businesses take advantage of ignorance. We hope we can help to be a source of knowledge and share our passion for a healthy lifestyle."

The cafe, right opposite Tesco Lotus Lamai, is open from 10 am to 9 pm daily except Sundays, serving juices, cakes, teas, salads and snacks. The shop also stocks a range of shampoos, toothpastes, face and body products from a variety of sources, including the house brand. There are Thai herbal teas, essential oils, and handmade artefacts. There's even a rack with hilltribe clothes from Mae Jam, with the proceeds going directly to the village. "My brother is a priest and worked up there," explains Benji.

In addition there are ingredients for healthy eating such as MSG-free soya sauces, wild honey and everything from wheatgrass- growing kits to superfoods such as flax seeds, quinoa or organic cacao. It's an impressive array of well-chosen products.

"My friends think I'm moving too fast," says Best. "They think I've been too quick to get married, too quick to quit the city, too quick to open our own business." But the couple's families have been supportive. As luck would have it, Best's family is one of the Samui clans descended from his Hainanese grandfather, and he'd visited his island cousins every New Year.





"It's true at first we thought we could live anywhere as long as it wasn't Bangkok. But Samui seemed the least stressful option: my father was born here, and this shop was built by my grandfather," he says pointing to the carefully oiled beams overhead. "They say he was the finest carpenter on Samui in his day."

Best and Benji have augmented the old wooden shop by adding a modern glass frontage, and converting the back garden into a delightful outside courtyard. The cafe and shop are cool, comfortable and stylish, but also welcoming. "My mother taught me that we have to balance our profits with the local economy and always give more than what we get," says Best.

It's more common to meet newly arrived Westerners who are disenchanted with the consumerist West than young Thai people leaving the apparent abundance and bright lights of the city. Many who do move here complain of

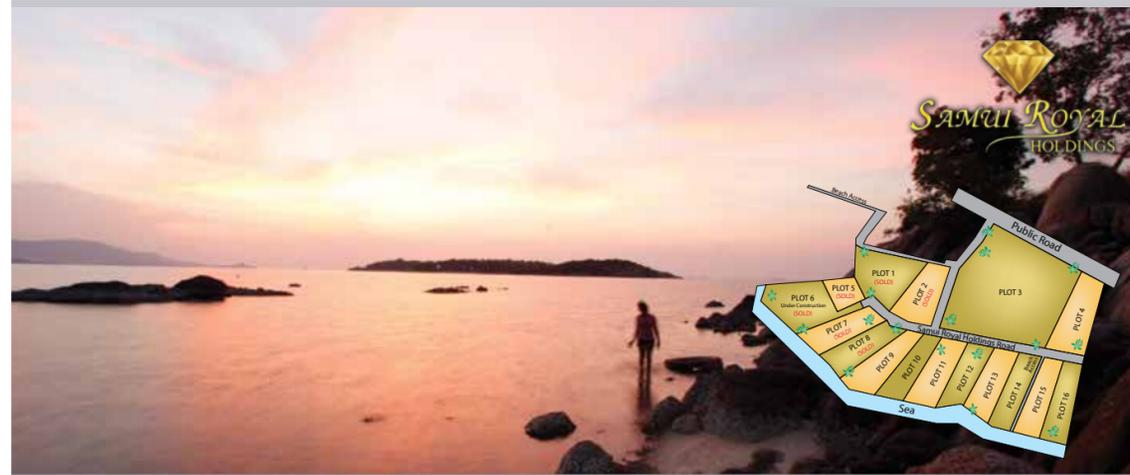
the (comparative) lack of variety when it comes to eating Thai food on Samui. As luck would have it, Best and Benji are health-conscious and often concerned with the quality of the ingredients when eating out. "My favourite place to eat is right here", says Best. Isn't that a lot of work, I ask? "It doesn't feel like work when you love what you do," says Benji, bringing out steaming banana cacao muffins from the oven.

That's having your cake and eating it too, I mumble with my mouth full of goodness.

**Annie Lee**

For more information, telephone 0 7723 1079.  
www.lamphuthai-botanicals.com

ENJOY THE VIEW • FEEL THE QUALITY • LIVE THE LIFESTYLE



EXCLUSIVE BEACHFRONT AND SEA VIEW LAND, TOTALLY 16 PLOTS, 10 PLOTS REMAINING FOR SALE



19 SEA VIEW PLOTS FOR SALE (14 SOLD), 5 BEDROOM VILLA & SEPARATE GUEST VILLA FOR RENT OR SALE



LUXURIOUS 6 BEDROOM MAIN VILLA WITH 360° SEAVIEWS AND SEPARATE GUEST VILLA FOR RENT OR SALE & 1 PLOT FOR SALE



14 SEA VIEW HILL SIDE PLOTS FOR SALE, STARTING FROM 1.6 MILLION BAHT

SAMUI

ULTIMATE

SAMUI

Plai Laem Soi 8,  
Choeng Mon,  
Samui, Thailand

Contact :  
Mr. Yo  
081 537 3088

sales@naraikiri.com  
yochaweng@hotmail.com  
www.naraikiri.com  
www.samui-ultimate-samui.com

SAMUI ROYAL HOLDINGS

SKYLINE RESIDENCES  
HILLSIDE PROJECT

NARAI KIRI RESIDENCES

KOH SAMUI