

Ryan's Gold

Alumnus discovers richness of Thai culture

by

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DAVID WATSON

Joe Ryan's customers at the Bangkok Orchid occasionally get a dose of his Irish humor to go with the Thai cuisine.

While enjoying the wealth of flavors of Thai cooking, served by Thai people, listening to Thai music, surrounded by Thai art, one can't help but notice the burly, long-haired man in a T-shirt who darts from table to table greeting people.

His name is Joe Ryan and he looks like a large leprechaun whose smiling Irish eyes say that he has found his pot of gold.

Ryan, together with his wife Noy, owns and operates the Bangkok Orchid on Milwaukee's east side, rated one of the best Thai restaurants in the country. Ryan has traveled far—through 15 countries—to reach the end of this rainbow, but after talking with him, one soon senses that, for Ryan, there are more rainbows on the horizon.

Originally from West Allis, Wis., Ryan returned to the states after spending nine years in the Orient. "That's what I had to do before I went back to college," he says. "When I left I thought I was going to find myself and I really knew myself all along. There was a bond of unity among my seven brothers and sisters which helped in formulating who I am. The Orient, particularly Thailand, validated my values. It has a strong family-oriented culture."

Those strong family ties are what eventually brought Ryan, his Thai wife, and son Mike back to Wisconsin. "I wanted them to

meet my family and friends," he says.

Once he came back, Ryan realized that a great deal of the Thai culture had rubbed off on him. "The one thing that mesmerized me about the country is the tremendously positive attitude about life prevalent everywhere. Everyone you look at smiles at you, and I was smiling the whole time I was there. I've always had somewhat of a positive attitude but they really brought it out in me."

That attitude is what landed him a position in the field engineering division of Allis-Chalmers upon his return. "I didn't have any education in engineering other than understanding the principals of electricity and telephones which I had learned in the service," says Ryan. "They felt they could train me to represent the company in the field because of my positive attitude."

"It didn't take me too many jobs to realize I didn't know enough about engineering to be out there. I worked with a young kid named Pat Link who had graduated from MSOE and I was impressed with his knowledge of engineering. He took me by the hand and dragged me down to MSOE one day."

Ryan quickly became convinced MSOE was the route for him. "I wanted the basics and some strong business courses; to know about statistics and accounting and

employee relations," he says. "I knew where I was headed was business and if I wanted to be an effective business manager I also needed to know how to use computers."

Ryan is quick to credit others for his success, particularly those who helped him during his years at MSOE: Professor Ray Palmer who convinced him "to get the fear of computers out of (his) heart"; former MSOE Vice President Joe DeCarlo, who hired him to do a survey for the college, and Joe Meloy, director of counseling services, who helped him lay it out; John Carroll, retired senior vice president of finance and treasurer, who told him to "do something with (his) life instead of staying at MSOE and playing games" (he was DJ "Wolfman" on WMSE radio); and Richard Hamm, director of administrative information processing, who helped him figure out what this was going to take. He graduated in 1983 with a two-year computer degree and a bachelor's degree in industrial management.

It was through MSOE's placement department that Ryan landed a job with a Canadian company manufacturing heavy equipment which required Ryan to move his family to South Dakota. Within two years, he had set up distributorships and maintained a marketing program which brought his territory, the western part of the United States, to number one in the country.

When the company started looking for opportunities overseas, it almost sent Ryan back to Thailand. However, after conducting a nine-country feasibility study, Ryan steered the company away from a project which would have eventually collapsed.

"Although I could have lived in Thailand for three years before they discovered this, I couldn't have lived with myself," he says. "I don't do business that way. That's why you do market research. That's why you have statistics. That's why you analyze the facts—so people don't have to

lose money."

Ryan had talked the company into disbanding the project and himself out of a job. He came back to Milwaukee and eventually took early retirement when the company was sold.



KENT PETERSON

A sartorial Ryan joined fellow WMSE disc jockey Randy Conway for the station's dedication during his "Wolfman Joe" days in 1981.

company was sold.

Ryan again turned to MSOE connections. He started Trader's Connection (now called Nexus International), an international trading company, with Opas Suwanbol, an MSOE industrial management graduate from Thailand.

At the same time, Mary Schmidt, MSOE library director, helped him use the computer network to research Thai restaurants in the Los Angeles area. He and his wife opened the Bangkok Orchid in 1988. "The brains behind it was Noy," Ryan says. "It was her dream and her concept. I'm just contributing some of my talents to her success."

He's also paying back some debts. "MSOE alumni encouraged me to go to the college, and I hope to fill those shoes now by encouraging and helping young people to go to MSOE," says Ryan. In addition, he hires MSOE students to work in the restaurant.

Ryan is currently completing a study to determine the feasibility of franchising. "I always have an alternative plan, though," he says. "Regardless of what happens, in five years I see myself committed to Thailand and Wisconsin in some fashion."

This is manifested through his import-export business—with a uniquely Ryan twist. He plans to introduce a Thai product to the U.S. market in such a format that would allow U.S. handicapped or underprivileged people with a low range of skills to package the product and label it "assembled in the United States."

"In my own mind, what I'm doing is engineering work," says Ryan. "There is a great sense of balance that has to take place in international trade. I'm not interested in marketing Thai products at the American people's expense. If I can help the Thai economy while helping the American economy, that's what I'll do."

At this moment, Ryan is in Thailand overseeing the final stages of another project: a bed and breakfast on his wife's family's 80-acre farm 100 miles northeast of Bangkok.

"The bed and breakfast is a way in which my wife and I will share the culture of Thailand with others. The Americans we take over there will be sharing themselves as well. They will see a part of Thailand most people have never seen and the Thai people will find out about Americans and say these people are really great, really neat people."

Some Thai people already know one American fitting that description. He's the one with the big smile. □