



He Said, She Said





Silk Unlimited

Interview by Peter Myers
Photography by Fee Lee

Michael Vaipot Petpoon is the Managing Director of Almeta, a unique Thai silk production and weaving company who are quietly revolutionising the way people can buy and use silk.

It all started during a lunchtime conversation among friends over a decade ago. The subject was the bastardisation of Thai silk, and how it was so difficult to find top quality Thai silk nowadays. The famous two-way sheen was fast becoming a lost art, and designers were despairing that they could only find olde-worlde intricate styles, or western-style copies. The conversation was not forgotten, and soon after Michael and a couple of good friends decided, as a hobby at first, to purchase a couple of looms and experiment with some raw yarn.

Soon they were producing 60 colours and the response to the product was positive. The hobby quickly turned into a business, with a small factory operating in northeastern Thailand's Korat region, and the small group of friends became partners in *Almeta*. Korat was an apt location for the factory, being both Michael's home province and the cradle of Thai silk, where most families keep a loom under their stilted houses - the region therefore boasts the world's best talent pool of silk weavers.

Although proud of his Thai heritage, French- and English-fluent Michael sports a global outlook, having spent 12 years living, studying and working in Lausanne, Switzerland. Several of his friends around the world have become *Almeta* agents, and in 2001 the company opened a small 'by appointment only' showroom in a charming, grassy compound off Bangkok's Sukhumvit Soi 23, a popular locale for interior decoration stores. The showroom quickly became a retail venue which has just been extended; and by the time you read this, the well-appointed studio-boutique will be fully operational.

Michael, who is also a racehorse breeder during the 50 percent of his time he spends in Korat, explains: "We wondered how we could offer much more flexibility and variety than was available in the market at the time. After some time, we realised that we could combine 10 different warp colours [the vertical thread of weave] with a hundred weft colours [horizontal thread of the weave] and produce 1,000 colours - and since we can use any of these colours with 12 different silk thicknesses and with four different yarn types, that's over 50,000 varieties altogether!"

Previous page: Michael enveloped by a tiny fraction of the silk shades Almeta have on offer

This page: Michael overseeing the finishing touches to the renovations at his boutique store





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Almeta has slowly built up a fan base in Bangkok, becoming one of the city's best-kept retail secrets, though Thai Government Department of Export Promotion missions in embassies around the world spread the word to excited decorators and designers further afield. Global gift and fashion shows also enable the company to show off their unique wares.

Glowing mentions in popular guide books and recommendations from Bangkok hotel staff have spurred increasing numbers of tourists to find their way to Almeta; thrilled to find that their orders (there is no minimum - you can even order just one metre!) will be ready in the space of two days, including the transportation time from the factory. Some people bring swatches of the colour they are desperate to replicate and the factory will continue to send samples down until clients are satisfied with the shade. Those who want to grab something straight away can purchase popular silk shades and styles from the showroom, from straight/thin silk ideal for lightweight frocks, to heavy/coarse material better suited to upholstery purposes.

A plethora of additional products seductively compete for customers' attention, from wine bottle holders, to scarves, from pillow-cases to silk curtains. A recent trend in silk wallpaper is also apparent. I did wonder at the silk-lined, possum-fur covered sleeping bags; an innovation from one of Michael's New Zealand-based partners where possums are serious pests.

There's just so much choice at Almeta, that Michael admits his sales assistants have to be careful not to bewilder clients with the range and multiple application possibilities on offer: "Unless you happen to be an interior decorator or fashion designer, it can be quite confusing for the uninitiated. Fortunately, the people who come here and find us tend to know what we are all about, and are excited to see the place

for themselves. One thing we really enjoy explaining is that, even though most people think silk cannot be machine washed without gradually losing its sheen and softness, we have made it possible through chemical treatments, and all our 1,000 colours are now available in what we refer to as 'lazy' washable silk, ideal for clothes or bedding."

Rising popularity means expansion, and construction of a new 100-loom factory begins in early 2005 up in Korat. Although not involved in the first stage of the silk process - raising the silkworms - the factory buys raw yarn (which looks a bit like old, grey hair), and de-gums it, bleaches it, dyes it, works it into the warp and weft spools, and prepares 150-metre long warps ready to weave together. The silk is then treated depending on taste: either plain, made machine-washable or pleated, or backed as wallpaper.

Some people will inevitably wonder why Almeta products aren't readily available around Bangkok and the region in department store concessions, like the rival Jim Thompson brand. Michael grins: "We started out in a very boutique way, and we want to stay that way. We've found that people like to discover us, and we love to be discovered. Our idea of expansion is really not to be in every shop window around town." 🍷

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Above: The model for the new Almeta factory set to begin construction in Thailand's northeastern province of Korat

Right: There's over 50,000 different silk shades and varieties to choose from, but a selection of favourites are on display at Almeta's boutique store

