

Mama Noi – Her Story



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Mama Noi

Directly opposite the Landmark Hotel is a narrow alley that you have probably walked past. Many times if you've stayed in the Nana area, hundreds of times if that part of town is your *playground*. At the end of the alley is the Check Inn 99, not a hotel as its name suggests but a bar and restaurant with a house band, a proper dance floor, tables and wicker chairs with space around them and hostesses. The bar, and the whole package is very much a throwback to the Bangkok of old.

The venue's staff is one big family, with the chef having clocked up 47 years on the property and the "new" waiter still serving his apprenticeship with *just* 27 years of service. But to many the face of the venue and the star of the show is Mama Noi, the venue's Mamasan who has been working in Bangkok's nightlife since before I was born.

I met with Mama Noi as she is known and spent an enjoyable couple of hours hearing her story and looking through her photo albums the old-fashioned way, browsing photos that had become a deep shade of sepia without a hint of Photoshop and not an iPad to be seen. Mama Noi took her time warming to the whipper snapper with lots of questions who was furiously making notes, so I have filled in a few gaps with anecdotes from the Mama Noi story.



It's dreadfully rude for a man to ask a female her age so please forgive me for this...but may I ask yours?

I am 72 years old.

Wow! How long have you been working here?

28 years in the Check Inn. I work here 6 days a week.

And before you worked here, where did you work?

Club 99 in Silom. I was the Mamasan there as well.

And before that?

Starlight Club in New Road.

When was that?

That was around 1968.

Wow, that's before I was born! Was that your first job in Bangkok?

No. I first worked in the predecessor of Check Inn 99 when it was called Copa Cabana. And then I went to the Starlight Club after that. The Starlight Club was the number one nightclub in Bangkok. So many people went there - Thai people, Americans, influential people - everyone who was anyone went there!

When did that club close? How long did it run for?

Oh, that's a really long time ago, I cannot remember.

What sort of bar was it?

It was a nightclub, and we had drinks, but at that time there was no live music. It was the time of the Vietnam War and things were very different back then.



So this bar has been here a long time?

Yes, a very long time. It hasn't changed a lot either. The entranceway was the same in the past but the inside was a little different. Here inside the bar, there was another bar serving area opposite that bar area you can see over there *<she points across to the bar and its counter top>*, but there was no mezzanine level in the past.

And you are the Mamasan here, right?

Yes, I am.

It's not that long ago that Mama Noi was the life and soul of the party and one long-time customer describes how she would out dance the young ones. One night, some 8 or 10 years back, she had had a few too many and fell over while dancing, breaking her ankle. Surgery was required and a pin was inserted.



She bounced back but just as sports stars may recover from serious injuries, seldom do they really get back to where they were at - and so it was with Mama Noi. Today the dancing is somewhat subdued, but if you're there at the right time, and paying attention, you might just see her dance, and she has been known to flash some flesh too.

So back then were most of the customers American military taking R+R breaks from the Vietnam War?

Yes, most were.

This place almost closed a couple of years ago? What happened?

There used to be a lot of shareholders and they were losing money and they didn't want to continue. They were foreigners and there were so many shareholders.

Around this time last year the current owners took over. They did not want this piece of Bangkok history to be lost so they bought it. The farang man didn't want to see it disappear and he and his Thai wife now run it.

Old customers come inside when they pass by and some are surprised to see that we're still in business. Everything is better now. They have made some alterations but retained the original flavour but everything is cleaner, and looks nicer. There was a lot of old stuff here and the place still has an old feel, but everything is much better. The new boss is always so concerned about it being clean.

The original 24 shareholders, mainly Danish businessmen, operated Checkinn as their own club, remaining low profile, and with a hole in the wall almost non-descript entrance it was a true word of mouth bar. The days Mama Noi refers to were fun times, according to Bangkok old hands, where many raucous parties were held and much revelry took place.

One of the many Danish owners was a young 17-year old man contracting to the US Military running ammunition barges up the Mekong during the Vietnam war. It was a job considered too dangerous for US personnel. Having lost many contractor friends due to hostile action, he then became an underwater UXB diver clearing booby traps and unexploded or discarded ordinance. He arrived in Bangkok a very wealthy teenager and set up the first live sex show in Patpong. He is still in the underwater and marine safety business. Another previous owner was a Danish air force fighter pilot and subsequent commercial airline pilot - and both are still customers. Both he, Mama Noi and Checkinn feature in a thriller / spy novel Lethal Legacy soon to be published by Allen Mehew based on true actions.





There are two farang co-owners, Chris (Australian) who is a full time project manager often working during the week overseas and Mike (English) who is in the oil rig management business also currently overseas. The business is managed by Chris's wife, Mook.

It is a unique style in that Chris and Mike have set up a customer focus group - with whom they confer on any changes or issues relating to the operating of the club. Unlike nearly all other bars, all staff and hostesses are covered under social security and workers compensation schemes with a separate scheme for the staff over 65 (not covered under Thai government schemes). Checkinn operates a profit share with staff and a bonus if the bar stock reconciles which in part explains Mama Noi's comment about kind management.

I bet some readers who do know the venue know it from the dwarf who used to stand outside beckoning passersby inside. I haven't seen in a long time. What happened to him?

He is from Isaan. He used to work at Pizza Hut before he worked here. He was not well for some years so he stopped working and returned home to be with his family.

I heard rumours he starred in adult films.

I heard similar rumours. *<For what won't be the first time in our chat, a look of suspicion appears on Mama Noi's face and she stares at me intently, silently as older people often do. I'm sure I can read her mind - she is wondering how I know this!>*

Don't want to tell me anymore? I am sure you know more about that than I do!

I don't think it's a good thing to talk about. I don't know where or how he is now. I don't know anyone who has heard from him in a long time. I hope he is doing ok. The last I heard he went back to Isaan. So you don't get bored working here. I mean absolutely no disrespect here, but at your age most people want to put their feet up, kick back and relax! Hell, some friends my age don't want to work any more!

I would like to stop working but I can't. I really can't. There is no-one to take care of me. I don't have a husband or a boyfriend. But actually I don't need a man. I can look after myself. I stay alone so I have to keep working! I have a son from a marriage to a Thai man. *<She opens her photo album and shows me photos of a handsome Thai man in uniform, the photos must be 50 odd years old.>*

I was married a very long time ago, and we split a long time ago. I have a son but he is not interested in me. The boss is very kind so working here is very enjoyable. Everyone here is really nice. The boss is nice, the staff here are nice and it feels like a family. Many older customers who I have met over the years come in and some nights as one leaves, another walks in the door. That makes working here really nice. It's like being amongst friends.



Check Inn 99 has 3 long-term staff members - Mama Noi, the head waiter who is an ex-Muay Thai boxer (so don't try and fill your belly and do a runner) and the cook. The "new" waiter has been there 27 years and the house band Music of the Heart 13 years.

The owners could best be described as caretakers - with so much experience on the premises, as well as an incentive system put in the place for the staff, the venue runs itself.



So you're a Bangkok girl?

I'm from upcountry. I was born in Ubon Ratchatani, in Isaan.

When did you first come to Bangkok?

I was 17 years old when I first came to Bangkok.

Can you tell me how you first got involved in the industry?

I started at the Copa Cabana. I didn't stay long and then I moved to the Starlight Club.

What was Bangkok like in the 60s when you first started?

I think it was quite different from now. Back then everyone had lots of fun. Everything is different now. I cannot explain how, but it's just different. It was real *sanuk* in the past, but it's different today. Fun sometimes, but a different kind of fun. Not genuine fun for fun's sake like it was in the past.

You must have met some famous people over the years...

Maybe it is not good to talk about them. You know in Thailand it's not good to talk about famous people.

Oh, but I heard you met some famous foreigners and you already showed me their photos. Come on, can you tell me about the famous foreigners? I am sure they will never know!

I think you know we cannot talk about famous or powerful or influential Thai people. But foreigners I can. I met Bing Crosby when he used to sing here. And I knew Bob Hope well.



Mama Noi with Bob Hope in the late '60s. Photos of Mama Noi from the 60s show an extremely attractive lady. Bob was said to be a bit of a player. There are some questions a gentleman just doesn't ask...

This bar is unusual by Thai standards and seems to get Thai male customers as well as a lot of older patrons.

Few Thai people come here today. Some Japanese, a few Thais, but most are Caucasians. Thai people don't come here so much. Just a few of them. They have their own places to go.

Some of the staff have been here a long time?

Some staff have been here 10 years, some over 20 years, some longer. There is a famous farang who wrote about the industry and used to go around all the nightlife areas...

You mean Bernard Trink?

Yes, I know him! I have known him for a very, very long time. Wow, Bernard!

He used to go everywhere, Starlight, here, everywhere. I used to know him well but I heard his health wasn't so good and he stopped going around the bars about 10 years ago. Is he still alive? Last time I saw him he was not looking so good.

Yes, last I heard he's still in the land of the living.

Everyone knew him! You'd see him going in and out of bars all the time. Patpong, New Road, he went everywhere! And he had his wife with him! Can you believe it?! Why did he do that? I have known Bernard since the 60s. I hope he is doing ok now. Please tell him I said hello.!>



Do you have friends who are still working in the industry, I mean friends from the old days?

Most have married and gone overseas. So many went to America. Some went in the 60s and are still there now.

What about you? I am sure you must have had the chance to go overseas?

I didn't want to go overseas. I want to stay in Thailand. Had I married I would not have been able to stay in Thailand.

I could have gone anywhere and yes, it would have been fun for a while, but it's not the same as Thailand. Thailand is my home and Thailand is where I want to be. I went to New York, Luxembourg, other places. But it's not Thailand.

I still have customers I knew from a long time ago come in and see me. They come to see Mama Noi! There are some customers from 30 or 40 years ago who still come in to see me.

Can you remember their name? Thais are good with names!

There are so many of them and you know, I haven't seen some of them for so many years so I often cannot remember. *<We both laugh and Mama Noi looks at me with a polite smile but a suspicious look, as if she thinks this is the dumbest question ever asked in the history of interviewing!>*



Mama Noi has managed the hostesses at Check Inn 99 for many years. She is subtle and has her own thoughts and style on how a club should be run. Retaining her classic Thai roots, she insists that no customer should be approached by hostesses until the Mamasan has introduced herself and got the lay of the land. If the customer is not looking to meet a lady, or simply not in the mood, no hostess will approach. Mama Noi engages customers and does the rounds of the tables throughout the night, adopting and treating those customers she likes as a son.

What do you make of the industry and the advent of modern technology and its effects on the industry?

Things have changed so much. Nothing is the same any more.

You've been working in the industry since before I was born. What advice do you have for guys?

Whatever a foreigner wants to do in Thailand, whether he wants to go somewhere, or get to know someone, or anything, they should ask Thai people for help. Thai people are always happy to help foreigners.

So tell me about this bar today.

We have live music from a Filipina trio and they start at 8:30 PM. The music stops at 1:30 AM and we are open until about 2:00 AM.





1962



1968

The Copa (taken across the road from where the Landmark Hotel is now)

Despite the initial impression that the dimly lit entrance and sometimes scantily clad hostesses welcoming guests at the start of the alley make it look on first impressions a bit sleazy, once inside and the eyes have adjusted this is not the case at all. It is friendly and has more of a supper club feel than a bar.

Numerous souvenirs from parties, old style fittings, and a garish but apt collection of mementos and eclectic photos adorn the walls - and it all seems to fit.

The place is old but clean - having had a previous history of being otherwise, even in the past incurring my disfavour - times have changed - but not so for Mama Noi who is as much of an institution of Bangkok nightlife as CheckInn99 itself.

What about barfines? Is this a place a guy can meet a girl?

<I get a frown as if this is a question that really shouldn't be asked> If a guy wants to drink with a lady or dance with a lady, we have ladies here. We have about 15 ladies. The ladies like to dance with customers, but it's not gogo style. We have food and live music and ladies can sit with customers. This is much more laid-back than what you might find elsewhere. We have ladies who can *take care of customers during the evening*, but we cannot say that the ladies are available. You know, it's not nice to say that. Not polite. It really isn't nice to talk about a place or ladies like that...

After all this time working in an industry known to change those who involve themselves in it, Mama Noi has grace and dignity. Many who have spent even a fraction of the length of time in the industry as she has have become hard, yet Mama Noi retains an old world charm almost unseen today.

