





# REALISING A *dream* TOGETHER

**SIMILAR INTERESTS** and a common dream for the future has seen two worlds collide in a life-long commitment for Mittagong couple, Jason Bailey and Bee Satongun.

But the couple concedes the road to marital happiness takes plenty of hard work especially when it involves a union of eastern and western cultures.

When Jason headed to Thailand five years ago he was on a soul-searching mission.

He was a property developer, disillusioned by his fast-pace life, who was looking for a new direction. Jason was born and raised in the Highlands and owned a Thai restaurant in Mittagong.

He had a dream to master the craft of the "old world" style of Royal Thai cooking and sought the support of Chumpol, the executive chef at the Blue Elephant Restaurant in Bangkok.

Bee was a Thai local working at the Blue

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Elephant Restaurant as the private secretary to Chumpol who specialised in Royal Thai cooking. She was also the administrator of the restaurant's cooking school.

Bee was spiritually grounded in Buddhism, instilled in her from birth, and possessed a passion for food with a strong practical approach to cooking.

Chumpol, in his wisdom, saw a common interest between the two individuals and subconsciously weaved his match-making magic.

"Chumpol originally told me he was busy and decided to introduce me to Bee who he thought was well experienced to guide me in the ways of Royal Thai cooking," Jason said.

"He asked Bee to take me to all the different food regions of Thailand to teach me the cooking ways and difference of food in each area. >



*"We enjoy the challenge of unfolding the mystery of each other and we are inspired by the strength we give to each other."*

"That took about five weeks and by the time we returned to Bangkok I knew there was something more between myself and Bee.

"I immediately applied for a visitors visa to Australia for Bee and she returned to my homeland with me."

The couple is quick to point out that it was not love-at-first-sight. Jason had his sights firmly set on one goal, "to be the best he could be at Royal Thai cooking". Bee said she thought Jason was "a bit too skinny". But somehow the common interests of the two forged the way for a strong and committed connection.

"I don't think you need to be immediately in love with someone to make a relationship work, but a commonality of interests and dreams for the future help you grow closer," Jason said. "It is important to have a common connection because lust and passion experienced in the early stages of a relationship don't stay forever, and when that goes you need something more to keep you together.

"The greatest part of realising a dream is the journey and it is far more exciting when you share that journey with someone else – we keep each other on track."

Jason said it was equally important to work towards a better appreciation of each other especially when there were huge cultural differences. "We fought a lot in the early days, which is not surprising because we were raised in two very different cultures," he said.

"We were well aware that about 70 per cent of east-west relationships ended and one of the main causes

of these break-ups was the differences in culture and religion passed down through the generations over thousands of years. "When you combine these two very different cultures under the one roof it can lead to intense frustration.

"Bee and I soon realised that we were never going to understand each other in the same way as two people from the same culture, but we have learnt to respect each other's differences – we meet in the middle."

The couple took a practical approach to coping with their cultural challenges with a strong focus on reading sociological relationship books about east-west relationships and marriages.

"I also returned to Thailand in 2007 with the intention of spending a year in the country learning more about Bee's culture and getting to know her family," Jason said. By the end of 12 months both Jason and Bee knew they had something that was "worth holding onto".

In a single day they made a decision to marry and headed to a nearby registry office to officially seal their bond. They said it was a recognised commitment that would also enable them to continue to grow as a couple in both Australia and Thailand.

But it is clear true romance is not lost on the couple who followed their registry commitment with a traditional Thai wedding. As far as both Jason and Bee are concerned their "more practical approach" to marriage is paving the way for a long and committed bond.

And the couple is equally focused on immersing themselves in each other's cultural and religious beliefs. Jason has become a proud practicing Buddhist while Bee has made a permanent home in the Southern Highlands, with the couple working together at their Mittagong restaurant Classical Cravings.

Jason is equally convinced that their difference add to the excitement of the relationship as they learn more about each other. "The most exhilarating part of an east-west relationship is that you get to explore new horizons," he said. "You are no longer dictated to by the boundaries of your own society you gain the freedom to look outside and quest what is considered the cultural norm. "We enjoy the challenge of unfolding the mystery of each other and we are inspired by the strength we give to each other." ■