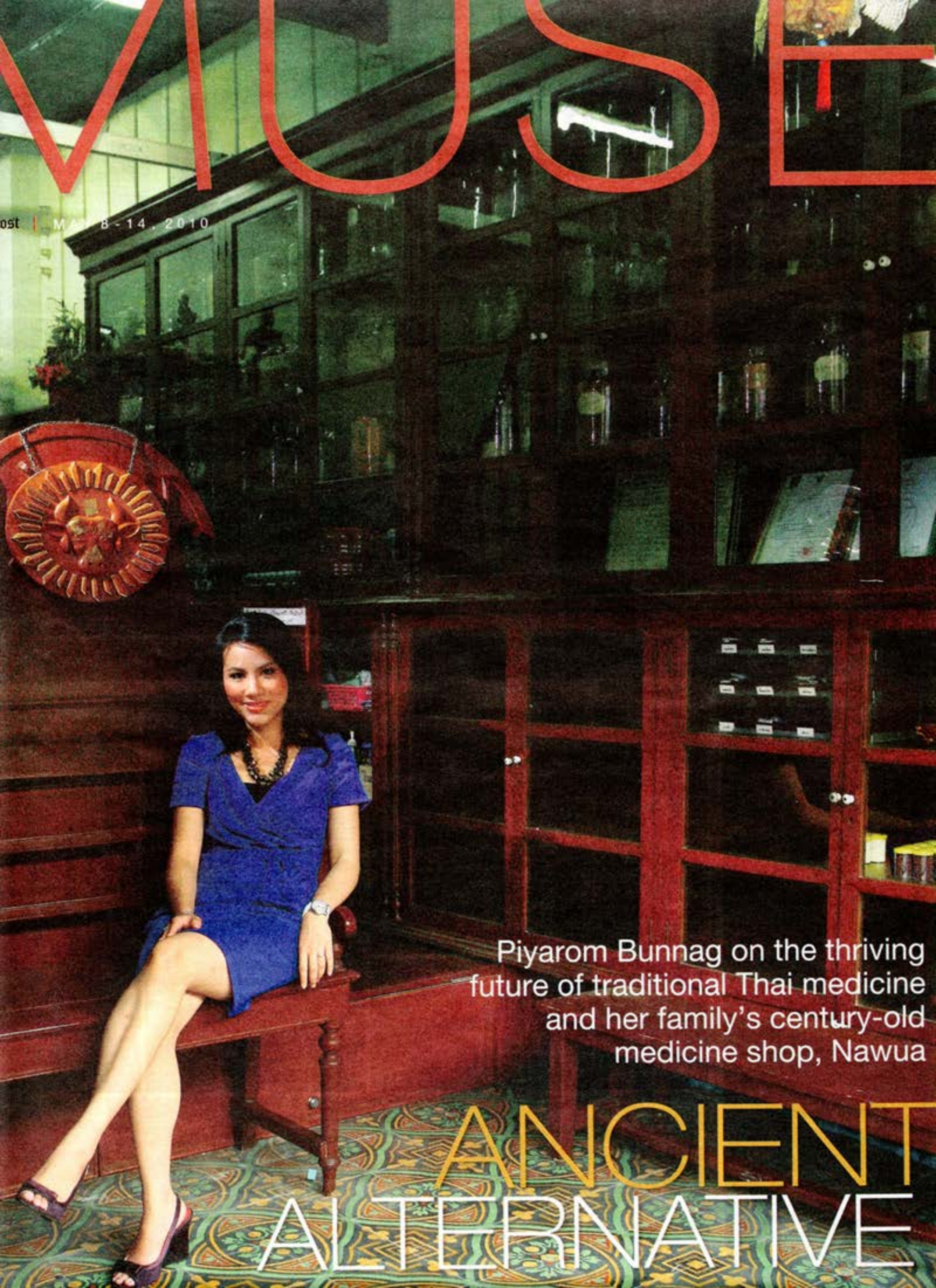


# MUSSE

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Piyarom Bunnag on the thriving future of traditional Thai medicine and her family's century-old medicine shop, Nawua

## ANCIENT ALTERNATIVE

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Thai medicine is living and thriving  
through the test of time at Nawua Medicine Shop,  
writes **Napamon Roongwitoo**

**O**n the strip of shophouses opposite of Khao San Road stands a one-of-a-kind pharmacy. In fact, it is the only shop on that strip without glass doors and air conditioner — just the way it was back in the old days.

Nawua Medicine Shop was established over 100 years ago during the reign of King Rama V under the name Wiryamai Osoth Tra Nawua by Somboon Pirawatteuk, a renowned traditional Thai medicine doctor. Many of the formulas were given to him by the Royal Family and kind customers, and they have been carefully kept and used at this pharmacy ever since.

Around 1958, the shop moved from its original location at Sao Chingcha to its current location on Kokwua intersection. The large green wooden doors have been opened to welcome customers in for over 50 years now, and with its new location came a new name — Nawua Medicine Shop.

Currently, the shop is in the hands of Piyarom Bunnag, who said she practically grew up with this shop.

"When I was little, I liked coming here because the neighbourhood was a lot of fun. There were things to see and delicious food to eat. But even back then I knew our shop was distinctive because no other shop looked so ancient," said the 29-year-old owner.

She admitted that although she knew what symptoms those Thai medicines kept in the shop could cure and how efficient they were, it was not until she grew older that she realised its vast business potential. With a bachelor's degree in business administration from Chulalongkorn University, as well as a certificate from the Medical Registration Division in Thai pharmacy, Piyarom knew she could turn the already-popular business into something even more.

"Our brand has lived on for over a hundred years without any marketing campaigns or advertisements ... and that really says something about how firmly established we are. Still, we have to preserve and improve our formulas to meet with modern standards," said Piyarom, who always makes sure the shop follows the laws and regulations and that all of the medicines are GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) certified by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration).

Although it was something she grew up with, studying Thai medicine was not a piece of cake for her. It takes good memory to know all the ingredients by heart, but it takes years of experience to do it right. "In class there is no way to know how each step works without actually doing it with your own hands. Learning something in theory is one thing, but putting it to practise is quite another. There are many machines you must familiarise yourself with, and this takes a lot of getting used to."

Her knowledge in business administration is not irrelevant to what she is doing now since running this shop requires her to be both pharmaceutically equipped and business savvy. "I know our products are good and I want the public to know about them, try them and benefit from them. We have to improve our products, too, as the consumers are constantly changing. If they want something convenient, then capsules are

much preferred by them. We live by word of mouth as our best marketing tool, therefore we have to win the hearts of our customers first."

So, what is the most important ingredient that makes Nawua medicines so popular? Sincerity. She said she is lucky to have such a strong customer base, so she has to work hard to keep them by giving them nothing but the best.

"As I've been around this business since I was very young, I can confidently say that our medicines are free from contamination and steroids. I wouldn't sell something to my customers if it wasn't up to standard. It's an ethical practice that both Thai medicine and modern medicine practitioners should keep."

There are over 40 different formulas in use at the shop today, and the best-selling ones are the children's set, women's set and elder's set.

"Our medicines are enough to cover basic illnesses, from constipation, allergies, irregular menstruation and dizziness to asthma. But if a customer is severely ill, say like a cancer patient, I would suggest modern medicine practice instead," she said, adding that Thai medicine is a trusted alternative since it has been passed down from generation to generation. It serves as a source of hope when modern medicine fails to satisfy the patients.

However, just because Thai medicines are effective, they are not a miracle. She explained that Thai medicines are targeted at healing the illness, not just the symptoms, and therefore it takes longer. "You can't expect to get rid of the illness instantly. Some illnesses take three months to cure."

While alternative medicine has become more popular recently, Piyarom warned that not all medicines and herbs can be trusted.

"First you have to look for a proper registered shop, not just any stall in the market. That way, if something goes wrong you know where to go and ask. Second, medicines need to be correctly labelled with FDA certification. You can also buy a test kit to check if there is any steroid mixed in it ... just to be on the safe side."

One of the selling points is something the shop gives away for free — friendliness. Many of her customers have frequented the shop for generations. Some of them would call for medical advice followed by casual chat. Some even have written poems to express their good impression of the shop.

"As with any business, it is the customer who drives a company's success. We have to treat them as our real friends, not just customers. This is why I love my job. I love that I am offering quality products to improve people's health."

This business lady has already set her eyes on the future of the shop. While she is focusing on improving her products now, she is hoping to expand her business to other provinces, and to introduce her medicines to hospitals. If chance permits, there is also a possibility that this brand will go global. "Standard-wise, we are ready for export. We have many foreign customers here and they are very happy with the results. However, it is a lot of work and we have to wait until we are really ready. I'm quite optimistic about our potential, though."