

SANDRA'S BIG CHALLENGE



After Sandra (right) her wife as a diplomat in Bangkok (left) & her management in Phuket. Sandra Steppe has worked as Phuket's search for the other Blue Elephant.



STEPPE in her chef's whites.

At 31 the daughter of Blue Elephant's founders has shouldered a heavy load – the reputation of the global Thai-restaurant chain's new baby

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

Sandra Steppe, the daughter of Thai celebrity chef Nooror Somany and Belgian entrepreneur Karl Steppe, has always been on the move. After “rebellious” teenage years spent in Belgium, the cooking teacher became coordinator at the Belgian embassy in Bangkok at 19, then a glamorous marketing woman in Mumbai in her early 20s – and finally a second-generation key mover of Blue Elephant in Bangkok. She's only 31.

“The decision to help with her family business came out of a need to continuously challenge herself – though it's meant putting on hold a career in diplomacy or business.”

In its 29-year history, Blue Elephant has introduced royal Thai cuisine to the wider world through 12 branches spread from London to Bangkok.

Steppe has placed her teaching duties at the Bangkok branch – which doubles as a cooking school – on the back burner, to handle the hot potato of Blue Elephant No 13's launch in Phuket.

A woman of conviction, she revels in a hands-on, top-down approach to running a restaurant, never restricting herself to any one facet of the business. A single day can see her flitting from teaching students upstairs, to bussing tables downstairs, to cooking up a new marketing strategy to attract that all-important hip and youthful crowd.

“My mother has a lot on her shoulders and I just figured I'd help her out. I can be critical and moody and discuss all aspects of the company because it's like a part of my family.”

With her background in marketing and communications, Steppe seems well suited to the task of running the Phuket branch.

“I think Phuket will do well just because the location itself is so incredible. Phuket town is very hip. Also, the clientele there has

a more expensive lifestyle and with that comes greater expectations. When we open, we expect everyone to rush to us for the novelty, but the trick is to maintain that standard and have people coming back.”

Though she seems to be heading for success as a restaurateur, Steppe's initial aspirations couldn't have been further from food.

“My ambition was to do diplomatic work: basically, jobs that looked great on my CV and allowed me to travel. I wanted to explore the world and I thought working at embassies would be the best way to achieve that.”

When an opportunity to work for a year as a trainee in the Belgian embassy in Bangkok presented itself back in 1998, she initially met opposition from her father (“He wanted me to stay and continue studying”).

However, the self-confessed “rebellious teenager” went ahead and found herself living in Bangkok at the tender age of 19.

Her duties at the embassy included everything from helping the ambassador organise events and taking care of Belgian nationals in Bangkok to serving as translator for Dutch-speaking Belgians. (“To be successful in Europe you have to speak at least two languages. So I learned both French and Dutch.”)

Despite its many privileges, Steppe found the job too stressful and after a year took her father's advice and returned to Belgium and her studies. Ten years on, her friendship with former colleagues at the embassy still exists – they turned out in force for her mother's recent book launch.

But she wasn't back for long in Belgium before a new challenge arrived on her doorstep.

“My parent's best friends were an Indian couple from Mumbai. Their work was relocating businesses from one place to another. My father's friend wanted to launch a customer-relations programme and thought I would be perfect for the job.”

And so began Steppe's five years in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai.

“It was very tough and challenging because first, I was a girl, second, I was a foreigner and third, I was working with

men." She successfully launched the programme in Mumbai, settled down the operations and then hired others to manage it. "And that was it. I didn't want to stay any longer because the challenging part of the process had been done."

Her life in Mumbai was full of seeming contradictions.

On the one hand, she lived the glamorous life to the full, spending free time mixing with the Bollywood set, roaming fashion shows and dropping in on pal AD Singh at his celebrity dining haunt Olive.

On the other, she felt at ease with the rough-and-tumble street life of Mumbai, commuting to work by train or even rickshaw. "As a child I often travelled with my family from Belgium to Mumbai and then on to Bangkok. So Mumbai was already like a second home to me. I love being in touch with situations and people. India can teach

even those with affluent backgrounds like mine to be grounded. I'm proud to be half Thai and proud to be half Belgian, but a little piece of my heart belongs to India."

The decision to help with her family business, she says, came out of a need to continuously challenge herself - though it's meant putting on hold a promising career in diplomacy or business.

To begin with, learning the ropes at the cooking school was daunting.

"I was always intrigued while watching my mother in the kitchen, but I was also afraid because she was already very experienced."

Fast forward a few years and Steppe is now the teacher, boasting celebrities like Indian film-maker Nagesh Kukunoor along with several Michelin-starred chefs as past pupils.

"It's in my nature to be open with people. Some want to cook because they've never cooked in their lives, others have just gone through a divorce and have chosen cooking as their therapy. Companies even use the school for team-building exercises."

Steppe's personal philosophy is very simple.

"Karma. It works! I think one should accept age with grace and move forward with it instead of just getting stuck at any particular stage. I just try to do the best I can with what I have, and I did everything I wanted to at the right time."