# Postcards from Post: interview with Amber Parr, Australia’s agricultural counsellor in Thailand

(Duration 16 mins 12 secs)

## Transcript

**Tim Dawson (Host):** Australia exports over 70% of its agriculture, fisheries and forestry produce. And DAFF has a network of agricultural counsellors posted in Australian embassies around the globe to help make that trade happen.

In this series, we'll hear from those counsellors. Welcome to Postcards from Post.

[Opening slide for Postcards from Post]

And this afternoon we're speaking with Amber Parr, our agricultural counsellor based in Thailand. Good afternoon, Amber.

**Amber Parr:** Hi Tim. How are you?

**Tim Dawson**: Amber, you've got quite a wide remit and you've got several markets in South East Asia. Can you tell us about which markets you're responsible for?

**Amber Parr:** Yes. So, I look after Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. So those markets are incredibly diverse almost in every way. Whether they accept premium or midrange products. What their importing conditions are, but some of the commonalities across those markets and I would suggest, across East Asia more broadly, is that I think being priced well in the market and knowing where you sit, having some consistency in the product that you're bringing in consistency in the quality, and also really, investing in those relationships with the people that you're training with is a really great solid foundation for being successful.

**Tim Dawson:** Can you tell us a little bit about the Thai market for Australian agriculture?

**Amber Parr:** Look, I'm totally biassed, because I am, based here, but I love the Thai market for Australian agriculture. I think there's so much potential here. And often when Australians think about Thailand, we think about, street vendors and backpacking and things being really cheap. But and that's true. But the Thai market has this really incredible premium end of the market, and they love Australian product. Australian product has an excellent reputation for quality and it really commands some of the best prices within this market.

Now, this market is quite open. And I say that because there are competitors here and it's incredible the amount of diversity you can get in the market, but Australia certainly has an enviable reputation, and we have a great trading environment for lots of our products.

I know my American counterpart, they don't have an FTA, and they are often, tell me how jealous they are of the tariffs that we get here or don't get here as the case maybe. There is incredible opportunity for lots of Australian product to come into Thailand and I think we should. I think it's not too far away. We get premium prices, and it's quite stable. So, if exporters are not in Thailand, they should definitely consider it.

**Tim Dawson:** Can you tell us about your greatest achievement to date in the role?

**Amber Parr:** Look, I was very lucky to be in this seat when we finally landed access into Thailand for Western Australia Hass avocados. This process took, I think, almost a decade. So, there were some counsellors before me who also, did their bit and played a role and passed me the baton. And I was lucky enough to be the one that landed it but honestly, that trade has gone gangbusters.

The market here love Australian avocados, and I mean, I know I'm totally biassed, but really the best avocado in the market. And I think we're seeing that in the volumes that are coming through, that was a real victory and a real success story for how the Australian government works with our Thai counterparts. Also, with state government and industry, it was a team effort to get that across the line, and I'm so pleased we did, but there's been so many.

So even with wine, we worked to cut the red tape for wine coming in. And we now have a certificate of analysis rather than each shipment needing to be individually tested in Thai labs. So, it's made some of the administrative processes more efficient and less costly for Australian exporters, which has just been fantastic.

**Tim Dawson:** I'm aware that it seems that wine is growing as one of our exports. What opportunities do you see for Australian agriculture, fisheries and forestry to expand into the market?

**Amber Parr:** Look at the moment, certainly, wine and Australia, I think, by volume is the highest seller of wine in this market. Although the French, as perception goes, it seems that the Thais, if they're thinking quality, they think French wine, which annoys me, but they certainly sell. We sell a whole lot of Australian wine and good quality wine into Thailand. But we also sell a lot of wheat as well that are made into noodles here, and Australian beef.

So, Australia currently enjoys, we own 90% of the imported beef market in Thailand. Australian beef is everywhere. You see it on menus that it's Australian. We have an incredible reputation, and the Thais certainly enjoy our beef.

And funnily enough, we thought, pre-COVID that there's 40 million tourists that come into Thailand every year. And we suspected that our product was going into high end retail, and to tourists, so into hotels and restaurants. And then COVID happened, and the Thai market went from 40 million tourists to zero overnight, and our meat exports continued to grow through that period. So, the Thais themselves were buying meat in the supermarket and cooking it at home through that COVID period, so we continue to go from strength to strength.

Also, this market is a great market for Australian citrus. Australian blueberries come in here, really, we have loads of opportunity.

What I will say, though, in that in the Southeast Asia relationships are really important. So, we find that the commodities that do well and the exporters and importers that do well are the ones that come over in market and meet people, and do, you know, dinners or something like that. It's really not a set and forget market. You have to be in here and meeting people and continuing to develop those relationships.

**Tim Dawson:** Is there a particular commodity or product that you can think of where there is a real opportunity in the Thai market? But we're not quite there yet. And you think that we should act to take that chance?

**Amber Parr:** Look, I think there is. There are lots, I think for me. I love Australian lamb. Australian lamb in Thailand, the Thai palate, they it's a bit gamey for them. They don't. It's a too strong a taste, but for me, I just can't get over you know, Massaman Lamb shanks. I think, is just such a beautiful combination. I think that there is probably some opportunity for us to do some fusion cooking and really show the Thais how we can use lamb in Thailand in a way that I think they would love. So, I think there's some real opportunity there and also, sometimes it's education.

So, I was saying, avocados are coming in. We worked with Austrade and industry and importers to do some education campaigns of, how do you know when an avocado is ripe and what are some things that we you know, we as Australians almost innately know how to how to get the best out of avocados. But we needed to show the Thais how to do that. So, I think as things, new things come into the market, the Thais are quite, brave and up for some new culinary experience. But they need a little bit of education on how to get the best out of the produce that they're buying.

**Tim Dawson:** So, you're talking there about educating people and giving them the chance to try new things? Sometimes events like, a social gathering, an embassy barbecue or that sort of thing where Australian food is on display is one of the best ways to do this. Do you do that in country?

**Amber Parr:** Yes, we certainly do. So, we have a wonderful HOM [Head of Mission] at the moment, who loves using her residence to showcase Australian produce, and it doesn't matter if it's agriculture or focused or not. Every event that she does is always Australian wine. Australian, Australian beef, what's in season. We can also use Australian horticulture. Whatever we can get, we use, her chef is wonderful and adapts. I think he even does like pavlova now with, Australian berries on top when we can and those kinds of things.

But look it, there's been some hilarity as well. We had an opening, there was some supermarkets who had an agreement where they were bringing in more Australian product, and they invited myself and the ambassador to the launch of their new partnership.

And I don't know I if people understand, but the Thais go all out when they do these things. And so, as part of this supermarket partnership opening, they had a magician come and do tricks and I was I was laughing thinking whether they’re going to saw the ambassador in half as part of this but, they had a great time and it was all part of the fun.

**Tim Dawson:** So what would your message be to Australian producers who want to reach your market be?

**Amber Parr:** I think come, I think you should do your market research. Make sure you're positioning yourself in the market where you want to be. Thailand is a premium market and there there's certainly room for you to come in here and do that. But if you do, consistency and quality is really important.

People do value the Australian brand, but we need to come into the market and be consistently good to fetch and maintain those high-level premiums. Now, in saying that, there is also a market for medium quality as well. And I also look after, the Philippines and the Philippines is a really great market also for Australian produce, but, and I'm going to say more generally, the Philippines market is more for a medium-priced produce and not that really high-end premium is what we see going there, which is also great because, it gives us more export options for what we produce. So come, price yourself well where you sit in the market, make sure the consistency and the quality is there. And then really, invest in those relationships.

**Tim Dawson:** Australian aquaculture and fish products, is there a market in Thailand because Thailand produces a lot of their own aquaculture, do they not?

**Amber Parr:** Yeah. Look, they certainly do, and Thailand is interesting because it's the only country in Southeast Asia that we actually have parity when it comes to agricultural products with, so Australia imports from Thailand to the same value with agricultural products as we export, and what Australians love to eat are Thai prawns. So, there's that and we also get a lot of their tuna and other things coming in. So, there's certainly, in the Thai culture, aquaculture products are a huge part of the diet, and I'm sure we know Australians also love Thai food. But in saying that there is some opportunities for Australian products in market, but it would be at that high-end level that we would be hitting. And they do love Australian salmon, which has a presence here.

There are some, products already in market but I think it's something that we would have to be very, pointed about, where we were landing in the market. But there's certainly opportunities.

**Tim Dawson:** This is a very unique role that gives you access to a whole range of really important people and, amazing events and so on. Can you tell us about some of the exciting elements of the job?

**Amber Parr:** It really is such a unique role. And you do find sometimes I find myself in rooms and think, “how did I get here?” So, I think the biggest one of the biggest events that happened, I was only I think I was less than two weeks into the job. And the King of Thailand came to the embassy for an event, and I met, I was part of the welcoming committee that met the King and the Queen of Thailand. The king has never come to an embassy before, or since, it was quite a big deal. And it is unusual for, someone in my position or diplomats to meet the king like that. So that was a very unique experience. I actually had to take curtsying lessons. The palace sent out protocol people and made us taught us how to curtsey and then made sure we were doing it right.

So we had a very intense protocol, short course, really about, what we were to do, and how we were to behave. Although I did laugh because there was also a lot of VIPs from the Thai side as you would expect that accompanied the king. It's probably 50 maybe. And they gave us photos of all the people so we could introduce ourselves, and we would know who we were talking to. And I was very new and very eager. And so I studied, and really tried to get my head around who would be in the room so I would not bring shame to the Australian Government or department and then on the night, it was still kind of COVID times and all of our 50 Thai guests turned up all wearing the same white uniform with masks on, and I could not tell who was who at all.

My eagerness was wasted, so I just had to introduce myself like normal and say “hello, I'm Amber, who are you?” because I couldn't tell. So it was, but that that event was, really incredible. And I will never forget it.

**Tim Dawson:** If there's anyone in the Australian industry, producing, you know, anything in agriculture, fisheries or forestry and they're interested in the Thai market, Singaporean market or the Philippines. What should they do?

**Amber Parr:** I think the first step is to see if we have market access for the commodity that they are looking at exporting. So have a look on our, MICoR system to see what the importing conditions are. Reach out to their industry organisation, as well. And reach out to me or my counterparts against other markets to see if we can help smooth that path and help get some trade happening.

**Tim Dawson**: Amber, thank you so much for your time today. Keep flying the flag for Australia and doing a great job.

**Amber Parr:** Thanks Tim.

[Video ends]

**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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