

## From ashram to Aman

4 Feb 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

It is a long way from a teetotal, non-meat-eating ashram in Florida to choosing wine for China's top government officials in Beijing but that is the path travelled by 31-year-old Krishna Hathaway, via dance, the Turks & Caicos islands, Delhi, Utah and Morocco.

Hotel junkies may discern a link between these last four locales. There is a super-luxurious Aman resort in each one and Hathaway, currently based in Beijing, luxuriates in the title Aman Cellar Master, which requires him to rove around the globe training restaurant staff who, however willing, may have only the merest glimmer of what wine is.

A tall, striking, graceful, rather elfin 31 year old with a ready laugh, he owes his vaguely Polynesian looks to his mother. 'Her mom owned a drag bar in San Francisco', he volunteered with a wide smile when I met him recently. There are also Italian and Yugoslav genes from his father. The rules of the 150-strong non-violent, inter-faith community where 'the aim was to channel spirituality towards a Hindu life of purity' meant that he worked in the kitchen from an early age and has always been fascinated by food and tastes.

But, as he observed pragmatically, 'the best way to separate yourself from a very bohemian background is to get into a good school and go somewhere exciting'. Home-schooled, he got into Brown in the north east and created his own interdisciplinary topic involving both dance and development studies. To fund his way through college he deliberately chose to work in 'the nicer restaurants' wherever he found himself. He danced in a couple of troupes but never felt confident that this sort of performance would provide him with a living.

His first major performances on a restaurant floor were at the Setai hotel in South Beach. He was eventually sent to Mendocino in northern California for a couple of months while the Setai's owners were trying to set up a hotel there. He had long been able to further his wine education via the dregs of great bottles left by the Setai's customers and the odd seminar but in Mendocino he was exposed for the first time to wine country, where he was inspired by getting his hands dirty with the 2005 harvest at one or two local wineries.

His boss at the Setai, Alejandro Ortiz, left to join Aman in 2006 and by December 2008 was calling for Krishna to help him open the Aman in Delhi, a difficult market for wine beset by ever-changing import taxes, licences and restrictions but in a country with a rapidly growing wine culture. With a vivacious young Australian sommelier Kavita Faiella, recruited from the Maldives, he managed to assemble sufficient bottles and suitably trained staff in time for the opening in April 2009. Then his world tour began.

'I left to open Amangiri in Utah in August 2009. Of all the places I've worked, Utah with its liquor restrictions was the most difficult, although we did manage to open in October 2009. In a way, my experience of India helped. To get round the rules on shipping, for instance, I found myself contacting the Asia director of Billecart Salmon champagne.

'Then I went to Amanjenna in Morocco for three weeks. They needed a lot of training there and there were some special events happening. More training in Cambodia and Laos - 10 days each. Then the Turks & Caicos islands for three weeks. That was more ideal because it was high season so I could help with service as well as do some longer training sessions and help get wines for special programs like sunset tastings. A part-owner of the resort has a big wine collection so we were able to sell some of his wine on consignment.'

This reminded me of the time I had heard from his old Delhi colleague Kavita Faiella about the joys of being the only member of staff with real wine knowledge at the original Aman resort, Amanpuri in Thailand, over the Christmas holidays. The glitzy villa owners who flock there to celebrate the holidays are just dying to share their trophy bottles with someone who knows one end of them from another apparently.

I wondered whether Krishna's globe trotting on behalf of Aman's clients was equally luxurious but it seems not. 'I once flew Ethiopian Airlines Delhi to Beijing.' He made a face. 'The movie was the James Bond one when Iman was famous.'

With the current fine-wine fever in China, qualified sommeliers must be in huge demand. When the Aman in Beijing lost its wine steward, Krishna was drafted in for eight months in February of last year and that is now, technically, his base - although he was ordered back to Delhi 'strategically' for the winter season, to order wines, reorganise, and compensate

for Kavita's having moved on to Hong Kong.

Which place was the most enjoyable, I wondered. 'A burgundy seminar I attended in Singapore', was Krishna's immediate response, 'although India is fun to live in. There's a smorgasbord of humanity in your face every time you step out the door. Staff are very alert, all with pen and paper and tons of questions - random, very obscure stuff', he giggled. 'It's challenging on a service level because people, customers, are very confusing about what they're looking for. We always have to watch social cues very closely.

'Beijing is very exciting, because they're drinking so much there, and they're all so excited about wine. There's a culture of drinking already - with the *baijiu* [strong, rice-based spirits] tradition. Beer is also poured, and tea, and often a prestigious wine nowadays. They sometimes want them all poured at the same meal. I have to work out a sensible sequence. The staff have to assess first of all whether the party is mainly Chinese or mainly western because that will dictate how things go. Some people make it clear by bringing their own bottle of *baijiu*. And there's a tradition of pre ordering food anyway. Often there will be a scout sent in advance to look after all that side of things.

'It's interesting because you have to present the prestigious wine they've pre-ordered to the guest of honour, not the host. It would be a big mistake to interfere with this order. Sometimes very top Chinese people will ask me to pair top wines with their Chinese menu but sometimes the food is all served at once so it's difficult.

Lafite mania shows no signs of abating in China. Even the first growth's second wine Carruades de Lafite (which has traditionally been sold for a fraction of the grand vin's price in western markets) is perceived in China as of almost equal status to Lafite itself because it has the magic word on the label. At a recent banquet for a Chinese official too important to name, Krishna had to find enough of the first growth to serve the 50 or so guests in the number one dining room. (The party also comprised a second dining room for second-rank officials who were served Château Phelan Ségur, and a third dining room for the security staff who were not served alcohol.) Although the cellars of the Aman at Beijing's Summer Palace have a few bottles of some reasonably mature vintages of Lafite, Krishna had to buy in the embryonic 2006 vintage to be sure of having enough for all the 'top officials, opera singers etc' in dining room number one.

He did, however, manage to persuade the organisers that it might be novel to serve the odd wine that was not red, and received plaudits afterwards on account of the Salon champagne and the Château d'Yquem.

Very obviously not Chinese, Krishna is not allowed to serve top Chinese guests. It would be a loss of face apparently to be served by a westerner. The norm is to have wine served by Chinese female sommeliers, especially at the top level, one to every three guests. (And certainly on my travels, I have found far more women than men in the ranks of Chinese wine writers too.)

This is all at the exalted level of high-level entertaining. Krishna points out that on more everyday occasions, 'both the Indians and Chinese know perfectly well that Australia and Chile make the best value wines that are fruity and easy to appreciate. But in China there is much more conspicuous consumption, prestige buying and showmanship. In India it's more single malt drinking and still the long drinking session throughout the evening and then eating only very late afterwards. The Chinese drink heavily through the whole meal which may be long and drawn out with multiple small courses.'

His existence is so peripatetic at the moment, I wondered how Krishna Hathaway saw his future. Not surprisingly it was to stay quite a chunk of time in one place. And he admitted that he nurses a romantic notion about working in or even owning his own winery - perhaps in Spain or South America to take advantage of his Spanish. So far he has a serious lack of formal wine qualifications, having twice started out on Master Sommelier courses but having twice been recalled to work by his employers.

And his family on the ashram? 'They're cool with what I'm doing now. "Far out, so cool", they say. I don't really think they know what it entails, but they understand I'm forging my own path.'

It could have been worse. His best friend from ashram days is in real estate.