

# Wine arrives in India

13 Nov 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See these tasting notes on <u>some current Indian wines</u>.

On my first visit to India, in 2002, I met one of the country's first wine writers, a young woman who told me that her friends would routinely ask her, 'What's the *point* of wine? Whisky gets you drunk so much quicker.'

How things have changed. Despite punitive taxation and mind-boggling regulation and paperwork, India now has a thriving wine culture - or at least the vast middle class and 'upper crust' (the name of an Indian glossy magazine) do.

Taxes and duties on imported wine are imposed by both national customs and the individual state. They are cumulatively so high that consumers can pay 10 to 12 times the initial cost of a bottle when they buy wine from one of India's relatively few but growing wine retailers. A basic bottle of the leading imported brand Jacob's Creek, for example, could easily cost the equivalent of £20 off a shelf, and many times more on a hotel wine list.

The hotels, and in particular the major hotel chains, played the crucial initial role in introducing Indians to wine, and they still largely provide the settings for the wine dinners sporadically organised by foreign wine producers trying to establish themselves in this small but growing market. Château Margaux, for example, a first growth keen to repeat Lafite's dramatic success in China, flew in Alain Passard of Arpège in Paris to design and cook a vegetarian dinner to go with their wines last December, mindful that 40% of Indians do not eat meat.

Back in 2002 you could count the number of licensed restaurants independent of hotels even in Delhi and Mumbai on the fingers of one hand. Today the introduction of a special, much cheaper, licence for establishments serving only beer and wine has encouraged many more cafés and casual eating places to offer wine. There is now sufficient interest in wine service for the most charismatic of young Indian sommeliers, irreverent Mandheep Singh, to have forsaken the dining room for a consultancy and the TV screen. But in general, Indians who want to sell wine have to submit to an expensive and cumbersome process designed originally for the distribution of spirits, which has been a deterrent.

Until Indians were introduced to wine, a typical retail outlet for alcohol was a heavily guarded, steel-caged, none-too-clean shop selling dubious spirits to even more dubious men. A major brake on the development of wine culture in India initially was the poor quality of storage conditions and transport for a liquid that is so much more susceptible to heat damage than spirits and beer. But smart, well-lit, air-conditioned wine stores are beginning to proliferate in India's newer shopping malls, affording women a chance to handle and buy bottles, too.

Wine has opened the door to social drinking for Indian women, who before its introduction into Indian society were expected to merely watch while their menfolk downed whisky in great quantity before a late dinner. Today wine and food are often consumed together, European style (although dinner invitations specifying '8.30 for 11 pm' are by no means a thing of the past). In fact, as one Indian political economist friend put it to me, wine consumption can be regarded as a 'signifier' in Indian society, signifying not only that the consumer has a certain level of material wealth but also that they understand western mores.

What is remarkable is the speed with which India has gone from a country where a tiny handful of the very rich drank nothing but the most famous names in wine to one in which thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of young, well-travelled Indians are beginning to appreciate the nuances of a wide range of wines, both domestic and imported.

The founder and editor of the country's leading wine magazine *Sommelier India* is a woman. Reva Singh saw an opportunity back in 2004 'when India had no wine culture', as she puts it, but today she has about 20,000 regular readers, and subscribers in such 'second tier' cities as Allahabad and Shillong. Even the prime whisky state of Punjab is being converted to the grape, she reports.

Wine bars, wine clubs and wine fairs are sprouting all over the country. But what of Indian wine? Its quality has slowly been improving, and it has the huge advantage of being less savagely taxed than imports. One large company Château Indage that made sparkling wine with imported French expertise expanded so rapidly recently that it went pop. The founder of the most serious red-wine producer, Kanwal Grover, died recently but only after establishing Grover Reserve



Bordeaux blend, made with the help of ubiquitous consultant Michel Rolland of Pomerol, as a seriously reliable Indian red.

But the current leader of the Indian winemaking pack is Sula, founded by Rajeev Samant, who returned from a career in Silicon Valley in the 1990s to found this dynamic wine producer in Nashik, in the state of Maharashtra, about 120 miles north east of Mumbai, which had long grown grapes for the table. This year Sula, now a tourist destination (the picture above is from their website, showing a couple relaxing looking at their vines), will fill a total of 450,000 bottles and ship them to 20 countries. Sula's reputation is founded on fresh, clean whites, especially the crisp Sauvignon Blanc that can seem like nectar in India's sultry climate.

A week last Sunday *Sommelier India* organised The Great Indian Wine Tasting, assembling some of the country's best-qualified palates to judge blind up to four wines submitted by a dozen of the best Indian wineries. (Three wineries' wines failed to make it because the relevant domestic airline refused to fly wine on the basis that it is alcohol and therefore dangerously inflammable.) The judges decided that overall Indian whites are better than the reds, although since storage conditions constitute wine's greatest enemy after taxation in India, it may be that whites, generally sold younger than reds, have an inbuilt advantage.

There is currently no effective wine law in India and therefore no controls other than cost on blending and labelling different wines. The outfit in charge of wine is known rather ominously as the Indian Grape Processing Board, but India is a recent recruit to the OIV, the international body for wine regulation and technical advancement, which bodes well.

Already there is considerable technical input from abroad. Sula's winemaker is Californian. The relatively new Fratelli operation is run by Piero Masi, ex-winemaker of Isola e Olena in Tuscany. However, the special conditions in India's low latitudes (generally mitigated by high altitudes) call for specific expertise in tropical viticulture which is very different from the conventional sort.

But all are agreed that wine has finally arrived in India.

The following wines were chosen as best in a recent blind panel tasting organised by Sommelier India.

### **BEST WHITES**

Fratelli Chardonnay
Fratelli Chenin Blanc
Nine Hills Viognier
Reveilo Grillo
KRSMA Sauvignon Blanc
Sula Sauvignon Blanc
Big Banyan Sauvignon Blanc

#### **BEST REDS**

Grover Cabernet/Shiraz KRSMA Cabernet Sauvignon Four Seasons Barrique Reserve Shiraz Fratelli Sangiovese Sula Rasa Shiraz

## ROSÉ

Grover Shiraz Sula Zinfandel Nine Hills Shiraz

### **SPARKLING**

Zampa Brut

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