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Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

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Founder **Reva K Singh**
Publisher **Shiv B Singh**

Advisory Council
Dhruv M Sawhney – New Delhi
Ravi Viswanathan – Singapore
Sanjiv S Dugal – Providence, USA

Editor in Chief **Reva K Singh**
Chief Copy Editor **Bunny Suraiya**
Tastings Co-ordinator **Gagan Sharma**

Correspondents – India
Alok Chandra, **Brinda Gill**, **Aditi Pai**, **Kaveri Ponnappa**, **Ruma Singh**

Correspondents – Overseas
Renu Chahil-Graf – EU, **Rosemary George** – UK, **Mira Advani Honeycutt** – US, **Michèle Shah**, **Alessandra Piubello** – Italy, **Carol Wright** – UK

Contributing writers
Raghu Bahadur, **Sourish Bhattacharyya**, **Raymond Blake**, **Shoba Narayan**, **Jon Wyand**

Administration and Accounts
Harendra Singh

Design **Inkspot Inc**

Layout Artist **T M Jose**

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contributors

Sommelier India The Wine Magazine is written by some of the best wine writers in the world. Our cast of contributors includes wine experts, food and wine writers, professional journalists as well as new writers. We regard our stable of regular contributors as our most valuable resource.



Sourish Bhattacharyya is a journalist who has clocked more than 35 years in the profession. He has written on a number of subjects, but mostly on food and occasionally wine. Sourish is one of the founders of delWine Excellence Awards, Tasting India Symposium and Asian Hawkers Market. He is the co-editor with Colleen Taylor Sen and Helen Saberi of the “Companion to Indian Food”, to be published next year by Bloomsbury.



Raymond Blake is one of Ireland’s leading wine writers and was Wine Editor of the highly regarded Food & Wine Magazine from its launch in 1997 until it went online last year. In addition, Raymond has written for numerous other publications in Ireland and abroad, principally on wine but also on a diverse range of other topics. He is also much in demand as a presenter at themed wine dinners, tutored tastings and other events. Raymond is the author of three

critically acclaimed books, “In Black & White: A History of Rowing at Trinity College Dublin”, 1991; “Breakfast in Burgundy – A Hungry Irishman in the Belly of France”, New York 2014; and “Côte d’Or – The Wines and Winemakers of the Heart of Burgundy”, Oxford 2017. (Short-listed for the Louis Roederer International Wine Writers’ Awards, 2018.)



Alok Chandra is an independent Wine Consultant based in Bangalore. His company Gryphon Brands Inc focuses on Knowledge, Research (wine markets & consumers); Projects (vineyards and wineries, import & export of wines), and Marketing. An MBA from IIM Calcutta with 30 years work experience, Alok was the founder of the Bangalore Wine Club in 2001, and has been writing on wine for *Sommelier India* and the Business Standard Weekend magazine since 2005. He has been a judge in several wine competitions in India and abroad.



Brinda Gill has a graduate degree in Economics (Hons) from Lady Shri Ram

College, New Delhi, and a Masters from Gokhale Institute, Pune. One of her major interests is discovering the unique wealth of India through the country’s living multi-faceted heritage, specially textiles and crafts. She enjoys writing on these subjects and travelling.



Mira Advani Honeycutt is the Wine Editor of PASO Magazine, based in Paso Robles. She is curator and writer of “Signature Wines & Wineries of Coastal California”, curator of “The Winemakers of Paso Robles” (both large format coffee table books) and the author of “California’s Central Coast, The Ultimate Winery Guide”. She also writes for the Napa Valley Register. Mira has chronicled the wine world for several international publications and has written on international cinema for The Hollywood Reporter.



Shoba Narayan is an award-winning columnist and the author of five books. Her latest

book, “Food & Faith: a pilgrim’s journey through India” is just out from Harper Collins. She has written about wine and spirits for a number of publications including Mint Lounge and is a wine columnist for *Sommelier India*. She is passionate about wine, preferring floral Alsatian wines that go with her vegetarian diet. She is a member of many wine clubs and enjoys sharing her wines with friends.



Nimmi Malhotra is a wine consultant and writer, born and educated in Delhi, currently living in Hong Kong. Nimmi’s passion for wine grew in Australia, where she lived for 12 years, often visiting her uncle at his renowned vineyard, Nazaaray Estate on the Mornington Peninsula. She turned that passion into her profession after graduating with a WSET Diploma. Her work currently includes consulting for restaurants and writing, with her first IWC judging role scheduled for November.



Kaveri Ponnappa is an author and independent writer based in Bengaluru. Her articles on food, wine, travel and heritage appear in leading publications. She explores India’s traditional cuisines, as well as evolving restaurant trends and the growing appreciation of wine in India. Kaveri graduated from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, and took a Master’s Degree in Social Anthropology at SOAS, University

of London. Her first book, “The Vanishing Kodavas”, is an extensive cultural study of the Kodava people. (www.kaveriponnappa.com.)



Michèle Shah is a writer and wine critic based in Tuscany. She organises wine tastings, seminars and educational sessions on Italian wine for Italy’s regional wine consortia and the international press. She is the founder of Speedtasting® B2B events and an honorary member of Donne del Vino in Italy and committee member of the Circle of Wine Writers, UK. Michèle is CEO of Exceptional Travel to Italy (www.micheleshahtravel.com.) She contributes to the world’s leading wine publications including *Sommelier India*.



Gagan Sharma is a Certified Sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers, UK, and holds the WSET Diploma from London. Gagan has a Masters degree in Hospitality Management (specialising in wines) from Victoria University, Melbourne, and works as a creator, curator, wine educator and sommelier at Indulge India. He reserves a soft corner for Barolos, Riojas, Australian reds, and Sherries. When not working, he enjoys trekking in the Himalayas and chasing historic sites. Gagan is the coordinator of the *Sommelier India* Tasting Panel.



Bunny Suraiya After an award-winning career in advertising, Bunny Suraiya took up writing and editing as her profession. She writes on travel as well as on social trends and literary subjects and has contributed to several national and international publications. Her novel, “Calcutta Exile”, which was published to critical and reader acclaim and shortlisted for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Award 2012, has been published in a French edition. A black chocolate freak and a red wine enthusiast, she enjoys being editorial consultant and copy editor for *Sommelier India*.



Carol Wright is a freelance writer based in the UK but travelling the world. Carol has written 30 books and writes extensively on travel, food, wine and restaurants. She has been the chairman of the British Guild of Travel Writers twice, is a member of the Society of Authors, was chairperson of her local history society and is on the board of an environmental charity.



Jon Wyand, a multi award winning photographer has been shooting wine as his speciality for 20 years, travelling extensively in Europe and the Americas. He has illustrated a number books as well as two of his own on Burgundy. He works with magazines in the US, UK and Europe.

COLUMN

Fine wine and stereotypes



SHOBANARAYAN

shares her take on fine wine and everyday wine in the time of Coronavirus

It is the Chinese followed by the Americans that care about cellaring and aging wine. The British and Australians, as it turns out, enjoy drinking their wines but are not obsessed about aging them

In late April, Areni Global, the British wine research firm released a report about who buys fine wine. There were some usual takeaways and some unusual ones. Few in the wine world, as it turns out, cares very much about sustainability, although you would expect that with the current focus on climate change, sustainable wines would be the most coveted.

But what are fine wines really? It depends on who you ask. This report categorizes “fine wines” as those that are priced at or above \$75. This is a sensible rule. A winemaker friend in Napa, once told me that above \$75 was when the art of winemaking actually made a difference.

The big market for fine wines are the usual suspects: the UK, US, and China. Here are some surprising takeaways. You would think that the elderly rich would buy fine wines. As it happens, it is the younger people, those in their 30s that are buying fine wines. This could be linked to technology and the millionaires this industry has spawned. In terms of aging potential, it is the Chinese followed by the Americans that care about cellaring and aging wine. The British and Australians, as it turns out, enjoy drinking their wines but are not obsessed about aging them.

British customers care about complexity and regional typicity of the wine. The Chinese don’t care about this at all. What do Chinese wine buyers care about? They care if the wine

comes from a famous wine growing region. This is, of course, the stereotype about brand-obsessed Chinese. But the Chinese also care about vintage. And a number of Chinese who buy fine wines is a whopping two-third of the wine buying market. In comparison, only 7% of the Americans who drink wine spend money on fine wines and just 10% of UK wine drinkers buy expensive wines. China has some 35.2 million people spending and buying fine wine which is perhaps why it has become the most important wine market in the world.

India doesn’t feature in the fine wine market at all, either in the buying or making of it. For Indians, figuring out an everyday drinking wine is the current challenge, given Covid restrictions and the lockdowns imposed by various states.

What is your everyday drinking wine? What is your favourite varietal? Please don’t say Pinot Noir. It reeks of “Sideways” the movie and a safe bet; a cop-out really; one that you cannot go wrong with. Pinots are the last stop for most oenophiles. Since I cannot afford DRC (Domaine de la Romanée Conti), I have to depend on the Marlborough region of New Zealand, where good and affordable pinots are made, and subsequently make their way to India.

Unfortunately for the other varietals, the grape that makes its home in Burgundy has cachet and evokes prose. Who can forget Miles’ – a character

in the movie, Sideways – passionate speech on the virtues of Pinot Noirs.

“...it’s a hard grape to grow...it’s thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It’s...not a survivor like Cabernet, which can just grow anywhere and, uh, thrive even when it’s neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention.... And in fact it can only grow in these really specific, little, tucked-away corners of the world. And, only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot’s potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, oh its flavours, they’re just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and... ancient on the planet.” Almost makes one want to move to Burgundy and taste these ancient flavours.

Few in India make good quality Pinot Noir. The closest to “Indian” you can get is the excellent Indian Creek Pinot Noir from Navarro Vineyards in Mendocino, California. I say this in jest of course, because Indian is a part of its name and it is currently not available in India. Still, it is a good wine. Many Indian wine producers stay away from Pinot Noir and gravitate towards Cabernet Sauvignon for the same reason that Miles alluded to it in his soliloquy: Cabernet is a hardier grape to grow.

So we come back to the question, what wine are you drinking during lockdown? Since most of us aren’t travelling, it is a good time to explore Indian wines. Here in Bangalore, summer is in full swing and so sparkling wines and rosés have become part of every Zoom catch-up call among friends. We are opening Chandon Brut to savour with our book clubs.

Now here’s the paradox. Good sparkling wines are an exception to the rule that wine is always more expensive in India than abroad. You can get good Brut from Grover Zampa, Chandon, Sula and other brands for around ₹1,500. In the US, good sparkling wine costs about the same. Indian sparkling wines taste fresh and are perfect



for the summer. Chilled well and served with fresh strawberries, they can ward off lockdown blues. Poured in a nice Champagne glass, you can almost trick the mind into thinking you are in, well – Champagne, popping some bubbly!

The trend in Champagne is towards what are called “grower” Champagnes, which means the grapes used to produce the wines are grown in vineyards owned by the winery. While large Champagne brands source their grapes from 60 to 80 growers, these grower Champagnes are similar to “Estate bottled” wines in that the whole process from growing to bottling happens in-house often under the watchful eye of one person. A reputed producer and grower is Jacques Selosse who cultivates his vines in a completely natural way. His “Substance,” a 100% Chardonnay, Blanc de Blancs is from a single vineyard in Avize and made in a unique solera system. Some grower Champagnes available here such as Chartogne Taillet, Agrapart and Laherte Frères are imported by Sonarys. Laherte Frères is unusual in that it uses a greater proportion of Pinot Meunier grapes, somewhat akin to the much higher-rated Jerome Prevost Champagnes made exclusively with Pinot Meunier.

All of which leads us back to the first question: what if your everyday drinking wine is now limited to the ones produced in India since you cannot travel? Well, if you are dependent on local Indian brands, here is a tip: get a decanter. It is a great way to soften tannic, over-oaked Indian wines. ♦

Moët & Chandon: the Champagne House that produces the Indian sparkling wine, Chandon in Nashik

Indian sparkling wines taste fresh and are perfect for the summer. Chilled well and served with fresh strawberries, they can ward off lockdown blues