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# Sommelier INDIA

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## COLUMN



SHOBANARAYAN

As the Indian wine consumer gains confidence, will our wine terms change, or will they be forever linked to European terms?

# Is there an Indian way of tasting wine?

After my last column for this magazine, a male reader who lives abroad wrote the following response on Twitter. “As one of Indian extraction (the Asian, not the American, varietal), I’m forever irked by the repetition, in many wine reviews, of the same tired analogies – toffee and coffee, citrus and berries, leather and tannin, oak and pine, and the appallingly generic ‘herbal’, ‘fruity’ and ‘spicy’.”

Just you wait until Indians get in on the act! Then you shall read about: “A shade of Sitafal that also favors Falsa. Or “An after taste of Amla with a barely sensed whisper of Ber...” And don’t even get me started on the varieties of mango... But wait. How about, “A suggestion of scorched cumin with a nose of nutmeg” and “A greeting of Garam Masala with a tinge of Tulsi.” Or “A clue of cloves with a mention of mace...” The sommelier who ventures to use ‘fruity’ or ‘spicy’ shall be punished in this world with a withering arched eyebrow!

Sitafal is the *Annona Squamosa*, a cousin of the Soursop and the Cherimoya. Falsa is *Grewia Asiatica*. It looks like a blueberry, but has chewable stones, and a flavour profile so exquisite, it is worthy of its own reviews. Amla is *Phyllanthus Emblica*, aka Indian gooseberry,

revered in Ayurveda as a cure-all. Ber is *Ziziphus Mauritiana*, which in spite of the Mauritius in its name is the Indian jujube. And everyone knows garam masala, tulsi and cumin.

Humans have invented passages and shortcuts. We know how to transport music online, thus bringing Ravi Shankar and Rachmaninoff to our living rooms. How wonderful it would be if we could transport scent through the Internet too. If you could click on a wine bottle that is displayed on your computer and smell the aroma of berries, cedar and spices, thus indicating an Australian Shiraz, you could decide in an instant whether you wanted to buy the bottle or move on to a different varietal. But touch and smell have eluded software developers and AI, thank God. In order to hug a friend or smell a wine, you need to be present in person. Which brings us to the question of this column – a riff on A.K. Ramanujam’s famous essay, “Is there an Indian way of thinking?”

Is there an Indian way of drinking? Is there an Indian way of tasting and describing wine? By some estimates, described in Magandeeep Singh’s book, “The Indian Spirit,” fermentation and distillation are ancient practices in India, described in our epics and poems. K.T. Achaya in his important book, “Indian Food – A Historical

Companion”, talks about how Sita promises to pour a thousand jars of wine into the River Ganga, if her exiled party were to return home safe. Once Rama returns to Ayodhya, he feeds Sita a spiced wine called *Maireya* with his own hands. Meanwhile the people of Ayodhya were happily indulging in drunken orgies with the smell of wine all around the city. There are many drinking scenes in the Mahabharata and indeed, the Yadava clan is finally killed in a drunken brawl.

Both Singh’s book and earlier essays talk about *Kapisayani*, a wine made from white grapes, imported from Kapis in Afghanistan. Another wine is *Harahuraka*, which is made from black grapes imported from Harahur, Afghanistan. The Vedas describe intoxicating spirits, distilled from fermented kadamba and mahua flowers, along with dates and raisins. Even now *Madhira*, the Sanskrit word for wine, is still used in our Hindi poems and Bollywood lyrics and, of course, in *shairis* and *ghazals*. There are many mentions of alcoholic drinks in Sanskrit literature, ranging from the pre-Aryan *Sura* – made of rice flour and barley – to a variety of *arishtas* or potent remedies named in Ayurveda. In fact, I was delighted to learn that an Indian wine label called *Kinvah* was the name of a wine festival held in the Mauryan era.

If you own a vineyard in India, you have a variety of choices with respect to names. You can go the Western route or the Indian route. Sula usually elects for Indian names, a practice which signifies confidence: *Rasa Shiraz*, *Sula Dindori*. *Grover’s*, based in Bangalore goes the Western route with its *Insignia* and *Signet* ranges. *Fratelli* used to go with Western names but recently chose *J’Noon*. Why not choose something like *Akluj*, which is easy to pronounce even for non-Indians, and references the terroir in that most French of ways?

The Indian wine consumer is evolved enough not to need European pretensions. Particularly when we can come up with authentically Indian names like *Mandala* or *Deva*. Contrast that with

*Chateau d’Ori*, sans provenance or soul, located in Maharashtra. Give me *Rasa* any day.

Words manipulate the wine-drinking experience, something that *Baba Shiv*, professor of marketing at Stanford University’s graduate school of business, knows well. He has done numerous studies about how wine descriptions affect our experience of the wine. In one study, he connected subjects to an MRI machine and gave them wine to drink. Now that’s a study I’d like to participate in. When he told them that they were drinking expensive wine, the pleasure receptors of their brains lit up. In other words, just telling someone that they are drinking expensive stuff makes the brain and body change in behaviour. The next time you pour a friend a glass of red wine, tell her that it is a *Château Margaux*. This simple statement will enhance her pleasure.

The most common words that we use to describe wine are *finesse*, *structure*, *acidity*, *aroma*, *balance*, *layers*, *harmony*, *nuance* and *texture*. My point in this column is that we need an Indian way of thinking about wine. We need words that make sense to us. Does the wine smell like *amla* or *Indian gooseberry*? Does its tartness remind you of *tamarind*? Is it viscous like *draksharistam*? Is it mineral, like drinking water from a copper pot?

One sommelier described a *Barolo* as tasting like “*Baryshnikov* in a glass.” If you open this door, India has oodles of poetic descriptions to fit our wines. *Mariam-aunty* of Kerala could describe a *Malbec* as having the “balance and spikiness of very good fish moilee”. *Subhashishbabu* of *Darjeeling* could describe a particular *Cabernet Sauvignon* as “flabby – like the *Ganga* in spate”. Or you could sip a *Chenin Blanc* and say, “Inspid, like my mother-in-law’s *vindaloo*.”

We Indians have tasted wines for over 5000 years. We need to reach into our history, heritage and local vocabulary to describe wines in a way that resonates and makes sense to us. Goa with its prodigious practice in *Sussegado* – the state of contentment – would be a good place to start this exercise. ♦

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