

WHO'S WHO IN INDIA

In retrospect, gentlemen like Michael Broadbent and Hugh Johnson were considered queer birds in England when they began writing about wine fifty years ago. Today, India is witnessing the genesis of a new era of wine consumption and a number of figures are in the starting gates to make their mark on the first generation of Indian wine drinkers.

India is an emerging wine market in which the culture of wine barely existed until a few years ago. Of the country's 1.1 billion inhabitants, fewer than a million people drink wine, and total consumption is still less than 7 million litres. That is barely a teaspoon full of wine per capita each year. Of that volume, only 1.5 million litres are imported. Heavy taxes on imported wine of up to 267% mean the local wine industry has reaped the majority of the benefits of the emerging wine culture.

The profile of the consumer has been changing, too. Once the reserve of the educated elite, more and more middle-class people, especially women, now take to wine. The rise in consumption can be attributed to factors including the perceived health benefits of wine; the fact that wine is lower in alcohol than spirits; its image as a "lifestyle product"; its compatibility with food; its role in entertaining foreign guests; globalisation; and rising prosperity.

Over the past five years, since the government liberalized the import of wine, consumption of imported wines has grown at an average clip of 25% in spite of the high duties. The growth rate, at 35-40%, has been even higher for Indian wines. Most of the increased consumption has been in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore, in that order, with Kolkata catching up fast.

Analysts expect the current rate of growth to sustain itself, taking consumption to about 60 million litres in 10 years. If taxes are lowered, a distinct possibility after the intervention of WTO, that estimate may be conservative.

The information and statistics available on wine and patterns of consumption in India are scant and not always accurate. No authentic data is available on

how many Indians drink alcohol, although most agree that less than half do. Most, though, limit their consumption to beer and whisky. Wine Business International sent out a questionnaire to more than 500 wine industry professionals in India and an email to 5,500 wines lovers registered at the Indian Wine Academy, to learn more. Based on the response received, we compiled the following Who's Who in the Indian wine industry. Further categories will be added in future and posted on our website.

1. Best Importer

Until recently there were fewer than 30 importers in India, with the top three controlling more than half the market. Although the number has risen to 50 during the past year, it could reach 100 within a year. There was no surprise in this category. Based on its size, portfolio and market penetration, Brindco, in Delhi, was voted far ahead of Sonarys, in Mumbai, as India's best importer. "Best collection of wines" and a portfolio "that will make people jealous" were some of the responses. Sonarys, which edged out Global Free Tax Traders for second place, was commended for its better knowledge of wines by many respondents. "They understand wine and have a good selection" was a remark echoed by the majority, whereas Global "is slowly arriving there". Mohan Exports, as "the oldest importer", also garnered some votes.

2. Best Wine Producer

Amid the many nominees, five or six producers stood out. Surprisingly, Champagne Indage came out ahead due to its larger sales and market share, as well as its status as "a pioneer of wine production in India". According to a knowledgeable

respondent who tracks Champagne Indage's performance, "it has the highest number of brands and varieties to offer. It targets each and every market segment from the low- to the high-profile consumers. It has the highest market share with 36 International Awards for its wines." Because of its commitment to quality and diversity, Sula Vineyards was a close second. While Sula has "few brands to appreciate", it has "a good brand perception and market penetration". Though Grover Vineyard was predictably in third place, Vintage Wines got a special mention because of its quality. Surprisingly, there were supporters for Seagram's Nine Hills, which crushed its first vintage last year.

3. Best Wine Retailer

Wine retail has been a very low-key affair in India due to the stringent and independent sales policies in various states. Poor storage and heavy duties have kept the sale of imported wines insignificant. Sales can only be through government-licensed channels. Until recently, supermarkets were not allowed to sell wine, a policy that is being liberalised gradually in many states.

Surprisingly, in Mumbai Patel Wines edged out Shah Wines, despite the latter's exhaustive range, free home-delivery policy and better-than-average storage conditions. No strong reasons emerged for Patel Wines' lead. Modern Wines is also a name to watch. Air-conditioning was installed last year, it has increased its range of labels, and it could be a strong challenger in this category next year.

In Delhi, the retail situation has been even less enviable than in Mumbai, both in terms of storage and portfolio spread. Until a couple of years ago, retail sales of

imported wines were not allowed. Only last year, retailers started paying attention to wine sales in the liquor retail shops. Although prices are generally fixed by excise laws, government-owned shops compete with private vendors.

DSIDC, the Delhi-government-owned retail shop in Greater Kailash II, added a separate air-conditioned wine section last year. With an excellent display, "a variety in brands", "nice placements" and the available choice, it won hands down. A couple of its stores in other locations in Delhi also impressed some respondents. A few positive articles on the internet site delWine regarding proper storage and portfolio perhaps induced consumers take note of this store.

There was a surprising absence of mentions of retail stores in cities like Bangalore and Chandigarh, perhaps because choice is rather limited.

Next year will be an exciting one for this category. With supermarkets being allowed to sell wine, these air-conditioned outlets with massive buying power will become important retailers and the trade may see improvements in some stores and the closure of others.

4. Best Hotel Wine Lists

We divided the winners in two categories, Delhi and Mumbai, as most responses mentioned only these two. Wine lists were chosen as the criterion, though wine prices were not necessarily a factor in respondents' choices. Although the Hotel Taj Palace, with its list of 498 labels, came out on top in Delhi, ITC Maurya Sheraton, The Oberoi and The Imperial were also commended. Diva Restaurant, run by wine connoisseur and chef-owner Ritu Dalmia, was the top choice of stand-alone restaurants, not only for its elaborate list, but also its affordable prices, storage, service and wine knowledge.

Although some respondents mentioned ITC Grand Maratha, Taj Hotels took the credit in Mumbai. Surprising omissions from our analysts point of view included the Oberoi, Leela and Grand Hyatt hotels, which have excellent wine lists. The stand-alone category in Mumbai was won hands down by Indigo

Restaurant, which not only has a great wine list but good service, Mediterranean cuisine and wine-knowledge. The prices, though, are aimed at upper-end customers and, as one professional wrote, "could be more affordable".

5. Best Wine Club

Wine Club culture has been slowly catching on in India, with cities beyond the big three also capturing some of the action. The Delhi Wine Club was an almost unanimous top choice. This could be due to its educational website, which displays the club's activities in detail and keeps the visitors informed about the wine scene in India with "news, which is up-to-date and important for wine enthusiasts". The Bangalore Wine Club, perhaps the first of its kind in India, was voted second and the Wine Society in Delhi was also mentioned.

6. Best Indian Sommelier

There are not many sommeliers in India. Although Daniela Reynaud from France "has 40 years of experience in the Indian market" and is "an old hat in India as a wine educator with Sopexa", we chose to disqualify foreigners. Rajesh Batla, the Assistant Food & Beverage manager of the Taj Palace Hotel, who has completed three parts of the WSET and is enrolling in the MW programme, is an ace, but is not yet well known. Magandeep Singh in Delhi thus got the top votes. Singh trained in France and, on his return to India, after working briefly with Sonarys as a trainer and in marketing support, has been freelancing.

7. Best Wine Journalist

Due to limited interest in wine, wine journalism is relatively new in India. Though quite a few such journalists are now emerging, their knowledge of wines is often limited. Asit Chandmal, who is "spectacular with words and demystification", represents the old guard. Alok Chandra also came out ahead of other figures such as Reshmi Dasgupta, Vikram Doctor, Nandini Sengupta and Trilok Desai. There were also many votes for Vir Sanghvi, editor

QUOTE UNQUOTE

» Brindco has a portfolio of wines that makes others jealous. «



Aman Dhall, owner of Brindco

of the daily Hindustan Times, who is a prolific food writer and added wine to his repertoire over the past couple of years. Sourish Bhattacharyya was also a favourite with many readers. Subhash Arora, editor of delWine, a regular contributor to www.indianwineacademy.com and our correspondent in India came out on top. "He writes with a passion and expresses his viewpoints fearlessly and without trying to be popular."

8. Most Influential Wine Journalist

Vir Sanghvi, who has been a food writer and critic for many years, started writing about wines recently. He also anchors a television show and appears in several others, which gives him unparalleled exposure. "He is a common man's journalist, who bridges the divide between food and wine," said one voter. Asit Chandmal was also mentioned "as the first Indian wine writer with features that were simply the best". Still, Sourish Bhattacharyya, whose "insight into the Indian market makes everyone take note", came out just ahead of Asit Chandmal.

9. Most Influential Wine Person

The influence of individuals in a nascent wine industry can be due to various factors, not least of which is purchasing power. Ms Shirin Batliwala, VP of the Taj group of hotels, who looks after the central purchasing of the group, was the overall top choice. Wine producers can also wield much influence. While Mr. Shamrao Chougule, the patriarch of the Champagne Indage Group, a pioneer in the Indian wine Industry, was voted the most influential person in this context, Rajeev Samant, of Sula, was the darling of some voters. ■