



INDIA: RAJIV SINGHAL CHAMPAGNE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

India has seen a spirited journey in the past few years when it comes to the alcohol and beverages industry. A more stylised and informed customer base is growing with pace and luxury spirits are slowly making their mark in the country. *Nikhil Merchant* uncorks the bubbling trend of the world famous beverage with *BRIC Magazine's* nominated Autumn Person of India, champagne ambassador, Rajiv Singhal.

Many years ago, my first association with champagne came when I took along a bottle of Moët & Chandon to a private party at a millionaire's residence in the city of Mumbai. The invite was fancy, arriving in a velvet envelope delivered by a liveried chauffeur and the dinner itself was to be a seven-course affair. Going empty-handed would have been a complete no-no in my book. It was difficult to choose a gift for someone who had nearly everything but I finally narrowed in on a bottle of champagne, which turned out to be the perfect gift as it denoted celebration for someone with fine tastes.

A Bubbling Proposition

Many years later, sipping on a glass of Krug with Rajiv Singhal, the Champagne Ambassador to India, and engaging him in a tête-à-tête, I learnt the finer nuances about champagne and its hold on current markets with an in-depth view from Rajiv himself. Wine and Champagne became a part of Rajiv's life during his student days at Yale University. His story ran similar to mine: as a student Rajiv would carry a bottle of wine whenever he was invited by his friends for a meal, a ritual he indulged in regularly since he did not know how to cook. He got lucky when he made friends with a New Haven storekeeper who taught him the basics of wine. Little did he know then that wine would become a part of his profession in the years to come.

Rajiv's history and journey into the wine world is speckled with opportunities and dream chasing, which he passionately chose to embrace. His journey started in 1996 when he became one of the founding members and secretary of 'Table de France', a wine society set up by the French Embassy. In the mid-90s, when it was a lesser known drink in India, he started to building wine culture in the scotch guzzling society and created some very unique brand neutral initiatives around wine and food, especially from France. He says: "I conceived wine education in [the style of] a proper formal classroom, delivered by decorated sommeliers who trained the first set of wine knowledgeable professionals in the country." He went on to train almost 3,000 people across wine drinking cities in India between 2001 and 2008.

Within a few years, he had created the landscape for Champagne to run rampant in the niche market of India. The Comité Champagne noted his efforts and asked him to establish the Champagne program in India. He states: "Champagne is a statement.

Over the years Champagne has built a solid notoriety in India and, within wine, Champagne has the largest share." During this time the Champagne Classroom has been the platform for the training. These classrooms were typically not commercially inclined to bring various Champagne brands into India. They were exercises in popularising wine from the Champagne region in India. "The Champagne houses look after themselves and want us to lay the groundwork for the Champagne region," explains Rajiv. "We focus on brand neutral training and communication and building loyalty to Champagne. The houses support us in what we do because it's for a common cause".

Rajiv was bestowed with the title of Ambassador of Champagne to India by the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC). He went on to set up the Bureau du Champagne in India in 2008 and is quite straightforward in saying: "The mandate of the Bureau is simple – it is to inform and educate decision makers in India about Champagne and to protect the appellation.

Being the only such ambassador in India, my job is to plan promotion activities and sensitisation programs for the target market. I've created very enjoyable activities around this mandate. I enjoy Champagne, and love to share it with others."

More recently the President of the French Republic has appointed him a Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite, the second highest civilian role in France that can be awarded to foreigners, in recognition of his significant role in developing the French wines (particularly Champagne) market in India.

The Fluted Elixir

Rajiv not only holds the coveted title of Champagne Ambassador, but has his fingers dipped in many other pies as well; he is also at the forefront of a private equity fund as Managing Director of Morpheus Capital Advisors, India, a INR 400 crore (£40 million, \$68 million) independent private equity fund. Extending his passion for imparting knowledge on wine and Champagne, he is also the Editor and Publisher of *Five Wine & Champagne India* magazine, which is India's first and only officially registered magazine for wine. Business commentators in *Forbes*, while since 1993 he's also been a partner at Ritu Overseas, an international trading and consulting firm. "This company is the platform for my entrepreneurial actions. I identified

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