

# The French invasion

The Gauls are here to lay siege to your palate, exults

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The cheeseboard — at a store near you! With Sopexa's help, it will become a distinct possibility, says Rajiv Singhal (far right), in the picture with sommeliers Thomas Lamude and Daniele Raulet



**P**icture this: you're at your neighbourhood store, organising your weekly (or monthly) shopping, when someone asks if you'd like to try some French cheese. You might be tempted to brush off the intruder. If you do, you'll be doing yourself great disservice. For sometime in December, and perhaps a part of January, the French marketing and promotion board for food and beverages is launching a retail drive in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore.

From French dairy produce — cheeses, cream, butter, yoghurt and mixes such as *crème brûlée* — to frozen breads (*croissants*!), jams and condiments, mustards, fresh and preserved olives, mushrooms, fresh fruits and frozen vegetables, juices, syrups, chocolates and a range of delicatessen products will quite literally be pushed down Indian throats. Test, taste, then buy — the philosophy for Sopexa (as the board is called)

is simple: to promote the French way of eating and drinking in India.

And heading the effort is Rajiv Singhal, who has been associated with sporadic events for Sopexa for five years, and last year became Sopexa's first full-time charge d' mission when it opened its office in India. Right here, right now, Singhal is sipping delicately at his Beaujolais Visage. A promotion of French wines "by the glass" is just petering off in Delhi, to which it has travelled after debuts in Bangalore and Mumbai. Restaurants where sales of French wine were negligible (diners preferring new age wines from Chile and Australia instead) have reported a spurt in the sale of Bouilly Fume and Cotes du Rhone and Gewurztraminer.

Another wine promotion will kick off soon, this time involving liquor vends. Since advertising, or tastings at the retail end are not permitted, Sopexa hopes to rope in buyers to take away French wines along with

the offer of free gifts (glassware, wine openers) and the possibility of a jackpot prize through a draw of lots. "The French focus on India is going to be extremely strong over the next few months," says Singhal.

He isn't the only one pushing French produce in India. Buoyed by the success the Italians have had in the same space, and by their continuing promotions in India through various "festivals", importers have tried to plug the gaps with things French. And there's no gain-saying that while Italian cuisine (and design) might have a strong following in India because of its early start, it is French that still rules European palates.

Not that India has been completely isolated. Already, 40,000 tonnes of French gourmet produce finds its way to the country, though 80 per cent of it is confined to institutional buyers, chiefly hotels. In the case of the wines, while 75 per cent of the 4,00,000 bottles of wine that

were imported into India till 2001, when quantitative restrictions were lifted, were French (and so what if they were plonk), today, of the two million bottles of wines that are imported, the French are responsible for 50 per cent of it. "Year on year, we've had a 30 per cent growth," says Singhal, "and the value terms are higher even than the volume turns."

If these figures are gobbledegook to you, like Sanjay Tandon, you may find the changing retail scenario riveting. Tandon's Epicure is the largest importer of French food products into the country and



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yes, he says, much of the fresh produce — especially the fresh cheeses that don't keep beyond 45 days, go straight to the hotels. "But with retail chains coming up, investment in infrastructure will support the French supply chain," he points out. "That's when you'll be able to pop a frozen croissant into the microwave, and have a warm croissant for breakfast," beams Singhal.

Sopexa doesn't make any money from its activities — it is merely a promotional body "that is about impact rather than sales", says Singhal. "We're here to help others promote French produce,

not sell it for them." It is the likes of Tandon, and Brindco's Aman Dhall, who is possibly the largest importer of wines into the country, who stand to gain through such promotional activities.

In the retail promotions that kick off next month, so far only Hypercity in Mumbai has been tied up as a partner, though Le Marche in Delhi and Metro in Bangalore may also partner with it. "It's intended to inform customers," says Singhal. Where wines are concerned, possibly 40 stores in Mumbai and some in Bangalore will participate, though Delhi will be left out because of its archaic excise laws.

The next time, therefore, when you want a friend who's flying in from Paris to bring you some Roquefort or Comte cheese, and he won't agree to anything that's stronger than Brie or Camembert, you know that you'll be able to saunter across to a store nearby (or at least drive to a shop at some distance) to find the finest French produce, *foie gras* included. ■