



Rajiv Singhal is Ambassador of Champagne to India. Rajiv has a taste for finer things of life – literally. He learnt about wines as a graduate student at Yale, and now manages an international consulting firm that gives him the room to juggle many interests. He heads the Office of Champagne in India (representing the CIVC, Comite Interprofessionel du Vin de Champagne) as its first Director, and takes his role seriously. An encounter with Rajiv addresses some routine and other not so routine questions regarding the Indian market, nuances of Champagne marketing and what the name means beyond the wine in the bottle, and he addresses these questions with his trademark sense of humour.

How do you perceive the future of Champagne consumption in India, considering retail availability is almost absent?

For an emerging market like India, the availability is not bad, on retail. The market is presently defined by on-premise, but retail presence is ramping up in select outlets in major cities inspite of the complex regulatory mechanisms. The omnipresent neighbourhood bootlegger is now even on facebook! Our own crystal ball shows a bright future, given the changing lifestyles of the emerging Indian, who wants nothing but the best and gets it when he wants it.

Your toughest challenge when addressing the F&B industry about Champagne?

From experience, introducing a product line in India is always challenging. At times one can feel the inertia in the F&B industry slowing down the acceptability of new themes, such as more styles besides the brut non-vintage or Champagne not just as an aperitif, but beyond and through the meal. Our communication campaign is set on the foundation of continuous (and even repetitive) learning, especially given that the levels of information in India can be rather rudimentary. Hence, we traversed a very tough terrain to incorporate the first hotel school modules in our education platform to “catch them young”.

Do you believe that awareness and responsibility towards Champagne improved in the past few years?

As a consequence of our very focused activities, awareness of the consumer for Champagne and responsibility of the trade towards Champagne have risen to a new level in the last few years. Champagne's past association with Indian royalty lends a very strong notoriety. Champagne has been a must have on any wine list, some restaurants are packing more depth into their champagne offer, and even getting resident sommeliers to “help” guests.

With the rest of the world constantly promoting 'Champagne by the glass' do you foresee in the future such programs becoming more popular in India?

A coupe de Champagne is indeed the way to make Champagne more approachable to its target group – it helps to lower the price barrier and affords the opportunity to taste more types of champagne. In India, “by the glass” is popular where it is offered. As the markets learn to cope with the recessionary trends, the merits of this program will make it an imperative on wine lists.

Identify one hampering factor in champagne promotion in the country?

Without doubt the oppressive government levies, which are completely devoid of sanity, and the complex regulatory mechanism. This near impossible environment needed someone like us to lead the charge and set the rules of the game. The costs of developing this

market are prohibitive – we have taken a long term horizon.

CIVC playing an important role in safekeeping the name – any interesting 'confrontation' in India?

Champagne only comes from Champagne; it is a globally protected appellation that follows a tradition of wine making dating back a three centuries. It is disgraceful that some companies choose to abuse our reputation and try to masquerade as Champagne for petty commercial benefits. It is our mission to expose this misinformation, because it prevents the consumers from taking informed decisions, besides misleading them.

What prompted you into this business? What would be the highlights of your activities in the next few years?

I started wine promotion activities about 12 years ago... we are the pioneers and have helped define the framework and structure a fledgling industry. Today most follow what we initiate, and have even xeroxed our models (albeit in dinghy basement shops)! It is exhilarating when our actions are seen to chart the course that the markets will take. Of course this brings more responsibility and we recognise the need to constantly innovate to succeed in implementing new ideas.

Within the complex regulations the optimal plan cannot look beyond this evening! Our efforts to understand the Indian market for Champagne and the mindset of the Indian consumer towards Champagne will continue. We intend to emphasize the various styles and types of Champagne to various markets across India, and synchronise with food. I assure you Champagne pairs perfectly with good pakodas! We might do a book on Champagne with *Indian food* – who knows?

Champagne as experience of joy or Champagne as a wine with meal - what appeals to you on a personal level?

Champagne right through the day!! A winter Sunday afternoon brunch on the terrace with the family is my Champagne moment, an expression of joy and the wine with a meal. Enjoy Champagne when you can, because lack of it is known to cause severe withdrawal symptoms.

Champagne is always too expensive and other sparkling wines can be good - what do you say to that statement?

Champagne is the undisputed maharaja of wines. A drink around which conversation flows, a drink which evokes the emotion of romance, joy, sophistication... Rather uniquely, Champagne brings to your table the commitment of traceability and the assurance that it stood the test of almost 50 rigorous procedures. Why settle for a lesser known “cheap” substitute? Other sparklings can be good, but I wonder if Sir Winston Churchill would have bothered his troops to invade their land for them!