

It all began when Rajiv Singhal as a student, first at the London School of Economics and later at Yale university, would invariably supply the wine whenever he was invited to a friend's place for dinner. "Being unable to cook, I would try to get an invitation to dinner from friends who were able to cook or had wives who could cook. So, whenever I went for dinner to the friend's place. I would carry a bottle of wine," says Rajiv.

He would not only select the wine with care but also take along special vintages to match the occasion and the food. Word spread fast that if you invite Rajiv you will get a bottle of wine to enjoy with the meal. "So I earned a reputation of becoming a wine supplier at most social gatherings," adds Rajiv with a smile.

select a wine to go with a particular meal," he adds. Though the course at Yale was for a year, Rajiv got an opportunity to work on a special project for International Monetary Fund. "During my stint with IMF I worked under Willem Buiters, who was a connoisseur and had a strong fascination for the finer things in life. It was through him that I became aware of the finer details about wine."

In the summer of '93 he came back to India quite disillusioned with the project he was involved with. "I was a little disappointed with what I could have done as an economist. I did not find the project exciting or challenging as I had imagined it to be. I came back to get married but within myself I knew that the honeymoon with IMF was over for me."

Fine Wines

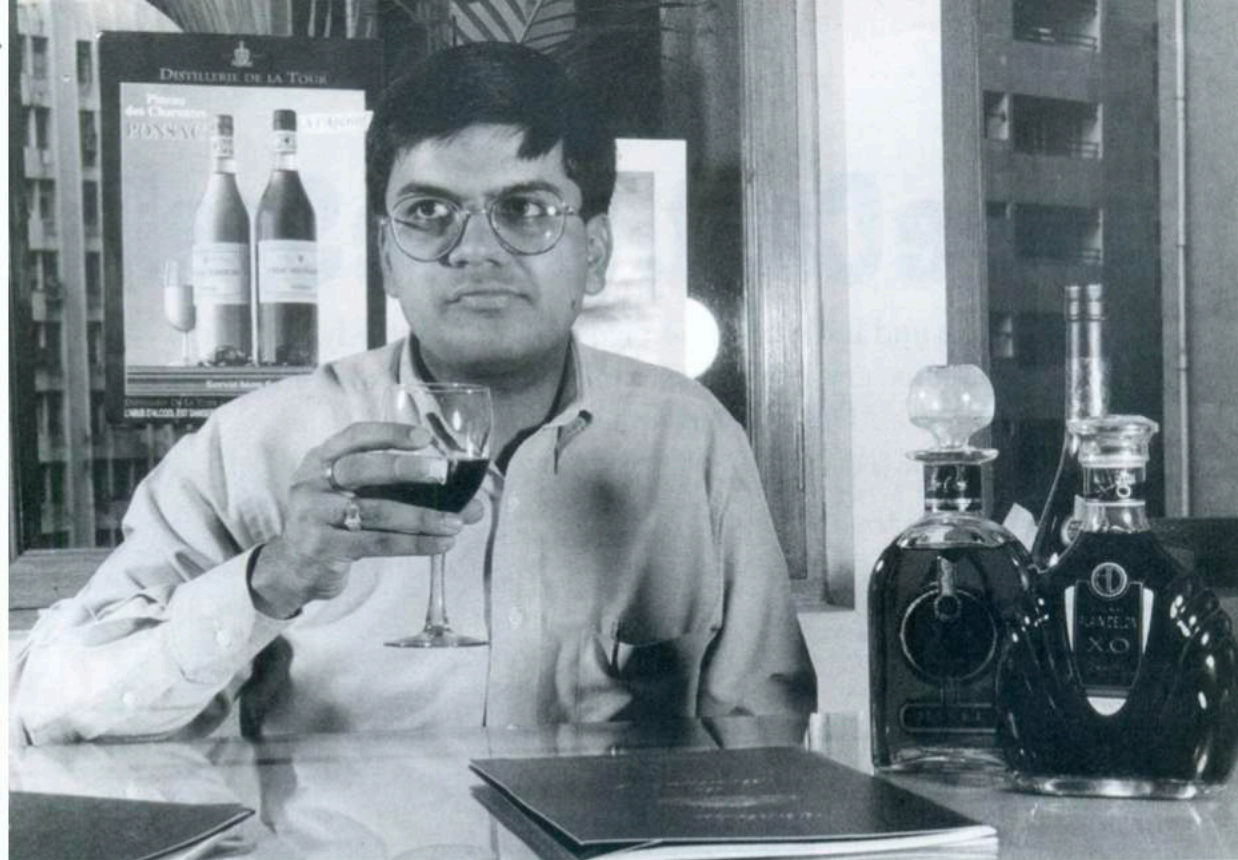
An economist from Yale, Rajiv Singhal intends to bring a select range of wines to the discerning Indian customer

Today Rajiv is busy promoting some of the most exclusive wines from the famous vineyards in France to the discerning Indian consumer. Currently under the banner *Wines of the World*, he has brought a select range of wines from the Loire Valley, Bordeaux, Beaujolais, Maconnais, Bourgogne and Cognac region. Interestingly Claude Blanchemaison, Ambassador of France in India launched Rajiv's venture by hosting a special wine tasting session. Ambassador Blanchemaison, who hails from the vicinity of the Loire Valley, holds wines of the Loire 'dear to his heart'. Says Rajiv, "He was glad to get a taste of home right here in the heart of Delhi."

While in India, Rajiv was not unaware of wines but admits that his awareness level was pretty low. In '90 he went to London School of Economics and after a year moved to Yale to complete his master's programme in economics. "Institutions like LSE and Yale are in itself a complete experience. At Yale I got an opportunity to attend wine evenings organised in the campus itself. Even at LSE there is an old tradition of hosting wine and cheese receptions. Through these sessions one learnt the nuances of enjoying wines and being able to

He set up his own company — Ritu Overseas. "I tried to leverage our traditional strength and the network that had been developed. My first venture was with the Shri Nityanand Steel Rolling Mills in Mumbai which belongs to my in-laws who are well established in the steel business for more than two decades. We tied up with LOSAL, a Spanish company who are pioneers in this field. But it was not successful because I had no direct control over the end result." After this Rajiv decided to work on his own and on projects which he could carry through till the end successfully. "But I discovered that in India it is a difficult task to deal with traditional business families. The mindset cannot be changed and these people are scared of entering new ventures," says Rajiv ruefully.

After this Rajiv decided to work on his own projects. But what made him launch exclusive French wines in the country? "In our country there has always been a fascination for high-priced luxury consumer items. I thought if I want to buy world famous luxury products which gives me good value for money then there are many others sharing my mindset. I was not disappointed when I brought Churchill — a traditional British chinaware



company which has an experience of 202 years in the field of pottery. Similarly, when this year I launched wines the response was overwhelming. We should admit that there is a certain snob value attached to these products and people do not mind paying a price for the taste of such wines. These products might not be the best but they are known all over the world to people who aspire to acquire the best."

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Though he is procuring wines from other vineyards he is concentrating mainly on the Loire valley. "They are the best produced wines on earth but it is the most neglected area," he says. In our country where people are mainly whiskey drinkers and beer-guzzlers, does he think people will opt for wines? Brushing off this belief, he quickly adds, "the low popularity is because of less availability or scarcity." However, he concedes that the wines are out of reach for a majority of Indian consumers since they are either available at duty free shops or at luxury hotels. But

through his company, he is trying to facilitate the consumer directly and even though there has been a hike in custom tariffs, he feels it has not deterred the consumers. Currently he is supplying wine to the French Embassy and the British High Commission. His company is also negotiating with four luxury hotels in the capital. Regarding his future plans, Rajiv says, "I hope the government will see reason and give us a quota through which we can directly import the wines. I would like to set up exclusive wine outlets all over the country. I am also planning to hold tasting sessions to promote our wines. It is very essential to create awareness for a product like wine now that it is easily accessible in India. Besides wine and chinaware I am also bringing French designer jewellery to the country. Korloff is a world known brand and we are planning to open an exclusive jewellery boutique." But vintage wines from the Loire valley will remain his core concern.

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Photographs: Swati Gao/okar