



# The Humble Evangelist



For him, getting his point across is what matters the most. He would categorically, and quite artfully, avoid talking about himself and steer conversation towards his bubbly. As the honorary Ambassador of Champagne, Rajiv Singhal takes his title quite seriously and believes that there should be no free promotional activities.

It's difficult to understand why a man wouldn't want to talk about him — after all, everyone seems to want to be a celebrity. Not Rajiv Singhal. Albeit being the champagne ambassador — a title bequeathed to him after he was handpicked by the French committee to safeguard champagne, the drink — he is reluctant to talk about his journey so far and his position of import.

For him, in his own words, "wine is about sharing". And, being the champagne ambassador — the person promoting Champagne as appointed by the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) — he should be known by all and sundry. He isn't. He is actually proud that there isn't much "literature" about him to look up.

"I don't normally talk too much about myself and my activity. I don't believe it is necessary. People, who know it, know it. People who know it, know that we do it best," he says stubbornly.

Singhal's own entry into this nascent market of wines in India is very much like the first grape vines that were grafted stock from overseas. As a student at Yale, he had always enjoyed wine. But once back in India, it wasn't a very easy task to find a good wine as it was for him abroad.

## The Age Of Ignorance

"At that time, the understanding of wine in India was nothing, but zero. I would even say negative. Except that there were shops which were called English Wine Shops, because English meant IMFL. The

word wine meant nothing in India. People didn't know wine existed. Some might say red, white," says Singhal.

"Wine in 1997 was sold as red or white. Most of the luxury hotels would say 'we have red', 'we have white'. I am the waiter but I don't come with the bottle. It comes from the bar. You ask for wine, I will bring you a glass. Drink it, don't drink it — I don't care I am going to charge you for it. That was the attitude with which it was served. People were doubly scared to open a bottle of wine because the corks would break. The bottles were fairly expensive and someone would be losing a large part of their salary," he reminisces.

"You have to understand that wine is something that is region specific. There are intricacies

associated to each wine's taste. If you start drinking wine from France versus wine from New Zealand and versus wine from India, their basics are completely different. If you are talking about grapes, which is the most important thing when it comes to wine, in France, region such as Burgundy, which is red dominated and regions such as Bordeaux, which is merlot dominated — are two unique tastes. And it is obvious to the person drinking it," he explains.

Wine in 1997 was sold as red or white. Call it providence or perseverance, but the ignorance sealed Singhal's fate with wines.

This was the scene of wine just over a decade ago in 1997. Call it providence or perseverance, but it sealed Singhal's fate with wine. On the insistence of a friend at the French embassy, Singhal got involved with wines.

However, on the business side, wines had officially arrived in India by this time. Thus arose the need to promote the drink locally and educate local consumers and make converts of them. For Singhal, this was the start of beautiful thing. He used his management consultancy background and put it to work for wine promotion.

## Bringing About Change

Because people are information hungry, there is this need to present as much data as is possible to assimilate in one go. And that is one fact that Singhal has used to its full

potential. "Even the tea or coffee that I present to you, people would want to know about it. It has come to that stage. India is still guzzling nation. But that is more traditional, historical. The availability of it is much simpler, much easier. 1997, it was that scenario. From 1997 to 2001, we built the market for wine with promotional activities where we were educating the people. And informing them about what they were imbibing," Singhal says describing his initial days of wine promoter.

According to him, those were the days when he had to make a tough decision. As an entrepreneur it wasn't easy for him to take on the mantle. He got out of the trade of alcoholic products because of the heavy and often complicated regulating policies associated with them and got completely into promotional activities. In 1997, no one understood the concept of wine promotion.

In fact, he was the first one to begin the wine promotion, as is known today. "As consultants, we exclusively and independently established and managed the French wines and food mandate in India between 2001 and 2008, we launched Austrian wine in 2001, and won the Champagne mandate in 2006. I look back at this journey with a lot of satisfaction — we fought odds and introduced hitherto unknown concepts and programmes to the Indian wine landscape — even if the medals may be intangible," Singhal says with pride. While he was in Sopexa, he introduced wine tasting for the hotel schools too. The idea came to him when he found out that hotel schools used wine bottles with water filled in it to teach students how to pour and serve.

Although he has arranged and since 2001 even conducted wine sessions, he now wants the method



As an entrepreneur it wasn't easy for him. He got out of the trade of alcoholic products because of the heavy and often complicated regulating policies associated with them and got completely into promotional activities.

of promotion to change. When Sopexa wanted him to continue in the same vein as he had begun, he refused and returned to dedicate all his time to his own management consultancy firm. "Having established the framework of the French wine mandate in chartered territory, when they expected me to churn out "more of the same" and presented a kind of parochial mission for the future, I chose to move on," he says.

And since he won the Champagne mandate in 2006, he has been solely dedicated. He is the name for Champagne but he refuses to be the face of it. He says for him the wine is more important. "Why is Rajiv Singhal important? French wine is more important." ❁