

Indian wine-taster sips his way to success

## My summer wine is really made of all these things....

**N Vidyasagar**

AS A student, first at the London School of Economics and later at Yale university, Rajiv Singhal would invariably supply the wine whenever he was invited to a friend's place for dinner. Singhal would choose the vino with care, taking along special vintages to match the occasion and the food — the simple quid pro quo being a bottle of wine in return for a meal. Needless to add, Singhal was the most sought-after guest for dinner during those bachelor days.

Gradually, his interest in wines turned him into a connoisseur and, soon, this healthy interest in wines translated into a thriving business venture — Ritu Overseas.

Today, 28-year-old Singhal brings wine from till-now obscure vineyards in France to the discerning Indian consumer. Of the seven major vineyards in France, Singhal's company imports the choicest wines into the country from three of them.

Fittingly, it was none other than Ambassador of France in India

Claude Blanchemaison who launched Singhal's business enterprise by hosting a special wine-tasting session in the Capital last month. The ambassador, himself, comes from Loire valley, a region where the wine is particularly good. He was glad to get a taste of home, right here in the heart of Delhi.

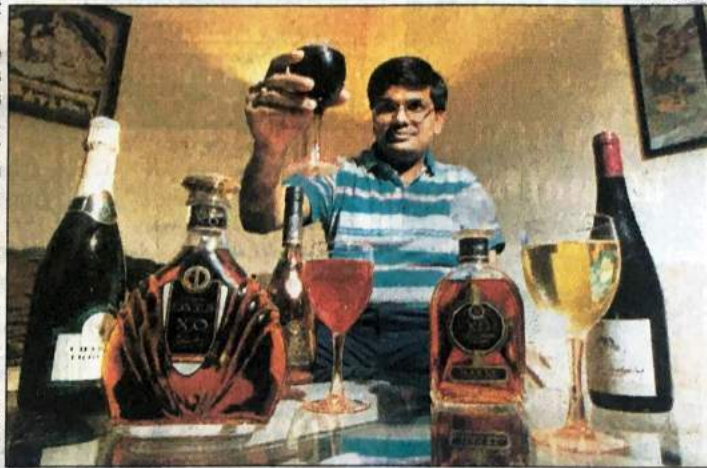
"They are the best produced wines on earth," says Singhal. Last year, during Queen Elizabeth II's visit, it was he who brought to India traditional English chinaware created by the 202-year-old British pottery company, Churchill.

With import restrictions and duties ranging from a steep 155 to 350 per cent on these wines from

Le Chateau de Monguereuse, Singhal says that the demand for these exclusive wines is steadily growing in the country. For instance, 30,000 cases of French wine (12 bottles per case) were imported into the country last year alone. The numbers more or less clinched his decision to

launch his own wine business in India. The range of wines that he imports into the country include Saumur Blanc 97 matured for a minimum of two to four years, the salmon-pink Rose d Anjou which is best known in the Loire valley, besides the Saumur Brut which is served with dessert.

*K K Laskar*



"There is a certain snobbery attached to this product and people don't mind paying a price for a taste of such wines," explains Singhal. He, however, concedes that these wines are out of the reach of a majority of Indian consumers. These imported wines are sold only in luxury hotels and through ITDC duty free-shops or via the diplomatic

channel. "Very few people have attempted to bring these products to the Indian market. The government should at least allow certain wines to be sold in specific shops," says Singhal. These wines are sold in France at 15 to 100 francs (Rs 100-700) per bottle. To begin with, Singhal has zeroed in on four luxury five-star hotels in the country which will serve these wines in their restaurants and bars, besides targetting diplomats. In Indian hotels, they are retailed at Rs 1,200 to Rs 1,800 per bottle. Had Singhal not gone into the wine business he would have been working for the World Bank or some financial institution as an economist. He decided to branch off on his own, only after researching for a paper on Peruvian economy, he says.

"The import of consumer goods isn't just about serving a select section of society. We believe it will instil quality consciousness and people will demand better products from domestic producers," says Singhal who is also planning to bring Filofax organisers into the Indian market.