

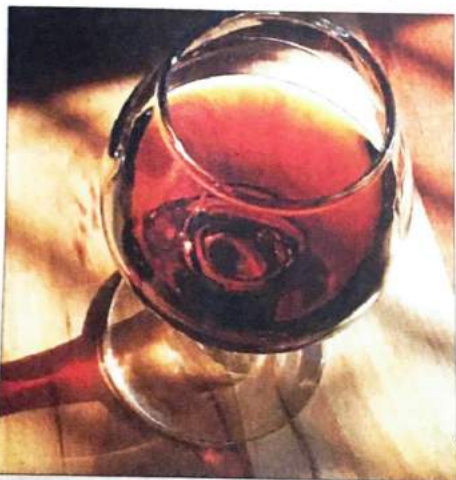
It would take a lot of convincing to convert Indian drinkers of Italian and Spanish sparkling wines to champagne — the real bubbly

The real ones & not so real ones

MUCH can be garnered over a glass of Veuve Clicquot... Or for that matter, any good champagne. Of course, as my friend Rajiv Singhal would want the rest of us to understand, champagne doesn't mean any ol' bubbly — it's specifically the sparkling wine made from grapes in the Champagne region of France. Yet champagne has become the generic name for any sparkling white wine, whatever the grapes, the region and the method of making....

So I don't envy the task that Rajiv has before him as the representative of the CIVC (Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne) as it's twofold. The first is to make everyone aware that champagne is region specific so that other bubbly don't cash in on its cachet; and the second rather paradoxical job is to bring champagne off its remote and inaccessible pedestal as the expensive wine for special occasions to being just a festive wine for all occasions! And an ancillary objective would be to show India the sheer variety of the 'real' champagnes — from France.

That has its problems, not the least because of the success of another friend — the irrepressible Ashwin Deo — in making Moët et Chandon's sobd Brut Imperial and more exalted Dom Perignon the choice of novices and connoisseurs alike. The other champagnes come a far second in consciousness even when they hail from the same group (LVMH) like Veuve Clicquot and



Krug... Not to mention well known outsiders like Louis Roederer! So Rajiv's crusade to extend the champagne lists of hotels (homes are still a rather distant ambition!) beyond the ones I just mentioned becomes that much more difficult. Indians are perfectly satisfied with the tried and trusted names.

Then there is the tough job of insisting that champagne is a region specific and not generic name. I offered the view that if he — or any one — could come up with an alternative and equally attractive name for it, then maybe people would take to it. The usual perpetrators of this crime against GI (Geographical Indicator, the international classification that also now protects desi products like Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice) are hotels who have "champagne brunches", which don't necessarily serve the correct French product! Maybe they will uncork a few ideas once the GI joes get down to enforcing the rules.

But really, would you want to go for a lunch advertised as 'Prosecco lunch' or 'Cava lunch' even if you know that they are the Italian and Spanish variants of the bubbly wine theme? In fact, considering many Indian producers also have sparkling wines in their portfolio, what could they possibly name a desi version? The mind boggles.

And Rajiv's task of making champagne more of an everyday drink also has its down side. Arguably the younger lot still haven't taken to champagne (because of its perception perhaps as a special drink rather than a chill out beverage) but there is a danger in bringing it into the pubs and loungebars... Then the special occasion high value customers may look for some other drink to epitomise that spirit!

But there is something to be said for the rule of champagne for all occasions for all three of the gentlemen who I consider to be the most knowledgeable about wines in India — none of them in the 'trade', all pure connoisseurs — feel, "when in doubt, order champagne". That is an adage which has stood me in good stead many a time, and once that feeling gains ground among more people, Rajiv's task will get a lot easier.