

**A**s a student in the US, with 'zero cooking-skills', Rajiv Singhal found himself a popular invitee to meals at peoples' homes. His secret? He would carry a bottle of wine for the host, as a gracious way of signing for his supper. That's when his wine odyssey began: more than 10 years on, and many, many enjoyable wine-filled evenings later, you would expect Singhal to term himself an expert, at a time when brash newbies with a couple of wine tastings behind them suddenly start projecting themselves as know-alls on the subject.

Not so. As the India representative of SOPEXA, The Food and Beverage Marketing and Promotion Board Of France, Singhal prefers to call himself a wine buff, still in the process of discovering the unending complexities of this 'light alcoholic beverage', fast turning out to be the world's favourite tippie. An invitation from him to attend a wine-seminar, aimed mostly at hotel professionals, turned out to be an instructive, extremely exacting afternoon: it was conducted by one of France's respected sommeliers, Madame Daniele Raulet-Reynaud, whose ability to share her vast knowledge of wines from her country is marked by great communication, tinged with humorous anecdotes and asides.

At the end of it all, one walked away, head swirling with images of French wines, varietals, appellations and regions. The world famous wine-growing regions are Beaujolais, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Chablis, Champagne, Alsace, among others — the musical-sounding names of wines which are so characteristic of these regions such as the reds of Bordeaux against which all other Cabernet Sauvignons are measured, the dry and crisp whites from the Loire Valley, like Sancerre and Muscadet, the great white Burgundies from the Chardonnay grape, and, of course, the sparkling wines from Champagne.

More than the collective sampling of these choice wines, about 20 in the space of the three hours (take a deep whiff, then a sip, swirl it in the mouth, savour, and swallow), it was the true expert's love for the subject, aided by videos and charts, which had one hooked. Another wine-tasting session, conducted by Daniele, a couple of months later, on a subsequent visit to India, confirmed my initial suspicion: I was well on my way to becoming the sort of person who wanted to know more about wine. And hopefully, taste a lot more!

So what can someone who is just about beginning on a journey do in terms of getting superior French wines in India? Precious little, unless you are in the income bracket which can let you freely access five-star hotels, or expensive stand-alone eateries which stock imported wine, at prohibitive prices of Rs 1,500 onwards (the Old World French wine prices can reach thousands of rupees, depending upon the label, and the vintage).

Or you have a resourceful bootlegger who can source your wine, again at stratospheric prices. The domestic excise policy, with an 'insane' 300 per cent duty slab on each bottle is the huge prohibiting factor: the growing breed of wine importers, as well as Indian makers of wine, are waiting for a rationalisation in the policy, which will allow freer, cheaper imports, as well as an opportunity for Indian wines to be available easily all over the country.

Apart from imparting invaluable tips

## The way with wines



Feeling lost?  
Not any more!  
Here are a few  
tips for all  
those wannabe  
wine buffs.



### Shubhra Gupta

on how to serve wine (from the kind of glasses — fluted, plain, not opaque cut-glasses; to checking for wine that's gone bad — smell the cork, if it gives off a vinegary whiff, the wine is not palatable; to learning how to let wine breathe to intensify its taste — pour it out into a shallow-stemmed glass and let it sit for a bit), Daniele endeavoured, in both sittings, to match wines with Indian food.

Common consensus among the tasters, some of whom were amazingly knowledgeable: dry whites go with the broiled fish, medium full-bodied reds with the chicken *tikka*, perhaps a sparkling with dishes that would constitute as starters, because, traditionally, sparkling wines signal the beginning of a long, leisurely meal.

"Indian food is so complex, so full of flavours," she says. "So is the highest quality of French wines. Complex wines should be served with simple dishes, and vice versa," she adds. Well aware of the Indian penchant of tanking up on tons of hard spirits before eating, she recommends a switch to wine, which allows your palate to actually taste the food. And acknowledging that temperatures in most of India average from the warm to the sizzling hot, she comes up with an

innovative way of storing wines: under the air conditioners, preferably in your bed room, which is usually the coolest room in the house.

And here's some good news for those of you who are planning a wine quest. The Indian wine industry, after a tentative beginning in the last two decades, is now flourishing. The latest addition to the wines from Chateau Indage and Grovers is Sula Wines, which entered the market barely four years ago and is already widely acknowledged as the rising star among the Indian wine makers. Says Adrian Pinto, General Manager, Sula Wines, "We have shattered the myth that wine is only meant for city-bred sophisticates. One of our slightly sweeter wines has penetrated large parts of rural Maharashtra. It is not unusual for a farmer to pull out a bottle for his guests, and for his wife to join him". "Sula wants to be known as a volume player in the wine market," he says, "with our prices between Rs 500 and Rs 100, we keep both our distributors and consumers happy."

Because of the varying excise slabs in different States, the cost of the same wine bottle can vary quite wildly: a bottle of the best-selling Sula Sauvignon Blanc will cost less locally in Nasik wine shops than in the rest of the country. In Delhi, where it is becoming a wine 'of choice' for several leading hotels (the Oberoi Hotel will introduce it as the house wine) according to its local distributor Raman Nijhawan, it costs Rs 490. Sula Brut, which is a sparkling wine, is priced at Rs 550. Merlot at Rs 450, and Chenin Blanc at Rs 450. Our wines are priced higher than our competitors' (Indage's Riviera and Grovers are priced between Rs 300 and Rs 370), admits Nijhawan. But we score because of our quality, he adds.

The most important thing to remember as you set off on your personal journey: you can ruin a perfectly decent wine by wrong storage. The best way to drink Indian wine: preferably between zero and 18 months of it being bottled, recommends Pinto. You and I might store it well, a distributor might store it well, a retailer, who knows no better, might not. ■