

There is now a marked preference for and interest in wines even when there are more conventional spirits on offer... Cheers to that!

## Red, white and bubbly, finally

**MY CONTENTION** last week — that champagne can and should be drunk at any time — was borne out this week rather emphatically. First I saw a charismatic media baron and an editor share a bottle of Laurent Perrier rose over what seemed to be a business lunch, at the Capital's most happening Japanese restaurant... Then at the birthday bash of another industrialist's wife, one tres urbane gentleman confided to me that when he knew it was going to be a long evening ahead, he always resolutely stuck to champagne. "I would get high if I drank whisky for hours; on the other hand, I stay absolutely fine with champagne," he said.

For a man to claim a preference for champagne — and this gentleman is the type who will drink the actual French one, not the cheaper ones from other parts of the world! — is truly brave. And here I was thinking that if there's Johnnie Walker Gold Label flowing like tap water, every red blooded Indian would head for it. Especially in a macho city like Delhi. Yet at the party, where there was a selection of wines and lots of trays of both whisky and champagne circulating, people were picking up the latter more. Maybe Rajeev Singhal of CIVC should take heart: champagne indeed seems to be finally moving beyond women in its appeal!



The perennial contention of this column — that wine drinking is on the rise, even in the face of 'spirited' competition from whiskies, vodka and the like — was further borne out this week, which was unusually full of engagements in the evening, both personal and professional. I noted with great pleasure that wines and bubbly (I would not dare to go so far as to certify that the sparkling whites were from that particular region in France called Champagne!) were almost as popular a choice as whisky and beer. People were even asking what the wines were and where they came from; some even asked for the varietal. Even more amazingly, the waiters could actually answer these queries with a reasonable degree of certitude. Wine education is indeed spreading!

I also observed that the general quality of the wines were better than ever before, though never exceptional. Interestingly, I did not taste a really bad (read, undrinkable) wine at any of the events. Even the reds were fairly conventional generic Burgundies, Australia or Napa Valley, while the whites and bubbles were drawn from all over the world. When asked, the hosts at most of these parties said they sometimes acted on expert advice — significantly, not always from professionals but from knowledgeable friends too — and occasionally put their own tastebuds to the test. That, again, is a far cry from the tentativeness we used to display earlier, relying entirely on others!

My rule of thumb at huge parties — and bars where the cocktails are suspect — is to go for the bubbly if available, but never more than two glasses as the bad ones have a hidden kick. Otherwise it's far safer to stick to the whites rather than the reds. As the champagne-preferring industrialist correctly put it, "By drinking this at least the only thing I would have to worry about the next morning is acidity, not a hangover!" This applies to white wines too — even the middling to bad ones will not make you regret it too much the morning after. But a bad red can be traumatic.

As one diplomat's wife told me succinctly last week as the bearer poured her a rather suspect red wine at a sit down dinner, "I love cheesy flavours, but not in a wine glass!"