

**A lot needs to be done to change mindsets about champagne in whisky-swilling, macho India**

## Why bond with the bubbly only in private?

AS WE HEAD into the festive and wedding season as always I think of champagne. All those who are in the champagne business would not be very happy about this comment as it reinforces a stereotype they have been valiantly trying to dispel: that champagne only goes with celebration. They would say — and I tend to agree — that sparkling wine, champagne, cava, prosecco, call it what you will, is fine any time, any day. Given the burden of duties and taxes, it's not easy to swallow!

Still, it would seem that times are a-changing. Champagne evangelist Rajiv Singhal (the Indian vanguard of the *Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne*) informs me that he had a survey done which shows wine and champagnes are gaining acceptability. As one man in the survey said, "Wine is a 'hep' thing to have," and another added, "Wine is good for family dinners; you can't carry a whisky bottle in front of your parents..." A practical note was struck by one woman who said, "If it's a work function, you need to stay sober and so they might serve champagne or wine."

A more conventional thought is that "wine is a couples' drink and champagne is the most romantic drink." Read that along with the fact that drinking in moderation and drinking in style are now in vogue, it means this genre should prosper in a changing India. The only glitch is that even if wines (particularly desi) are thought to be affordable, bubbly is generally thought to be relatively expensive and hence for special occasions. The age profile is also generally higher — 35 and above — and anything that sparkles is still called champagne....

One Mumbai respondent said, "You see champagne in ro-



romantic Hollywood movies... James Bond drinks martinis in the bar but orders a bottle of champagne for the bedroom". That reinforces the 'romantic' aspect of champagne but it also points to one of the biggest hurdles champagne faces — in whisky-swilling macho India, champagne (or any bubbly) is thought to be feminine. The implication is clear: no male who fancies himself to be remotely Bond-like (in appearance or inclination!) would want to be seen in public holding a delicate flute of sparkling white wine. This despite champagne playing a prominent part in F1, horse-racing and other non-namby-pamby sports!

The solution? One respondent said in the survey, "You need Shah Rukh Khan to start drinking champagne to make it a manly thing to do." A pretty tall order, that! And matters aren't helped by hotels which perpetuate this girly aura by promoting champagne cocktails among women specifically. But you can't blame them either as apparently single women travellers are now beginning to drink champagne. Some people may also be put off by the 'bling' quotient in ordering champagne, given the way some American singers and actors practically swim in the stuff, while others think it is 'snooty' and for "upper class and older people". One woman went as far as to say, "Champagne is for women who don't work!"

I would definitely dispute that last statement! maybe a wider survey is needed....