



Vinod Tandon discusses wine with Alessio Secci, executive director of Fratelli Wines, Anish Chopra and Colonel Manjit Singh at a tasting at the Delhi Golf Club. SIMON DE TREY-WHITE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CULTURE
India's wineries seek to change the taste of millions

After a false start a decade ago, a maturing industry is slowly overcoming the preference for whisky at home while beginning to win recognition abroad

STEPHANIE NOLEN NEW DELHI

Vinod Tandon was savouring a glass of bright, fruity cabernet franc-shiraz at the bar in his club in Delhi last week when his wife Monica uttered words that caused him to splutter and nearly choke. "It's not bad for an Indian wine, is it?" mused Ms. Tandon, holding her glass up toward the light. "Indian! Indian! Is this Indian?" gasped Mr. Tandon. Why yes – his glass of red was Indian, from Fratelli Wines, the rising star in India's wine scene. The Tandons had come to the Delhi Golf Club, a bastion of the city's moneyed elite, for a wine-tasting event, part of a dogged effort by its nascent wine industry to woo over a nation of spirits drinkers – or at least the growing market segment with a taste for Western ways and rupees to spend on luxuries. Mr. Tandon collects whiskies – but he worked abroad for years and appreciates wine as well, so he might have seemed like an easy sell. But he refused to believe that a wine he enjoyed could be Indian. Gagan Sharma, the evening's sommelier, listened to him with a sort of resigned dismay. This image problem dogs India's wines, both abroad – where Indian wine is viewed as a novelty but not something one would want to actually drink – and domestically, where the tiny pool of wine lovers are sure that imported must be better. Indian wine, the globally minded oenophile will recall, was supposed to be the big new thing a few years back. Beginning in 2001, Indian investors – many of them toting fortunes made abroad – snapped up land in the heart of Maharashtra and erected huge faux-Tuscan wineries. Their first vintages attracted a bit of international attention, while the vaunted Indian middle class was reported ready to end its love affair with spirits and embrace the grape. Wine, dusted in the cachet that anything foreign has here, was tipped as a new status symbol, and with 1.2 billion potential drinkers, India was meant to be a market just waiting to be uncorked. Then came the autumn of 2008. The global economy went into a tailspin, and in India the chill was exacerbated by the attacks on Mumbai by Pakistani terrorists. In the mood of national anxiety, consumption of "lifestyle" items fell dramatically. Wine sales fell by half in 2009, and the domestic industry fizzled. Three long years later, however, there are tentative signs that India's wine industry is growing once again, and sommeliers and producers agree it is harder for the harsh pruning it received. A

handful of Indian wines have recently been recognized internationally in blind tastings. The British supermarket chain Waitrose now carries one, introducing the idea that India makes wine to a whole new swath of consumers. At home, wine is slowly catching on. "The market is growing, but not by leaps and bounds like you heard in the hysteria a few years ago," says Reva Singh, who publishes *Sommelier India*. (She founded the magazine in 2004, and for the first few years had to explain what "sommelier" meant in a small note in the masthead.) Wine sales are expected to grow by 25 per cent next year, according to the government wine promotion body. But it's slow going. "This country has five major religions and four of them forbid the consumption of alcohol," says Mr. Sharma, who trains hotel and restaurant staff who have never tasted wine all about how to sell and serve it. There is nevertheless plenty of drinking – but here traditional village homebrew meets British colonial legacy. Indian drinkers usually opt for spirits, not wine, which is perceived as "weak" and unlikely to achieve what the drinker wants it to. True to form, at the end of the golf club tasting the staff tidied up the wine glasses, the 70 participants settled back in their chairs – and nearly all of them ordered a whisky. "They always go back to what they know," sighed Tarun Sibal, who heads marketing for Fratelli. Tastings, he explained, are a key part of his strategy. Individual drinkers, such as the skeptical Mr. Tandon, must be won

over one by one. In the hilly terrain of Maharashtra, many eating-grape fields have been converted to wine grapes (a few wineries are also trying the tropical climate of Karnataka to the south.) To boost the industry a decade ago, the state government offered subsidies but the market glutted just as demand crashed. A third of growers abandoned the crop over the past two years. "It's now on its way to righting," Ms. Singh said. One challenge that endures is the regulatory environment: producers are uniformly critical of government, which they say has done little to promote their wine domestically or abroad. Government, Ms. Singh notes, has a vested interest, since the massive duties on imported wines are a significant source of revenue. In addition, laws on the transport and sale of alcohol are arcane and complex – Good Earth Winery, for example, has its wines in restaurants in London but can't sell them in Delhi. Cultivating the domestic consumer remains the chief challenge. Current consumption is estimated at eight millilitres per person per year – which, said Good Earth's chief commercial officer Navin Sankaranarayanan, means that less than 1 per cent of Indians are drinking wine. "We won't need to export if we can cultivate that consumer." Good Earth attempts to do it with events it calls Vitiquette. For a Mumbai host seeking to make a splash with a party, they send a sommelier, a bar crew, the wine and the glasses, and set up shop in the living room. Mr. Sankaran-

arayanan said it works as both a status symbol and a way to learn for people who aren't comfortable enough with wine simply to serve it on their own. Ms. Singh believes that the key to success for Indian producers will be making wines that are truly Indian in nature, and not weak attempts to clone European wines. That means embracing all that Indian terroir produces – less minerality, for example, and higher sucrose. Sweeter wines are more popular here in any case, said Mr. Sharma, the sommelier. "You don't go to temple every day but if you're Indian, you go to the sweet shop every day," he told the Golf Club crowd, to approving chuckles. "That's why chenin blanc is an Indian favourite." India's white wines "show well," Ms. Singh said, and are perceived as being fresher – but they cannot withstand India's climate, while the reds are more robust. This is a serious concern where wines are sold in shops where the shelf temperature may be more than 50 degrees. "So many people have their first experience of wine with a wine they buy that is spoiled, and then they never want to drink it again," said Mr. Sharma. At the Golf Club, Mr. Tandon was intrigued enough to grill the Fratelli staff on where he might buy their wine, and nodded approvingly at the news that their bottles are priced around 550 rupees, or \$10 – compared to \$25 for the cheapest import. "Whisky is a thing of the past," Ms. Tandon said encouragingly. Her husband looked unconvinced – but poured himself another glass of the cabernet franc-shiraz.

INDIA, UNCORKED

Sula Vineyards 2010 Sauvignon Blanc

Won a silver medal at the 2011 Decanter World Wine Awards

Fratelli Wines 2011 Chenin Blanc

Commended at the International Wine Challenge

Grover's La Reserve Cabernet Shiraz

In 2005 the British wine expert Steven Spurrier called it the best New World wine

York Reserve Shiraz 2009

Gold medal at the Sommelier India wine competition, commended at the International Wine Challenge

CEASE AND DISTILL

The Scotch Whisky Association, which for years has been battling against India's fake Scotch whisky, has won a rare victory in court. India's rapidly growing \$22-billion market for alcoholic drinks is flooded with products that label themselves as Scotch whisky and use Scottish imagery such as bagpipes and tartan, and yet are made locally and have nothing to do with Scotland. Some of these imposter Scotches are more like rum, made from molasses, than Scotch whisky, which is distilled from grain or malt. Earlier this month, a court in Goa granted a temporary injunction which prevents two Indian firms – Glenmon Distillers and Imperial Distillers – from referencing Scotch whisky on its products, the Scotch Whisky Association said. The companies sell products under the brand names Royal Barrel, Glenmon and F&G. The court further ruled that Glenmon – and indeed any product with "Glen" in the title – was not allowed because it brought to mind the world-famous Scottish glens, or valleys. In June, the association won another victory when it persuaded India's government to allow genuine Scotch whisky producers to put "geographical indication" labels on its products to differentiate them from fake Scotch. The king of Indian whisky, Vijay Mallya, the billionaire owner of UB Group, which has two-thirds of India's spirits market by sales, continues to sell products like Bagpiper Whisky, made largely from molasses.



Sommelier Gagan Sharma samples a Fratelli Wines product with Reva Singh, publisher of *Sommelier India* magazine, and Alessio Secci. A glass of whisky capped the evening. SIMON DE TREY-WHITE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL