



WHY WINE STILL FINDS SO FEW TAKERS IN INDIA

A WINE CULTURE CAN GROW IN WHISKY-SUBMERGED INDIA ONLY IF THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION EMBRACES IT IN THE SAME WAY IT HAS TAKEN TO GIN

BY: **SUBHASH ARORA**

WHEN I joined a prominent Rotary Club in Delhi some time in the early 1990s, I was shocked to find no wine being served at the first fellowship dinner I attended. There were whisky, gin and beer for alcohol drinkers but no wine. When I asked the club president, he said wine was a drink for the ladies! There was only one such lady for whom they procured a bottle of gin. After the event, they would take the bottle home

and bring it back the next time till it finished and was replaced.

I protested and was allowed to arrange at the next event a couple of bottles through a bootlegger, the only source for wine those days. I was very happy to see them being polished off. I made it a point that some wine was available at every party thereafter. Members started drinking wine with my prodding and tips, and started procuring for their private parties hosted for



members. In the meantime, the availability started getting better with changed laws in 2001 and we were well on our way to drinking more wine. When I left the club a few years ago, there used to be a couple of cases consumed at each big party.

In 2002, I started the Delhi Wine Club, and in the 17 years it has been running, I have held tastings, dinners and talks by experts from around the world, written extensively on my websites and in offline media, and even organised two editions of the delWine Excellence Awards. Even in those early days, though, it was becoming a ritual for people to crowd around me and discuss wine and its health benefits, and their wine-drinking experiences during their foreign travels. Wine also made an appearance in weddings, although the ones served could not match the whiskies and the champagne either in price, or in quality. And I noticed, there were more and more women drinking wine.

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Slowly but surely, the wine culture has arrived. Restaurants like Diva, Olive and a few others started promoting wine with their cuisine. Though still not very popular with Indian food at home, many people started drinking red wine more for the health reasons — an idea I could be accused of promoting. As in China, more people are taking to red wine without really enjoying the taste — it's more a matter of fashion and lifestyle concerns.

The culture has spread to smaller towns as well. Goan Port has become even more popular because of its lower prices. Wine is still very expensive for the hoi polloi, but the demand is increasing even in smaller cities for wine they can afford. According to an estimate, about 3-4 million people drink wine at least once in a month, their number having gone up from about 50,000 a couple of decades ago.

How has the journey of wine been? Imagine hoping to catch a bullet train riding an old mail train. With such a low consumption base in a whisky-gulping nation, but with millions of women and millennials (and now GenZ) being the potential propagators of the wine culture, growth has been very slow.

Contrary to my expectation of an annual increase in consumption of over 40 per cent in the first two decades of the 2000s, the market has been growing on average at 10-12 per cent per year. The reasons are a lack of easy availability, erratic laws, uneven quality and high prices of Indian wines, and double taxation of imported wines. Poor storage and the weak links in the cold chain are major problems affecting the flavours of Indian wines in a negative way. The absence of a sensible state policy, which still clubs wine with alcoholic beverages with a much higher alcohol content, is yet another deterrent. And wine clubs are a rarity. Even the media no longer seems to be interested in wine.

The wine culture is growing, yes, but it certainly is not flourishing. Many of our club members make foreign trips just to attend expensive wine dinners and drink the choicest wines, but for the culture to spread, the experimental millennials with an international outlook need to embrace it (and not gin!) so that by the time their generation takes over the levers of decision making, there will be an exponential rise in the number of wine drinkers.

It will never replace tea as a refreshing drink, but the day a glass of wine offered in the early evening will be seen by one and all as a sign of good hospitality, that is when I would say the wine culture has well and truly arrived.

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