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ALOK MATHUR AND MELVIN D'SOUZA launched *Soul Tree* to introduce a much-needed authentic Indian wine into the market. They have since won multiple awards, including the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, and they were finalists at the esteemed National Business Awards. We find out why they started this venture and what makes this company so special.

What happened to first inspire the idea for Soul Tree wine?

The idea first occurred to us over a curry a few years ago. Though we had Indian beers to complete the Indian dining experience, the wine drinkers amongst us were forced to go for French or Australian wines. We knew that though India had been producing wines for thousands of years (wine production was lost for around 150 years in the 19th and 20th centuries), the modern Indian wine industry was also rapidly coming of age and we recognised this not only as a stark gap in the market, but as a gap that was just begging to be filled!

Why was there a need for an Indian wine?

People like to experience wines not just from different parts of the world but from new wine-producing regions. It comes from a sense of discovery, and explains why wine regulars, though they may have their favourites, often choose a different wine each time they drink. This explains why there is space for thousands of wines from dozens of countries around the world. There have been practically no wines from the tropics until now.

The other essential element is food pairing. When you consider that the Indian cuisine is practically the national cuisine in the country today, and that pairing wines successfully with the complex spice combinations used in curries is always a daunting challenge, the case for superb Indian wines makes itself.

Finally, the consumption experience is only partly in the taste buds (the rest, of course, is in the mind) and Indian wines truly complete the Indian dining experience.

Why do you think there is still a shortage of Indian wines?

The wine industry is as conservative as it is old and competitive, and creating a niche in the market of any significance is a massively challenging task for any new region. In the last 30-40 years we have only seen the likes of Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and Chile manage this successfully. It not only takes excellent wines, but a single minded, innovative, and concerted effort, and plenty of patience and resilience, to make it work. *Soul Tree* brings all these to the table but, equally importantly, it is a business and a brand that are uniquely close and responsive to the consumer and marketplace compared to any other Indian wine, and indeed to the vast majority of wines from everywhere else in the world.

MEET THE FOUNDERS



The creators of the hugely successful Indian wines, **Soul Tree**

INTERVIEW BY MARIANNE VOYLE PORTRAITS BY DESIBLITZ.COM



Let's talk about how you developed the business. What were the best and worst parts of setting it up?

For us, it goes beyond just setting up a business and the drive and passion comes from achieving something that no one has successfully managed before. The challenges are many and we face them every day of the week, but they pale into insignificance compared to the joys of setting up and running a business like this.

We love the name. How did you come up with it?

The wines and the brand embody the soul and the spirit of India, and the name *Soul Tree*, we think, perfectly encompasses everything that is India: flavours, colours, diversity, mystique, emotion, chaos, a warm soul and a spicy edge.

So where do you source your grapes?

We source our grapes from small independent farmers in the grape producing regions of Nasik, about 100 miles North East of Mumbai, off the Western coast of India. Nasik is the



wine producing hub of India, and probably produces around 90% of all the wine produced in the country. The soil in the region is claimed to be some of the best in Asia, and a very dry growing season with the temperature fluctuation of warm days and cool nights brings a lot of character to the grapes. After harvesting in the very early hours towards the end of the Indian winter the grapes are immediately transferred to the winery where our Indian winemaker crafts them, over the next few months, into the wines we love.

“INDIAN WINES TRULY COMPLETE THE INDIAN DINING EXPERIENCE.”

Why did you want to give back to the independent Indian farmers?

India has been an agricultural land for centuries, but the small Indian farmer is relatively disadvantaged, for whom life can be a litany of struggles. The farmer is one the most important links in the chain for us and so we have a keen desire to give back in whatever way we can - whether it is by promoting fair trading practices, or by eventually doing more for them, their families, and their communities.

Earlier you spoke of food pairing. How do your wines complement spicy food?

Pairing wines successfully with complex Indian spiced curries has historically proven to be an extremely challenging task. Indian cuisine is practically the national cuisine in the UK. Indian wines have a natural spiciness that comes from the soil and the climate and that complements spicy dishes superbly. Most good Indian wines pair almost naturally with spicy cuisines.

How are the wines doing at the moment?

We have been blown away by how much the consumer and the trade have taken to *Soul Tree* and to Indian wines in the relatively short space of time. *Soul Tree* is now sold in restaurants, bars, and along the length and breadth of the country. The rapidly burgeoning demand is keeping us very much on our toes! <

