

above: Alok Mathur with co-founder Melvin D'Souza

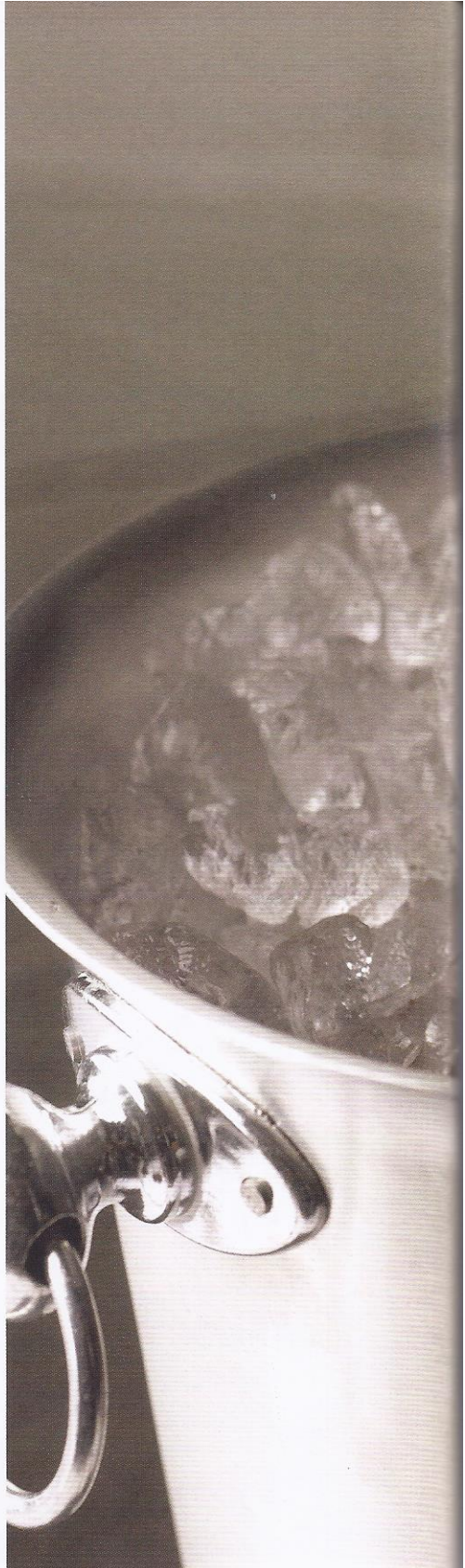
COMPANY TO WATCH: SOUL TREE WINES

Not everyone would order a "nice bottle of something Indian", but give them time, reckons entrepreneur Alok Mathur. He tells Jon Card about his plans to create the number one brand in the market

Alok Mathur is playing a long game. He's betting on a fledgling industry, in a country which is itself an emerging economy. But there's nothing like getting in early to grab the best spots. Mathur's business, Soul Tree Wines, aims to bring Indian wines to the masses, and he wants his brand to be the name most closely associated with it. "Soul Tree aims to put Indian wine on the map, and we want to be the brand that people ask for," says Mathur.

CHASING

The business was founded in early 2011 by Mathur and Melvin D'Souza. It currently employs four people in the UK and has a team in India looking after its vineyards and making the wine. The idea is that consumers should be able to drink something Indian when they are eating Indian, even if they don't fancy a lager. Soul Tree sells its produce via distributors to the restaurant trade, primarily Indian restaurants and curry houses, and currently can be found in about 450 outlets across the UK. It's been by no means an easy ride pushing an unknown product to an unsuspecting market, but Mathur says they are breaking through. "The first 18 months were a really hard grind, but that's now paying off. We've had some great press, won awards and



now we are being approached by people instead of us chasing them. In the last year we made some really good progress and we are beginning to carve a niche for ourselves."

SELLING

Indian wine isn't the easiest sell in the world; British consumers have become used to ordering a lager with their chicken tikka masala, and how many of us have ever drunk a glass of Indian? Nonetheless, Mathur believes the idea will catch on. "Our most distinctive selling proposition is that it is Indian wine and so the wine matches the food. If you go to a French restaurant you'd drink French wine. But at the moment if you go to an Indian restaurant, you'd probably drink a Cobra or Kingfisher. Curry is practically the national cuisine, so it makes sense that you'd drink Indian wine with it."

TINY

Wine production in India is also "tiny" making about 15 million litres per year. By comparison, the vineyards of Bordeaux alone make about 70 million cases (12X750ml) or 630m litres. But India has the climate and soil to make far, far more. Furthermore, Mathur argues, production will be boosted by domestic demand as the increasingly affluent population develops a thirst for something home-grown. "The Indian middle classes want to drink wine and are driving wine production in the country. Their spending and incomes are key drivers."

Surprisingly, wine isn't that cheap to produce in India, as the country's usual economic advantage, (cheap workers) doesn't greatly affect vineyards, which are not labour intensive. Economies of scale are required although these are on the horizon. "Currently, wine production is growing at 30-35 per cent per year there, so even if this doesn't accelerate, it will still be many times bigger in 10 years' time. In eight to ten years, I believe Indian wine will be mainstream."

INTERNATIONAL

Soul Tree currently has three wines (red, rose and white) but is also developing a Shiraz and a sparkling wine to add to the list. It has a number of distributors across the country, with Connolly's being its contact for restaurants in Birmingham. It's a case of gradual but steady progress, with the business developing as the industry does, with the hope that the market keeps following. Nonetheless, Mathur has big plans for his growing business. "The vision that we've always had is to put Indian wines on the map and to create the Soul Tree brand. Once this happens, we will be able to push Soul Tree Wines internationally." ■

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