

# Heady accident

Two Indian youths doing their MBAs stumbled into selling wines in the UK



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## Right foundation

The fact that it is a 'virtual winery', producing such a traditional product in an asset-light manner with the focus on product quality and branding rather than the way it has been done traditionally with a lot of investment in physical assets, also makes the company different. D'Souza, whose father and uncle run a poultry breeding and marketing industry in Nashik, goes home every quarter as Soul Tree expands its sourcing. "This

will most likely be the way of working which will continue in the medium term as we are building our production team in India, which now consists of a winemaker and support staff," he explains.

Mathur began his career with Tata Motors in 1993 and handled its operations and service management in three northern Indian states for seven years. He moved with the company to handle its UK operations in 2000. An apparent seven-year itch saw him taking a sabbatical to do his MBA, when he met D'Souza.

"Considering the enormity of the challenge we have set ourselves – that of creating a significant niche for an unknown brand and wine producing region – creating the right foundations is critically important and so we have focused solely on the restaurant sector so far," says Mathur. Adds D'Souza: "We are excited about our work and hopefully, if we do our job correctly, it will create demand for not only our brand but the whole Indian wine sector globally as people have begun noticing Indian wines through our brand in the UK. But with customers like Potli, where Tripathy says Soul Tree wines have "become an integral part of our wine list", that day should not be too far off.

♦ SEK HAR SESHAN

*Mathur and D'Souza are looking at retailing after supplying to restaurants*

It all began, says Melvin D'Souza, when he met a like-minded classmate at Oxford University in 2007 and decided to explore producing wines in India and selling them in Europe. Soul Tree Wines, which he and Alok Mathur set up 'by complete accident', has now taken a life of its own. Customers also came more or less by chance. "We found each other when the supply of our previous Indian wine selection came to an abrupt end," says Uttam Tripathy, director of London's *potli*, which describes itself as an Indian market kitchen. "Melvin & Alok are proactive people with great energy and pleasing personalities, not to mention great Indian wines. They convinced us to take Soul Tree on board. It is a great decision we made a couple of years back."

"We now work with small farmers to produce our own wine," says D'Souza, who comes from Nashik in Maharashtra, which is the wine capital of India. "We have our own winemaker and utilise existing capacities in and around Nashik district to produce our brand for the European markets. The UK is our home market, where we sell 90 per cent of our

volume in the on-trade sector – restaurants, cafes and pubs." Adds Mathur: "The business took root because of the opportunity of bringing wines from a nascent but exciting industry in India to the rest of the world. As it happened, Melvin's hometown Nashik is a wine-producing hub – so we could initiate this with the knowledge that we had back-end connections that are invaluable in international trade."

The response from the market has more than justified the duo's decision: though Soul Tree's volumes are still quite small, averaging just under 5,000 bottles a month, it has added 11 distributors in the UK in less than two years, and now has around 500 restaurants that list its wines. It has also had great success with awards on the national, cross-industry stage, and its efforts have attracted a lot of media attention. "This bodes well for the brand, and we are beginning to see a pull-through from the trade and from consumers," Mathur says.

According to D'Souza, it is now beginning to explore the retail sector, for which it is coming out with a new label soon. However, he adds, pragmatically, "We have a long way