

WINESFROMINDIA

One from the Soul

Alok Mathur shares his experiences with Brinda Gill on how he and Melvin D'Souza, co-founders of Soul Tree, set out to establish Indian wine as a distinct category in the UK, and Soul Tree as the best in that category



Soul Tree founders, Alok Mathur and Melvin D'Souza

Recounting how he and Melvin D'Souza, co-founders of Soul Tree, stumbled upon a business opportunity, Alok Mathur says, "During an evening out in 2008, while we were pursuing our MBA at Oxford University, Melvin and I saw diners drinking beer with Indian food and noticed the lack of any real presence of Indian wines on the beverage menus of UK restaurants."

On sabbaticals from their careers to pursue further studies, Alok and Melvin were looking at business options as they completed their course. It occurred to them that it would be great if there could be excellent Indian wines in the UK and other major wine drinking regions of the world to pair with Indian food. They decided to explore the possibility of entering the UK wine market with wines produced specifically for them in India.

"Melvin, who hails from Nashik was familiar with the emergence of the Indian wine industry. His background - coupled with the clear opportunity for Indian wines in the UK - made our decision a relatively easy one. What excited us about the opportunity was the prospect of not just running a business in a sector we loved, but of bringing about a meaningful change in the way Indian wines were perceived in Europe and around the world."

The decision taken, the two entrepreneurs embarked on a series of discussions with Indian winemakers and winery owners and also made visits to India. Eventually they worked out that it would be best for them to establish a UK based company and have wines produced for them at an established winery in India with grapes sourced from contract farmers. This business model would allow them to concentrate on branding and marketing the wine, while leaving the winemaking and winery operations to specialists in India.

In early 2011, they entered into an agreement with the Keval family-owned

Oakwood Winery Pvt Ltd at Shirampur, about 180 kilometres northeast of Pune, Maharashtra, to produce wines solely for export. Winemaker Rajesh Rasal, who is a consultant for several wineries including Oakwood, was appointed as their winemaker. Although the wine was primarily destined for Europe and beyond, Alok and Melvin wanted an Indian winemaker who was experienced with the local terrior and who could produce wines in a style more suitable to India than a consultant from abroad who would bring his or her own international style to the winemaking. Production commenced in 2011, with grapes being sourced from contract farmers in Nashik (about 110 kms north of Shirampur). Soul Tree entered the UK market the same year with two wines - a Zinfandel and a Chenin Blanc.

In the last five years, the portfolio has changed and has been expanded with the flavours of the wines being tweaked with every passing vintage to adapt them to consumer

Soul Tree wines, produced in Nashik, are a natural match for Indian cuisine



tastes in the UK and Europe. Soul Tree wines are fruit forward, and the oak-aged reds enjoy a balance between fruit and oak flavours. The winery now produces Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, rosé from Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, and a Shiraz-Cabernet blend at Oakwood, as well as a sparkling wine at Good Drop Wine Cellars, located at the Vinchur Wine Park in Nashik.

“The composition of the portfolio is reflective of the quality of each wine variety and how each wine fits into our marketing mix. It would have been great to have a standout variety that India could really make its own like a Kiwi Sauvignon Blanc or an Argentinean Malbec. However, in its absence we thought it important to reflect the ability of the region to produce several varieties well, and provide several choices to consumers with diverse tastes.”

When Soul Tree wines entered the UK market, Alok and Melvin observed that the market was not receptive to the prospect of Indian wine. “Unfortunately, the early developmental stages of the Indian wine industry and its associated challenges had set the wrong examples and raised the wrong expectations in the trade. It took us an incredible amount of perseverance (and a very thick skin) to wade our way through the minefield of objections the trade threw at us.”

The duo found that credibility is one of the hardest things to win, and they spent the first few years proving the trade’s expectations wrong and demonstrating that Indian wine and the industry that represented it had come of age. “Our next challenge was getting recession-hit consumers to spend their hard-earned money on something they had never heard of or tried before. However, we quickly discovered that there were large swathes of consumers who, once they had had a taste of the wines, were happy to come back to them again and again. The going was anything but

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easy and took every ounce of patience and perseverance we could find. But we always knew that it was just a matter of time before enough people backed the wines to make a real difference to our fortunes.”

When Soul Tree wines appeared in the market, they had to compete with some 7,000 different brands and 25,000 different wines available across different wine varietals, styles and price points. “As one of the largest importers of wine with the biggest and most diverse range of wines in the world, the UK offers consumers enormous choice. Although this means that there is immense opportunity for producers, it also makes the trade incredibly competitive and it is easy to get lost in the crowd.”

Alok and Melvin countered these challenges by being acutely focused on producing wines in styles that reflect varietal characteristics, yet are distinct from wines from other regions. “Some of the distinctiveness does come from the Indian terroir, but the rest stem from decisions made during the winemaking process. It also helps to have a keen understanding of the popular styles from other mainstream regions in the world and to fine tune our own style to have just the right mix of conformity and distinctiveness.”

The wine labels have a simple, international, classy look, rather than one evocative of “exotic” India since the duo believes that, as important as India is as the country of origin, the wine ultimately needs to speak for itself. “A more clichéd, typically Indian label would probably elicit greater initial curiosity, but after that success really depends on the consumer being comfortable enough with the brand to come back to it again and again.”

Britain’s historical links with India, the popularity of Indian cuisine and culture, and India’s growing presence in international consciousness – all these factors offer potential for entrepreneurs wishing to capitalize on the



With its simple, classy labels and fruity, approachable wines, Soul Tree has won a place on the wine lists of top UK restaurants

sentiment and bring in Indian wines.

“The idea of pairing Indian wines with Indian food is intuitive and works within the Indian restaurant sector. Still, the real evidence of success comes from an increasing number of mainstream restaurants including a few Michelin starred ones, as well as bars and hotels choosing to list these wines and to recommend them alongside wines from the best established regions in the world. They saw the appeal in Soul Tree and in Indian wine.”

In its early years, Soul Tree primarily focused on the Indian restaurant sector, but the brand is now gaining momentum, with an increasing number of British and international outlets wishing to supplement

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their wine lists with new wines. “Soul Tree predominantly occupies the on-premise sector, although there has been an increasing demand for the wines in the retail sector. We would like to think that this is a result of a very carefully thought out strategy, but the reality is probably a mixture of simply doing the right things and of the brand taking on a life of its own.”

With Britain as one of the largest importers of wine in the world, the trade is extremely quality driven. Wines of doubtful quality are likely to be weeded out quickly, which makes quality and consistency paramount. Soul Tree wines



Sampling Soul Tree wines at the London Wine Fair 2016

undergo OIV (International Organisation of Vine and Wine) testing, and the systems are geared to meet the exacting OIV standards throughout the production process.

“Quality is paramount but it is far from enough. Unless the wines are from the best established regions, quality needs to be complemented with an array of competitive features, be they price, value-for-money, distinctiveness-based, or the result of branding and marketing strategies suitable to the challenge. Indian wines still do not have the economies of scale to compete on a price basis with more established regions. However, the contextual relevance, appeal and distinctiveness of our wines, and our approach in the market, have come together really well to provide a great platform for long term success.”

Being completely focused on the European and international markets makes it easier for Alok and Melvin to aim for a style and taste profile that is expected by consumers in these

parts of the world. “Our UK base helps us to understand the European consumer and to develop wines that work best in the market. It helps us to work closely with the local trade and consumers, to build relationships and to be highly responsive to the market’s needs. It is perhaps as a result of this that Soul Tree’s wines have won several international awards including IWC, IWSC, and Decanter awards.”

Soul Tree is now represented by around 30 distributors across the UK and is listed by around a thousand outlets in the country. Soul Tree wines are also currently available in parts of Europe, including Germany and France and in the US. The company is in talks with importers and distributors in several other countries in North America, Europe as well as Asia-Pacific.

“While our wines have surely come a long way, we aim to keep doing the right things – and to keep doing things right – until Soul Tree and Indian wines have been irreversibly etched into the global marketplace.” ♦

WINE AWARDS

- International Wine Challenge: Bronze 2016, Commended 2016
- International Wine & Spirit Competition: Two Bronze medals 2016
- Decanter World Wine Awards: One Silver 2016
- Asian Wine Review: One Silver 2016
- Champagne & Sparkling World Championships: Commended 2016

BUSINESS AWARDS

- National Business Awards: Start-up Business of the Year – Finalist 2012
- Midlands Business Awards: Entrepreneur of the Year – Finalist 2013
- Real Business Future 50 – Winner 2012
- British Chamber of Commerce Awards: Most Promising New Business – Finalist 2012
- Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Awards: Most Promising New Business – Winner 2012
- Startups 100 – Winner 2012
- Top 20 New Businesses to Watch – Director Magazine, Institute of Directors 2011
- Best New 11 Businesses of 2011 – Smarta.com
- 6 Asian Businesses Helping to Shape the New Business Decade – Zee Magazine 2011

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