

Indian wines slowly come of age: India Inc Interview

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Among the few lesser known aspects of brand India making a global impact are its wines. The country has a long history of viticulture but its wine industry is still in a fairly nascent stage.

Soul Tree was founded in 2009 as the first UK-headquartered Indian wine company to tap into the international potential of the industry. Co-founder Alok Mathur (pictured left) spoke to India Inc about the gradual coming of age of Indian wines and what sets them apart in an extremely competitive market

as Soul Tree looks poised to kick off retail sales in 2014.

What is the USP and marketing strategy of Soul Tree wines?

Though Indian wines have been around for a while they are still practically unknown amongst consumers in the UK. Early research showed that all but a very tiny number of British consumers had never heard of Indian wines, let alone tried them. This is now changing rapidly but in the early days marketing Indian wines has simply been about availability and awareness – less strategy, more hard work, grit, and determination.

Soul Tree, as the only Indian wine to actually be headquartered in the UK, is focused primarily on the UK and global markets – that, and unrelenting efforts in the marketplace, have made Soul Tree a highly visible and credible brand amongst the trade and consumers alike. Our belief that we represent not just Soul Tree but the larger Indian wine industry, however, is having a positive influence on how Indian wines are seen as a whole.



Can Indian wine be considered at par with other New World wines?

Indian wines are slowly but surely coming of age. There are some very good wines that can hold their own with other New World wines.

However, Indian wines will only truly come of age when we can say that a large proportion of Indian wine producers produce wines that are world class, or are capable of being considered at par with wines from other more established regions. It is still work-in-progress, but we would like to see radical improvement on that front. Caught in everyday competition businesses often forget how important it is that our competitors do well, and how important this can be to how they themselves are seen by the world.

What sets Indian wines apart in the global market?

The global market is always seeking wines from exciting new regions – the relatively recent growth of regions like Chile and Argentina is testament to the market's appetite for new wines. India has only been on the wine map for a very short time, but it has the advantage of having diverse regions with excellent terroir, a glorious agricultural heritage, and a culture of entrepreneurship. Indian wines, however, also have the additional benefit of the sheer popularity of Indian cuisine – the 6,000-odd licensed Indian restaurants in the UK themselves are a huge market for Indian wines.

Is there more that can be done on the policy side to improve the image of India wines?

There is a very long way to go before Indian wines can truly be said to have made it globally. History tells us that the regions that have made it big in the last few decades have not only done so because of collective quality, but because the industry came together as one entity, with full governmental support.

The Indian Grape Processing Board is an excellent start to bringing the industry together and to putting up a common face to the rest of the world, but it is only just the beginning. It's effectiveness in the Indian context is yet to be proven. The Indian government also needs to strike a balance between being protectionist and between opening the lucrative Indian market to the world, thereby negotiating reciprocal entries into the much larger wine markets for their own products.

How did you decide to get into this field?

On sabbaticals from our respective careers and at Oxford for our MBA, Melvin [co-founder Melvin D'Souza] and I spotted a niche during a dinner out that was just begging to be plugged. Everyone was drinking Indian beers with their Indian meals, but there was not a single Indian wine in sight.

A hunt ensued, and yet we found none. We knew Indian wines were coming of age, but also realised that no one had yet successfully created a place for Indian wines around the world. What got us into this from those initial thoughts was a love to achieve something that had not truly been done before, an ambition to establish a new global consumer brand, and a desire to see a new Indian industry make it big across the world.



Is there a story behind the name Soul Tree?

We like to think that Soul Tree represents not just wines from India, but India itself. As wines, as a brand, as a company, and as people, this includes all the flavours and complexities of India, all the diversity, the mystique, the emotion, the chaos, a warm soul, and a spicy edge. Soul Tree emphasises, and promulgates, the very soul, the spirit of India.

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