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Indian wine viewed through Bordelais eyes

What do producers from Bordeaux think about Indian wines? Ruma Singh elicits their frank opinions



Bordeaux visitors in India holding bottles of their wine. Left to right: Emmanuel Boidron, François Hugueniot, Karine Barbier and Igor Solomon

India is one of the world's fastest growing alcohol markets, but wine consumption in the country is still low, less than 100ml per capita. Yet, the country also has a large young population, eager to adopt new trends yet conscious of health, and this is where wine fits in better than most other alcoholic beverages. Although Indian wine's potential for growth is slowed down by high taxes and red tape, this has not deterred the country's top wine companies from laying out ambitious plans. These companies have been experimenting with innovation in viticulture and vinification in an effort to bring better quality to Indian consumers. Technological innovations – from agri-voltaic systems to optical sorting machines, from amphorae to precision irrigation systems – are all there in the mix. Focusing on lower yields to give better grapes, on soil suitability and clonal selection are becoming commonplace for premium wines. And the results are showing. More Indian consumers are opting to drink Indian wine than ever before, and are increasingly ready to spend more on these premium offerings.

Offering a knowledgeable outsider's viewpoint on Indian wine, as it is today, are some interesting excerpts from Ruma Singh's interaction with a group of Bordeaux wine producers who visited India in December 2022. The producers, representing notable estates from Saint-Emilion, Sauternes, Margaux and the Haut-Medoc, visited Mumbai and Bangalore, during their week-long visit – including the vineyards of Grover Zampa outside Bangalore – and tasted several Indian wines.

Ruma Singh: Indian wine companies have been making significant changes to their viticultural practices, employing modern technology and a deeper understanding of grapes. What were your impressions during your visit?

François Hugueniot, director, Château Sociando Mallet, Haut-Medoc: Bordeaux wines are defined by their terroir, a complex concept that is not only about the types of soils but also encompasses the micro-climate, the exposure of the vineyards and the selection of grape varieties adapted to the geo-pedological and climatic context. In this notion of terroir, I would also add the important interaction of man with the given elements. The experience gained over centuries of cultivating vines in the Bordeaux area allows us to make choices that will continue to improve the quality of our Bordeaux wines.

Indian viticulture has a more recent history and, in my view, the first step is to gradually acquire the essential experience of all the parameters involved in producing quality wines; choosing the grape varieties best adapted to the soils and the constraints of vine-growing in a tropical environment. Our visit at Grover's showed a true mastery of viticultural practices, with knowledge and use of the latest technological advances, particularly concerning the essential water supply to the vines. We also noticed that Grover's viticultural policy is very respectful of the environment.

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– Igor Solomon

Ruma Singh: What did you think of the Indian wines you tasted during your visit? The grapes being grown? Production methods?

Igor Solomon, CEO, Château Clos Dady and Clos des Remparts, Sauternes:

Offering a global view on Indian viticulture based on our short visit would be more than presumptuous. India is a vast country with several wine growing regions and sampling just a handful of wines does not nearly make us experts in the field. At the same time, we were provided with very detailed and professional explanations on the growing methods, production cycle and the sheer volumes produced, so I'll do my best to offer my very subjective and limited view.

It seems to me that the wines we tasted were all correctly produced as there were no apparent faults in any of the samples and they all presented the correct balance between acidity, alcohol, sucrosity, body and mouthfeel. Most of the wines sampled presented genuine reflections of their varietal characteristics, especially the white varietal ones – Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Chenin Blanc. It seems to me, personally, that focusing on varietal wines would be the way to go, both in terms of production and in terms of marketing, since from what we saw, India is probably more closely associated with New World viticulture and winemaking rather than with the Old World, bearing in mind that this approach is overly simplistic.

This being said, I found the reds, and especially the red blends, less convincing in terms of clear varietal focus and expression. It is possible that this is due to the very challenging conditions of tropical vine growing and the resulting peculiar vegetation cycle. Experimenting with varieties other than traditional international ones could well be the answer to that and from what I understood, Grover Zampa is moving in this direction. Testing different clones of these varieties is also a strategy to consider.

Ruma Singh: What are the biggest challenges Indian producers face in the vineyard and the winery? How do you think they could adapt to produce the best wine?

Emmanuel Boidron, owner, Château Corbin Michotte, Saint-Emilion: In order to make the best quality, they have to find the grape varieties that are the best adapted to the different types of soil. For this, experimentation is essential. Technology is necessary, but cannot replace the terroir. Winemaking practices in India are well-known and the new technologies can adapt to produce the best wine in extreme climate conditions. Once again, experimentation is essential.

Ruma Singh: Unlike Bordeaux, portfolios in India are more volume-based with bigger choices to cover varied consumer interests. Do you believe Indian producers should focus on producing premium quality wines or on entry level wines to attract consumers?

Karine Barbier, Marketing and PR head, Château Lascombes: I think both are necessary. You are only at the beginning of wine consumption in India. So, it is important to have big portfolios with a wide range of quality and prices in order for consumers to learn about wine. People will start with cheaper wines, more affordable in terms of pricing but also simpler in terms of tasting. They will

learn about tasting thanks to these wines. Then, they will be interested in drinking more expensive wines of better quality, because they will have more and more understanding about winemaking. It is essential to have a big portfolio to arouse consumer interest. But it is also important to focus on the quality of their premium wines, so as not to lose the consumers' interest.

Ruma Singh: What interests you most about the Indian market and how do you think Bordeaux wines might succeed here, based on your visit?

François Hugueniot, Château Sociando Mallet:

This was my first visit to India and, when meeting people, I realized there was a genuine interest for wine in general, and Bordeaux wine in particular. My main impression is that attitudes to alcohol consumption are evolving, that wine is gradually finding its place at the table in India and that the market is truly developing. Consumers, distributors and retailers all echoed this message in their discussions with the Bordeaux delegation.

Château Sociando Mallet has been distributed in India for a long time and consumer interest is increasing among a young population. Today, even if the retail price of our wines on the Indian market means they are only accessible to a very small proportion of the population, the potential for development is considerable.

Bordeaux wines have a lot going for them, with their excellent reputation and worldwide recognition of their quality. Their unique character charms consumers and we have seen that they match with Indian cuisines beautifully. The only drawback is the high level of import taxes imposed on our wines today that prevent the market developing to its full potential; but we are sure the demand is there!

Karine Barbier, Château Lascombes: The Indian market is a growing one with a large percentage of the population now interested in wine. And it will grow more in the years to come. It is a market Bordeaux cannot ignore. Succeeding in this market is not an easy thing for Bordeaux wines, as the taxes are very high.

An historic agreement was recently signed between India and Australia for decreasing taxes. We sincerely hope that it will be applied to Europe soon. As people in India have been learning very quickly about wine (with their first Master of Wine, Sonal Holland, in 2016), they will undoubtedly be more and more interested in Bordeaux wines and in the Classified Growths, which are references for excellence in the wine world. That is the reason why it is important for us to be here right from the beginning. ❖

In coordination with Brinda Bourhis from Bordeaux.



Ruma Singh and Brinda Bourhis (centre) and the delegation from Bordeaux pictured with the Grover Zampa team in Bangalore

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