



Napa in California, US, is known for its vineyards.

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Meet Raj Patel, the winemaker from Napa

Raj Patel, whose wines were served at a White House state dinner for Prime Minister Modi, says a winemaker's life is filled with both unpredictability and serendipity

Ruma Singh

Barely had the silverware been washed and dried after the state dinner hosted by US President Joe Biden for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House in June than the internet began buzzing. #Patelwine—the red wine served at the White House on the occasion—started trending. Created by Napa-based entrepreneur Raj Patel, the wine was a \$75 (around ₹6,150) Cabernet-dominated, small-batch blend that was served with a specially curated vegetarian-focused meal. Other wines offered to the guests included a Chardonnay from Virginia and a traditional method sparkling rosé from California.

Social media was quick to pounce on the fact that a wine by an Indian-origin producer—from Gujarat, no less—was on the menu. But for seasoned Napa wine collectors, Patel's name was not a random pick; his winery had been on collectors' lists for a few years. In fact, I had heard about Patel eight years ago.

So, during my recent trip to Napa, I thought I should meet Raj Patel, the man whose wine had captured the attention of Indians around the world.

Patel obliged by meeting us at the tasting room-cum-warehouse belonging to his winemaker, Julien Fayard, in downtown Napa. Fayard, a French native whose impressive résumé includes Bordeaux's Château Lafite Rothschild and Chateau Smith Haut Lafite, is known for adding French finesse to his wines. While we sipped and swirled the wines Patel uncorked for us, he told *Lounge* his story and his plans.

ACT 1: THE MONDAVI INFLUENCE

Patel admits he had little passion for wine in his early career. "My father drank whisky and beer back home in India. We had no exposure to wine at all," says Patel, who moved to the US with his family at the age of six, in 1972. "The wines I first drank were a white Zinfandel and a blended Pinot Noir."

But Patel, a biochemical engineer, studied at the University of California, Davis, a school famous for oenological studies, and was surrounded by wine professionals and oenology students. So, it seemed natural that while looking for a summer job while at university, he landed one at a wine producer. The wine producer in question was none other than Robert Mondavi, then one of Napa's most influential winemakers.

At the Mondavi winery in the summer of 1989, Patel began analysing wine samples as a lab technician. On Saturdays, Mondavi's son, Tim, would taste barrel samples and Patel got the opportunity to taste with him. "I had no clue about wine but Tim told me, 'Raj, you have a good palate....' It did briefly cross my mind at that time that I should buy my own winery and



(above) PATEL Cabernet Sauvignon; and Raj Patel.



I said as much to Bob (Robert Mondavi) but I was thinking of it more as a potential business opportunity rather than a passion," he says frankly.

Patel's career veered towards

the finance stream. Several years later, he happened to be present when Michael, Mondavi's elder son, made a presentation at a private bank. At the black-tie dinner that followed, Patel met Robert Mondavi again. "Bob was larger than life, at the pinnacle of his fame, but he remembered me," recalls Patel. "He said, 'I remember you—you are the first Indian to work in Napa. So, did you start that winery you were thinking of then?'"

And thereby hangs a tale.

ACT 2: THE 'SECOND JOB'

It was in the mid-2000s that Patel took to the wine trail again, using a custom crush facility and producing his first vintage in 2007—just 100 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon. On release, influential wine critic Robert Parker rated it an impressive 95 points out of 100. And so started Patel's "second job" in wine—his day job remained in the finance field, as wealth adviser to high net worth individuals.

It is said wine has a way of drawing you in, and Patel was no different. Over 16 years, Patel's production has grown from 100 to 1,200 (12-bottle) cases annually, sold exclusively through the "club membership" allocation system Napa is known for. Essentially, you sign up for membership with wineries if it is open, and are then treated as a preferred client. Patel, in fact, sells 70% of each vintage directly to consumers via his website. He ships to over 40 states in the US and exports to six countries on specific allocation.

He owns no vineyards but, along with Fayard, has exclusive rights to individual parcels within specific vineyards. In Napa, where restrictions on land use are man-

dated and commercial developments frowned upon, many wineries follow the practice of leasing or connecting with specific vineyards for their fruit.

ACT 3: THE ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

So, did his Indian antecedents pave his way to the White House? Perhaps, though Patel reveals it was a serendipitous meeting with a man with whom he shared a chance Uber ride some years ago that eventually resulted in his connection to the powers-that-be at the White House.

One morning several months ago, his phone rang at 6am; the caller ID said it was the White House. A prank, he thought. It was not. The White House finally reached him, and, within a short time, he was being asked to send samples of his wine to the admin team. "It was to be a state dinner for the Indian Prime Minister, with 400 guests attending, but I was not allowed to talk about it until the official PR release was out," he recalls. But the Indian media got wind of it; soon, his phone was ringing non-stop. "It had become public knowledge in India even before the official announcement!"

About eight cases of his PATEL Red Blend 2019 (\$75) were consumed at the dinner. A Merlot-dominant red blend that sees 22 months in new French oak, the wine is juicy, balanced and approachable. The vintage was awarded 93 points by critic Antonio Galloni.

But wine industry pros will tell you how

unpredictable the business can be. By 2010, Patel was making nearly 800 cases of wine. 2011 was a rain-hit year, followed by a bumper crop in 2012, where he harvested 40% more fruit. "I needed to buy more barrels very quickly," he says. In 2018, 2019, 2021, production hit 2,000 cases. "This year (2023) is a lot more like 2010, good fruit from a long growing season." However, he recognises the fallout of climate change. It has been noticeably hotter, and, if this trend continues, ripening would accelerate, with negative impacts. "My 2007 harvest started on 1 October but these days harvest might start any time from September to November. Climate change is really affecting the wine world. We should remember that, however well we make our wine, Nature has the final say," he adds.

In Napa, I tasted some exemplary Cabernet Francs—the grape seems to be Napa's next big thing. Patel confirms that a vintage of 100% Cabernet Franc from the Coombsville AVA (or American Viticultural Area, designated wine grape-growing regions), produced in 2014 and 2015 and sold out immediately, is also on the cards. Another client favourite is the PATEL Napa Valley Malbec from Atlas Peak, produced when the quality of the fruit is "up to standards". It was produced through 2013-16, with a hiatus from 2017-20 due to wildfires.

Patel's barrel-fermented Napa Sauvignon Blanc is whole cluster pressed and aged on lees in French oak, giving the wine a textural complexity which makes it excellent value at \$60. Peach, pineapple and a hint of guava lend a tropical feel, the fruit comes from vineyards in Napa's premium Rutherford AVA. "I use the same clone that is used by Chateau d'Yquem for their Ygrec dry white wine and vinify it the same way," says Patel.

The White House wine, the Napa red blend, is a combination of Merlot with Cabernet Sauvignon, approachable with smooth tannins, and considered a steal by Napa standards at \$75. He now has three Cabernets in his portfolio, the top of the line one—his Coombsville Cabernet Sauvignon is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from the cool climate Coombsville AVA—being \$170 a bottle. "We don't just source the fruit, it comes from a specific block and a specific clone—the Bordeaux 337 clone, which gives the wine its powerful structure." Fermented in steel and aged in new French oak for 19 months with minimal racking, it wears its 15.2% ABV lightly and displays considerable depth of flavour and structure.

He is adamant, though, that he wants to limit production. "If you go beyond making 5,000 cases, you may as well make 25,000 cases—and that puts you into the value wine range. Maintaining quality then becomes a challenge."

On the day we met, Patel was excited: He was on the cusp of a major career change—moving out of his "day job" to start a private equity fund with a group of investors that would focus on buying vineyards—this would give him first pick of the best sites or parcels. For Raj Patel, the time is right.

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A meal in the global capital of gastronomy

A long line of female cooks from Lyon have inspired the pioneers of modern French cuisine



Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse is an indoor food hall in Lyon.

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Ayushi Gupta Mehra

The sight of diners tucking into champagne and oysters in leisurely fashion at 10am might be startling to most but is nothing out of the ordinary on a Monday in Lyon, France. We are wandering through Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse, an indoor food hall frequented by locals and tourists alike for its regional produce, from cheese and chocolate to baked goods, fresh meats and wine. Had we arrived a bit earlier, we might have rubbed shoulders with some of Lyon's great chefs, who can be found there every morning, foraging fresh ingredients for their Michelin-starred restaurants.

Popularly acknowledged as the capital of gastronomy in France, Lyon has over 90 restaurants listed in the Michelin Guide, with 15 holding one Michelin star and five with two stars. The city, which boasts of more restaurants per head than anywhere else in France, has nurtured many notable chefs, from Paul Bocuse, the pioneer of modern French cuisine, to contemporary names such as Claude Bosi and Daniel Boulud.

Lyon's location, nestled at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, has been pivotal in cementing its stronghold as the "stomach of France". Local chefs have, as their birthright, produce that the rest of the world yearns for—Bresse chicken, Charolais beef and cheese from Auvergne, Jura and Ardèche. The Rhône valley is also the largest fruit and vegetable provider of France, while the wineries of Bourgogne, Beaujolais and Côtes du Rhône have ensured that the Lyonnais are oenophiles as well as epicures. A running local joke counts Beaujolais as the region's third river, which never runs dry.

History has also underwritten the rich gastronomic heritage of the city. Lyon is well known for its welcoming *bouchons*, bucolic family-owned eateries which are a cross between a bistro and café, mainlining a menu of traditional dishes from *cervelle de canut* (herbed cheese dip) to *quenelles* (delicate dumplings starring creamed fish or meat) and dried cured meats. Centred on communal dining, these establishments owe their origins to the silk trade routed through Lyon, having once served as inns or taverns for silk traders who would stop over for a meal, and to groom their horses. The name *bouchon* itself is a nod to the 16th century term describing the twisted straw brushes used to clean horses.

Homely restaurants are the very heart of Lyon. In the mid-18th century, they were championed by the Mères Lyonnaises, the mothers of Lyon. The long line of female cooks—their origins can be traced back to the 18th century and they had a presence till *nouvelle cuisine* gained prominence in the 1970s—wove culinary magic with their economical use of local ingredients (such as working with off-cuts of meat), inspiring generations of cooks and sustaining the local community through successive wars. Simple but refined specialties such as champagne sauerkraut, *tablier de sapeur* (made with beef tripe) and macaroni gratin underpinned the transformation of many *mères'* home-style restaurants into Michelin-star establishments frequented by businessmen and dignitaries.

Eugénie Brazier, perhaps the most eminent, was the first person to have received three Michelin stars twice for her restaurant in Lyon and for her chalet at Col de la Luère. The latter is where she trained Paul Bocuse, then a 20-year-old apprentice, who went on to become one of France's most famous chefs, celebrated for catalysing a shift towards "nouvelle cuisine" that eschews heavy marinades and sauces for lighter, hyper-seasonal dishes.

Laying emphasis on fresh locally sourced produce and clarity of flavour, this eclectic style of cooking is characteristic of many restaurants in Lyon even today. We get a taste of it at Têtoeio, a one Michelin-star restaurant for contemporary dining resting atop Fourvière hill. We sample slow-roasted summer tomatoes with a delicate puff pastry tart, tatin-style, a soft swoop of mascarpone adding the final flourish. An attractive prelude to dessert pairs apricots with more-savoury-than-sweet ice cream swirled together with sheep's milk. Eponymous chef Christian Têtoeio cuts an elegant figure, distinguished by a red, white and blue collar on his chef's jacket. The distinction is the hallmark of *Meilleurs Ouvriers de France*, a gruelling contest organised every three-four years. Translating to "best craftsmen of France", the title is one that is coveted by all chefs but awarded only to the best of the best by the Organizing Committee for Labor Exhibitions (COET), under the French ministry of national education.

The culinary landscape of Lyon today pays homage to its history, whilst looking to the future. Rustic *bouchons* remain integral to the city's traditions, with their signature red and white tablecloths, and hearty meat-heavy dishes typical of Lyonnais food. For a genuine experience, look out for the seal "Les Bouchons Lyonnais", emblazoned in the windows of the *bouchons* certified as authentic.

Meanwhile, a new wave of gastronomy has seen the rise of neo-bistros with more laid-back surrounds, alongside new concepts such as "Food Traboule." Helmed by Brazilian-born Tabata Mey and her husband Ludovic, the re-imagined "food hall" is housed in The Tour Rose, a heritage building which is part of Lyon's legendary maze of *traboules*—slender covered passageways which run through the middle of a building to connect different streets. Spread over three floors, seven areas and open-plan kitchen counters, the collaborative food hall is united by a communal dining space in which diners can enjoy the vast repertoire of dishes and cuisines from burgers and pizzas to bistro fare.

The gentle tug between old and new plays out across Lyon. A cruise along its famed rivers reveals a colourful patchwork of old-world painted houses juxtaposed against bright orange contemporary offices and gradations of industrial activity. There is no better way to uncover the depth of Lyonnais culture and cuisine than to be a flâneur, meandering through the charming winding streets in pursuit of both adventure and fulfilment.

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