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# Sommelier INDIA

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# RAISING A GLASS TO SOMMELIERS



The Sommeliers Association of India makes its debut with an ambitious programme in step with the ideals of ASI – Association de la Sommellerie Internationale. **Ruma Singh** has the scoop



Amrita Singh, president of SAI, flanked by vice-presidents, Salvatore Castano and Mattia Antonio Cianca

It was February 2024, the location was Monaco. The occasion was the Annual General Assembly and the celebrations of the 55th anniversary of the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI) were in full swing. The three-day session saw multiple events take place, including a black-tie gala dinner abounding with exceptional food and wine. But of greatest importance to the organization was the admission of new applicant members into their fold.

Amrita Singh DipWSET was at Monaco by invitation of the ASI, representing the brand-new entity, **Sommeliers Association of India (SAI)**, to present its vision and mission statement to the ASI Executive Board and presidents of 65 member countries. When the announcement came, it was greeted with resounding applause. SAI had been voted unanimously to be inducted into the ASI's College

of Applicants and had been granted membership. It was a dream come true and the right time for India.

Bordeaux-based Amrita Singh and her business partner, Mattia Antonio Cianca DipWSET were no strangers to the Indian wine industry. They had been visiting India since 2022. Over these visits, they realized that India was awakening to the potential of drinking wine as a beverage of choice. Wine drinkers were increasing in number and the quality of wine made by Indian producers was improving greatly with a new focus on premiumization. The demand for imported wines was growing apace along with an increasing interest in diverse and high-quality alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

Amrita and Mattia had watched this up close while interacting with members of the industry.

“We have been working with the sommelier community and

mentoring aspiring students in India since 2022, conducting tastings and masterclasses in Mumbai and Bangalore, as well as providing work experience for them during Vinexpo in Mumbai and Delhi in 2022 and ProWine Mumbai 2023.”

They had noticed a hunger among young industry professionals to seek better prospects, quality education and career guidance. But in a country as large as India, divided into 28 states and 8 Union territories with varying degrees of access to wine, finding professional support was a struggle.

This observation coincided with what Amrita had noticed at top international wine industry events. “I attended the Best Sommelier of the World competition in Paris last year to support Mattia, who was representing Italy. We noticed that while there was representation from many Asian countries, India, with the largest and youngest population in the world and considered a benchmark in hospitality standards, was missing from the lineup.”

That set them thinking: Youngsters in the Indian wine industry, not to mention the growing band of aficionados and professionals needed access to international connections that would expose them to the best in the world. The opportunities would follow, be it in education, jobs or competitions.

Amrita, Mattia and Salvatore connected with Nina Basset FIH, the founding trustee of the Gérard Basset Foundation, who had earlier served as secretary-general and has been an

Mattia, along with Salvatore, is vice-president, Sommeliers Association of India in charge of education and competitions



Best Sommelier of Europe and Africa 2021, Salvatore Castano is vice-president, Sommeliers Association of India

integral part of the ASI for many years. Nina introduced them to the ASI to understand the requirements for membership and they started work on creating an entity in India that ensured compliance on all fronts. This resulted in an invitation to attend the Annual General Assembly in Monaco.

The all-new Sommeliers Association of India will be launched as a non-profit organization. Besides Amrita who will be president, Mattia and Salvatore Castano (Best Sommelier of Europe and Africa 2021) will join as vice-presidents in charge of education and competitions. Vinod Abrol (ex-CFO Jabong, head of private investment at SAR family office) will come on board as vice-president, financial and legal. “Our endeavour has not only been to create the Sommeliers Association of India but also to get it affiliated to ASI at the very outset,” explains Amrita. “All of us are busy professionals for whom SAI is a passion project rather than a commercial opportunity. And, all year long we have invested our time, effort and resources for the timely launch of SAI in July 2024. Reva K Singh, publisher and editor-in-chief of Sommelier India is our media partner.”

“With our deep appreciation of India’s rich cultural diversity and rapidly evolving gastronomic scene, we believe that a national sommelier association will play a pivotal role”



Saiko Tamura-Soga, ASI vice-president for Asia & Pacific pictured with Amrita Singh

“When I founded India’s first wine magazine 20 years ago, I called it Sommelier India,” said Reva. “And now – here we are at the launch of the Sommelier Association of India! It’s been a long journey and I couldn’t be more thrilled or proud.”

It is the opportune moment for the launch of an internationally-affiliated body that will bring India into special focus and provide Indian professionals opportunities on the world stage, notes Amrita. As the palate of the Indian consumer became more refined, there was a growing need for skilled, knowledgeable professionals to guide and educate both consumers and industry stakeholders.

“Therefore, with our own deep appreciation of India’s rich cultural diversity and rapidly evolving gastronomic scene, we believe that the formation of a national sommelier association will play a pivotal role in elevating the standards of the beverage industry,” she said.

“Qualifications and competitions are the keystones to getting the exposure and opportunities required to improve members’ skills and knowledge, and to network with the community,” Mattia added. “The main goal is to discover the best version of yourself.”

Salvatore believes the affiliation of Sommeliers Association of India with ASI will put every member sommelier at par with international sommeliers. “India has massive potential. Recognition as an ASI-affiliated sommelier will open up job

opportunities around the world, as there is a shortage of good sommeliers worldwide.”

SAI’s formal launch in July 2024 will signal that the wine community in India is prepped and ready to join the big league of international wine professionals and wine lovers. Following the launch, individuals – sommeliers, wine industry professionals, beverage students and aficionados – will get the opportunity to apply for membership to SAI.

SAI’s offerings would be three-fold: memberships that allow multiple benefits to those enrolling, including access to international competitions at the highest level, Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific and Best Sommelier of the World – a contest held every three years – and competing with the best in the world. This is an opportunity to join famous names who have won the title of Best Sommelier of the World, like the late Gérard Basset, UK, Raimonds Tomsons, Latvia, Markus Del Monego, Germany, Marc Almert, Germany and Andreas Larsson, Sweden among many other renowned names.

What’s more, members will have access to international standards of training and education. Non-professional members and wine aficionados would get the benefit of access to a network of professionals who share the same passion for wine.

“This is a way to cultivate curiosity that can turn into a passion,” says Mattia. “SAI is creating detailed plans to organize events, conferences, and trade shows, including collaborative initiatives such as exchange programmes between sommeliers from different countries, facilitated through the ASI.”

There will be a clear focus on cultural integration as well, that would embrace and celebrate the cultural diversity of India by incorporating regional wine traditions and cuisines into SAI’s educational programmes for different categories and different member profiles, including the exploration of local and global wine and food pairings.

The concept of wine pairing with Indian food will also get a fillip, adds Mattia. “Food and wine pairing in India is an evolving concept. There is much more to it than spicy Indian cuisine being paired best with wines with residual sugar. One of SAI’s major focus areas will be to develop the experience of diverse Indian foods with Indian and international wines.”

**M**attia has forged some close connections while in India and has studied the needs of the community. He understands that SAI’s benefits should extend beyond its main focus, which is wine, to include other spirits and beverages that India is big on. “This is a platform where all wine and spirits education providers will co-exist. SAI will organize educational packages as well as conduct the official Best Sommelier of India competition for the Indian beverage

Vinod Abrol, ex-CFO Jabong, head of private investment at SAR family office



L-R: 2023 ASI Best Sommelier of World contest: Nina Jensen from Denmark, Runner - Up; Raimonds Tomsons from Latvia, Winner; and Reeze Choi from China, Second Runner-Up

industry, which will allow winning sommeliers to represent India in international competitions.”

The Indian wine industry will also receive special attention, says Amrita. SAI plans to actively promote and support the growth of the Indian wine industry by organizing events, tastings, and promotions, and establishing partnerships with Indian wineries to showcase their products and encourage greater appreciation for the diversity of Indian wines.

The advantages of an Indian national-level association that is India-centric and yet has access to top international links, are immense. One benefit is the requirement for adherence to international norms of conduct. SAI will have its own constitution and code of ethics for its members, but will also adhere to the strict code of conduct laid out by ASI.

Vinod Abrol’s message is clear: “Sommeliers Association of India is developing its own code of ethics in alignment with the ASI. We want to advocate for responsible alcohol consumption and ethical practices within the alcohol and beverage industry in India as well as develop guidelines and best practices for sustainable and eco-friendly approaches to wine and other beverage service.”

Eventually, as plans fall into place after the launch, SAI intends to create a diverse group of wine lovers and professionals across India, who, in the words of the late Gérard Basset, “would not just know wine, but can help others understand and appreciate it.” ♦

[www.sommeliersassociationofindia.com](http://www.sommeliersassociationofindia.com)

## SOMMELIERS ASSOCIATION OF INDIA

# All your questions answered

### How can one become a member of the SAI?

To become a member is very simple. One can apply directly online from the official website or contact SAI via email.

### Is SAI membership open only to the sommelier community?

Membership is not restricted only to the sommelier community. Sommeliers Association of India welcomes sommeliers, wine professionals, wine lovers, and businesses. There will be three types of membership for individuals (sommeliers, wine professionals and wine enthusiasts) and three tiers of memberships for businesses within the hospitality industry too. A specific sommelier membership is available for working sommeliers with relevant qualifications or equivalent experience.

### As a SAI member, what unique benefits can one get for members of the wine industry?

Members will benefit by being part of an internationally recognized association that follows the highest standards of the global wine and spirits industry, with invitations to exclusive tastings, events and masterclasses, including events for non-industry members or wine enthusiasts.

### 4. How will SAI membership help



L-R: Philippe Faure-Brac, Best Sommelier in the World 1992 and ASI Treasurer; Paolo Basso Best Sommelier in the World 2013; and Olivier Poussier, Best Sommelier in the World 2000

### in furthering one’s career?

SAI is the only provider in India of ASI (Association de la Sommellerie Internationale) qualifications, that are recognized and highly valued all over the world. Moreover, professional sommeliers will have the opportunity to compete for the national title of Best Sommelier of India, which will allow them to represent India in International events and competitions, such as the Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific and Best Sommelier of the World.

### What does the Best Sommelier of India competition mean?

It is a national-level competition open to sommelier members and held according to ASI standards. The winner will represent India in the Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific competition.

### When can one start applying for SAI membership?

Memberships will be available from August 2024.

### What will the scope of SAI’s certifications cover?

SAI will have its own certifications and competitions benchmarked to world standards, as well as access to ASI certifications, including theory, tasting and service of food and beverages, including cheese, wine, spirits, sake, beer, tea, coffee, water, chocolate and non-alcoholic beverages.

### Are ASI certifications available via individuals or members of other wine and spirits schools?

ASI certifications can only be provided by SAI in India.

## Learn, challenge and compete, to be the best

The word 'sommelier' has ancient historic connotations, reaching back to Roman and Greek times. Over the centuries, the word itself, along with its associated duties has evolved. In the modern context, sommelier refers to a professional who has acquired "profound wine knowledge in specific regions, varieties, producers and vintages and played a critical role in elevating wine appreciation as an art form".

The **Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI)**, headquartered in France, is the pre-eminent umbrella association for sommeliers worldwide. Created in Reims, France, on 3rd and 4th June, 1969 during a meeting of

the world's top sommeliers, it is a non-profit organisation. Although ASI is a global entity, the association has as its members, not individuals, but national associations of sommeliers from countries around the world. As of May 2024, it has 65 international member associations, with five associations awaiting formal intronization. This includes India in the form of the brand-new Sommeliers Association of India (SAI).

The mission statement of ASI is:

- To promote the establishment of one central sommelier association per nation
- To coordinate tools and measures to advance the profession
- To educate consumers on the role of the sommelier
- To defend the ethics of the profession



ASI Executive Board led by William Wouters, ASI president, in the back row, third from right

It has a three-pronged mandate, 'learn, challenge and compete' in order to be the best.

The ASI Contest for The Best Sommelier of the World has existed since the organization's inception. The contestants aspiring for this accolade must first win their national competition or win the selection process of their own national association. This also opens the door for regional international competitions like Best Sommelier of Europe & Africa, Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific, Best Sommelier of the Americas. These competitions are created to 'forge the steel' required to compete at the highest level by preparing for the competition to the highest standards of training.

The ASI is governed by a strict

code of ethics as laid out in its constitution and formalised in June 2022. The code includes such significant modern-day issues as diversity, responsible consumption and awareness of and responsibility for the environment.

ASI plays a pivotal role in assisting national sommelier associations to promote excellence and high standards among the international sommelier community. Member countries must sign to agree to adhere to the highest standards that the ASI stipulates as conditions for its membership.

Education is at the core of ASI's mission, acting as a stepping stone for those keen to follow a career as a sommelier. ASI's standardized curriculum is broad-based and comprehensive, including wine

knowledge, business management, and customer service. Aspiring sommeliers can choose from a diverse range of educational pathways, from immersive bootcamps to comprehensive grids.

As a national association, the newly created Sommelier's Association of India (SAI) is eligible for ASI membership. And, since the association is a member, all those opting for SAI memberships can avail of the benefits that ASI offers its member countries. These benefits will run alongside SAI's own curriculum as the national body for sommeliers in India.

"In my tenure as ASI President, our family of member associations has expanded to all corners of the globe," said **William Wouters, Association de la Sommellerie Internationale**. "In many ways ASI feels like a big family; one that is diverse, inclusive and understanding



William Wouters, president of ASI

of the uniqueness of each member.

"We are thrilled that the Sommeliers Association of India, under the stewardship of Amrita Singh, has been formed. India represents a new world for sommellerie, as its increasingly diverse culture, rising wealth, and breadth of hospitality destinations makes for a vibrant food and drink scene.

"Having a strong sommelier association in India will only help to raise the standards and profile of its restaurants, hotels and other dining options. At ASI we are looking forward to collaborating and supporting Amrita and the entire team."

Expressing her pleasure at the formation of the new Association, **Saiko Tamura-Soga, ASI Vice-President for Asia & Pacific**, said, "It has been my dream for many years to see India become part of the ASI family. Amrita Singh, the first president of SAI, with her passion, strong determination and commitment, has finally made it a reality. Being one of the world's fastest-growing economies and one of the most promising and exciting markets for wine, India's joining ASI will soon have a profound impact on the sommelier community.

"This must have also been an emotional moment for the two Italian sommeliers, Mattia Antonio Cianca and Salvatore Castano to witness the association taking shape, especially given their tremendous behind-the-scenes support and dedication from the very beginning. "The establishment of the Sommelier



Saiko Tamura-Soga, ASI vice-president for Asia & Pacific

Association of India is a significant milestone in the development of India's wine culture," she added. "It will not only raise the standard of service professionals, but also foster a vibrant community of wine connoisseurs and professionals. I am looking forward to a future where wine appreciation becomes an integral part of India's rich and diverse culinary heritage.

"India's joining ASI will soon have a profound impact on the sommelier community. India's vibrant energy and dynamism will boost the economic benefits around wine, contribute to make the sommellerie shine and lead the future on a global scale!

"Bravo Amrita, and warm welcome to the Sommeliers Association of India!