

COLUMN



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On how a search for terroir in the virgin grasslands of Akluj gave birth to Sette, the flagship wine that helped define modern Indian fine wine

Legacy in a Glass: 15 Years of Sette

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It was 2006. The seven founders of Fratelli Vineyards were on a mission to identify vineyard land in tropical India to start a wine company that one day could make wines akin to the classic wines of Tuscany from where three of the seven founders came. It was an ambitious plan.

Led by founder Kapil Sekhri and winemaker Piero Masi, they crisscrossed India searching for the perfect terroir. Nashik, where several wine companies were already based, was discarded as being too fertile. Then someone suggested land outside Akluj, a town in Maharashtra's Solapur district. These were virgin grasslands, unreachable by road or air.

Getting there was a task. Standing and surveying the expanse of barren land, Kapil Sekhri was assailed with doubts. There were no roads, no habitation, save for a handful of villages. But Piero Masi was excited. The eroded mother rock, the nutrient-poor soil reminded him of the galestro soils of Tuscany's Chianti Classico. This was it.

Nearly 30 years on, Masi's vision has proved correct. Fratelli owns 340 acres of vineyard land around the spot they stood at, and Akluj is inaccessible no more. Vineyards stretch as far as the eye can see. And their flagship wine, Sette, a market leader in the premium Indian wine

category, is celebrating its 15th anniversary.

What is remarkable about Sette is the dominance of Sangiovese in the blend. Sangiovese is still relatively unfamiliar in India: Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon are the best-known black grapes. So, to plant Sangiovese in 2007 was an enormous gamble. As Fratelli placed their first order for saplings from Bordeaux's Guillaume nursery, Sangiovese was just one of several varieties ordered. In the virgin soils of Akluj, there was no precedent as to which grapes would grow well. Sangiovese is a notoriously tough grape to transplant successfully: Tuscany remains its natural heartland.

But miraculously, it worked. Sangiovese took to the mineral-rich soil, and thrived in the altitude's cool nights and warm, dry days to produce ripe, concentrated fruit. The low-nutrient soil helped develop freshness, vibrant aromas, and tannic structure like the wines of Chianti Classico. And so, the Fratelli love story with Sangiovese began and a new Sette was born, tapping into Tuscan winemaker, Piero Masi's long experience with the grape. A grape that few knew in India, and fewer could pronounce, became the hero grape of the Fratelli portfolio. So much so, that the late Steven Spurrier, after tasting one of the vintages

on a trip to India, declared that Sette had the hallmarks of becoming India's first icon wine.

With the 15th-anniversary vintage, the 17-year-old vineyards have reached the end of their natural life cycle (in India, one year in viticultural terms equals two years in Europe), yet produced remarkable wines from old deep-rooted, low-yielding vines. For the launch, director Puja Sekhri commissioned fashion designer Manish Malhotra to design a special bottle to commemorate the occasion. The resultant black and gold design makes the limited edition Sette bottle a collector's item, as much as the juice in it.

Connected with co-founder Alessio Secci to chat about Fratelli and Sette, the past and the future. Having attended several vertical tastings of Sette with Alessio, I've always been impressed by the wine's development. Despite the belief that Indian wines are not ageworthy, from the first vintage in 2009, made in a big tannin-rich style (50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Sangiovese, 20% Merlot,) the vintages have shown graceful evolution. As the Sangiovese vines came of age, more fruit was incorporated into Sette and the changes became evident.

From the 2015 vintage, 60% Sangiovese was blended with 40% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40,000 bottles were produced, then 80,000 were produced in the 2017 vintage. The limited edition Sette 15th Anniversary is down to 6000 bottles like the first vintage. The vines that originally produced one bottle of wine per plant, now need 2.5 plants to produce the same quantity of juice. "There's a high concentration of flavours, polyphenols and colour in this wine but they're from old vines," notes Alessio.

Interestingly, Cabernet Franc is now added to the mix, echoing a trend that is finding traction with winemakers everywhere, including Tuscany. Alessio recalled a conversation with the Antinori agronomist at Vinitaly that revealed Tignanello now has more Cabernet Franc in its blend. Alessio is excited about Cabernet Franc, and we geek on, for a bit about it.



Sette 15 will be a keeper, says Alessio. "We have called upon all our experience and knowledge to make a wine that stands out from the regular Sette. It has been fermented at lower temperatures to preserve fruit and retain acidity so the wine can age and still be approachable when young. We have worked gently on tannins, ageing the wine for 14 months in French oak alone, as with the first 2009 vintage."

The cuvée is dedicated to both the late Kapil Sekhri and Piero Masi. While their families have picked up the reins, it was their vision that created Sette originally. "It is my job to keep their vision alive," says Alessio.

I'm curious: with white wine sales picking up worldwide, is there a white Sette on the cards, I ask, as a fan of Italian white grapes. "We are trialling some grapes, including some Italian whites," was all Alessio would divulge. Suffice it to say, this experimentation is in the safe hands of Fratelli's experienced agronomist, Dattatray Ghule, and Sandeep Magar, who looks after the vineyards.

Meanwhile, despite the old Sangiovese vineyards dying, it won't mean the end of Sette. New vines have been planted in the Akluj vineyards to compensate, and yet more are being rejuvenated. "You will continue to get Sette, but from different vines," says Alessio. "We want Sette to remain approachable, yet add more elegance and finesse in future." As the vines renew, the original vision endures. Today Sette might be an icon, but it is still a baby in vintage terms ♦

A line-up of Sette wine from the first vintage to the Anniversary edition

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