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Sommelier INDIA

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On how an informal gathering of wine professionals in Bengaluru matured into a powerful network of education, opportunity and camaraderie

It takes a Community to raise a Wine Culture

While WCB began as a germ of an idea in 2022, it soon gathered momentum and evolved into something far more significant

“Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.”

Helen Keller said this. And whether the founders of the Wine Community Bangalore (WCB), an informal collective of trade professionals, knew it, this is the path they chose: to create a sense of camaraderie, connection and support around a beverage they love.

There is solid recent evidence that wine’s popularity and consumption rise when communities actively rally around it. Community-driven wine concepts like US wine writer Karen McNeil’s “Come Over October” have brought wine drinkers into the fold, encouraging them to share wine and celebrate connections. The lesson is clear: when trade bodies, wineries, retailers and media coalesce around a simple, shared objective, they can generate meaningful results.

In India, wine is a small slice of the beverage market. The taxes further inflate prices, which hit wine education costs as well. Job opportunities and career progression have been slow and attrition rates in the wine trade high, as people quit for alternative growth avenues.

While WCB began as a germ of an idea in 2022, it soon gathered momentum and evolved into something far more significant. Originally something of a trade secret, its impact in Bengaluru, India’s pioneering city for innovative

ideas, generated community-driven camaraderie and a reawakened interest in wine.

My own introduction to the WCB started when I was handed a few bottles of wine by some visiting Bordeaux producers and asked to use them to teach about Bordeaux. But where would I find such a group of eager learners? Right under my nose, it turned out. That’s how I discovered the WCB.

Harish, the conceptualiser of the group, explains how it was born. “A group of us were killing time at a bar, awaiting our wine exam results. The topic turned to wine, and how little support there was for trade professionals in India when it came to wine exposure – no clubs, job boards, or tasting groups. We thought we should create something for the trade in our city.”

Sommelier and wine bar manager Ganga Ghale, agreed. She recalled moving to Bangalore in 2021 and googling wine clubs and tasting groups in the city with little success. For Tinu Thomas, sales and marketing head with a national wine importer, it began with a chance meeting with Harish. And the idea of a non-hierarchical, cost-only concept grew, centring around different wine-focused monthly events, called chapters. Fellow wine pros Prashanth Saldanha and Chethan Kumar joined the core team. On 19th August 2022, a WhatsApp group was started with nine people

and the WCB was born.

“Because the messaging around wine had been limited by a lack of access and knowledge,” says Tinu, “the WCB was a community that would keep the trade in focus, bridge gaps within the industry and create an environment where people could get together to talk, taste and learn.”

In order to generate professional self-confidence, everyone in the community was treated equally and no quarter was given for hierarchy or qualifications, adds Prashanth.

Inevitably there were doubts in the early days. Questions regarding logistics, finding venues, and wine support for events loomed large. However, as chapter followed chapter, the core team saw interest grow and backing come in from various quarters including importers and the hospitality industry. There was no financial commitment to join the WCB; the cost of bottles at tastings was shared. Marketers, sommeliers, retailers and wine enthusiasts began flocking to the chapters and seats disappeared in seconds on announcement.

I did the Bordeaux masterclass with the wines I received and, as the afternoon’s teaching and tasting session stretched into the evening, the enthusiasm I saw was an eye-opener for me, and seemingly, for the attendees. “That chapter gave us a new impetus; we found the trade very eager to learn,” says Harish.

As the WCB grew, so did the range of formats. From masterclasses to blind tasting sessions (nicknamed Stash) and experiential wine afternoons (a Rajat Parr talk and tasting via Zoom), the chapters took off. A sold-out sundowner saw 40 attendees clink glasses of rosé, while the third anniversary bash, titled ‘Music from Winelands’, was a rocking deejay-led musical and wine extravaganza with 180 people signing up.

“Brands began recognising what we were doing,” recounts Harish. Sourcing wine and finding venues became easier. Two high-

energy wine carnivals attracted large crowds and became highlights of 2023 and 2024, where the community came together and partied in day-long jamborees of music, wine-centric games, quizzes, and masterclasses.

Last month the WCB announced that its four-year journey in its current avatar was coming to an end. Why hit the pause button now when the WCB is the talk of India’s wine industry? I asked the core team. “For us at the core team, it’s been four years and 48 chapters of non-stop activity,” says Harish.

Each of the members had grown in their day jobs – Harish curates wine events in the city and around the country, and consults with wine bars. Ganga’s managerial responsibilities now take her beyond her sommelier role. Tinu, handling a large, premium wine portfolio in a growing market, finds spare time harder to come by, as do Prashanth and Chethan. It was time to hit pause.

“Today, most of us are what we are because of the community, the network, and the support we received,” says Ganga.

However, this is not the last we have heard of WCB, promises the core team. While many members have moved on to new pastures, often due to contacts developed via the WCB network, the WhatsApp group – now 425 members strong from across India – remains active. Members post job opportunities, broadcast wine events they’re hosting and stay in touch through the web of connections created by the community. Job opportunities around wine have grown; wine bars are mushrooming in Bengaluru.

“We are happy with what we have built, the spin-offs we have inspired,” says Tinu. “When the WCB returns, it will be more focused, offering new formats and better opportunities for the wine community.” ♦



Ganga, Harish, Tinu, Chethan and Prashanth convey some of the fun, youthful, high-energy profile of the core group

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