

pursuits

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What's the House Wine?

INDIANS NOW ENJOY TASTINGS IN THE COMFORT OF THEIR HOMES WHILE GAINING AN EDUCATION.

BY ASHWATI PARAMESHWAR

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ONE SULTRY TUESDAY EVENING in Mumbai, a customer told Nikhil Agarwal that he wanted “to try eight red wines from eight different countries”. Agarwal is the director of All Things Nice which provides wine tastings at home along with a host of other personalised good eating services. He arrived with his tasting notes and appropriate glasses for each wine, expecting to talk to a group. Instead he found the gentleman home alone. “He just felt like trying out new wines,” says Agarwal. “The Indian wine community is growing, and people are beginning to know what they



NIKHIL AGARWAL, DIRECTOR, ALL THINGS NICE

like.” The evening’s customer spent almost Rs 1 lakh.

India’s budding oenophiles are eager to learn more about their chosen beverage, and increasing numbers of successful wine courses are being offered to fill the gap. Wine-pairing dinners and wine-sponsored events are also popular, but some choose to learn about the drink at home. “Wine is one of those things that can make even a scholar sometimes look foolish,” says Craig Wedge, chief operating officer of Mumbai-based wine distribution and promotion company FineWinesnMore. “People want to learn in more private surroundings.” Wedge and Agarwal conduct tastings in homes, pairing the wines with food, and customising the experiences to fit the customers’ tastes and budgets.

Mehdi Muslemi, a 23-year-old sales and social media manager from Mumbai, had Agarwal bring seven wines over for an evening with friends. “We didn’t know anything about wine, but it was such an interesting concept,” he says. “Now that I’ve been told something about the pairings and

how to taste, I drink wine with friends when we’re chilling at home.” He adds that he is now more likely to order it in restaurants since he is more confident about getting value for money.

Indian wine consumption is expected to reach 6.88 million cases by 2015, according to industry reports. The surge is apparently being driven by women. Wedge agrees: “Women are the buyers in any family, especially those in their twenties. They focus on aesthetics and flavours. At our tastings, the ratio is about 60:40 in favour of women, while men are often more interested in hard liquor.” Agarwal, however, does not see a gender bias: In the last year he says he has conducted four wine tastings for bachelor parties and only three for bachelorettes.

Both Agarwal and Wedge receive frequent calls for advice on pairing suggestions. Wedge, who also provides wine concierge services to American Express Platinum cardholders, often helps customers choose wine as gifts or in starting or adding to personal wine collections. He also advises on storage, and builds wine cellars. “Depending on the size of the collection, we organise single cabinets or a whole bank of cabinets that will suit the purpose. At the moment I am converting a significant basement room for the customer.” Prices range from Rs 50,000 for a cabinet to up to Rs 20 lakh for a full cellar.

Agarwal has created unique wines for special occasions. “For a wedding reception, the bride and groom told me what their tastes were, and I liaised with a boutique vineyard in Spain to create about 500 cases of one-of-kind Kahva,” he explains. Such an addition to the menu can set the happy couple back upto Rs 12 lakh. “I’ve also created a wine for a company, which used them as Diwali gifts.”

Although excessive taxation and a poor harvest, among other factors, caused a slump in the industry between 2009 and 2010, wine consumption in India has grown at an annual rate of 24.8% over the past six years, according to a report by market research firm, AM Mindpower Solutions. Agarwal saw a 60% jump in requests for personalised tastings from 2010 to 2011. His company conducted 51 personalised tastings in 2011, of which wine-specific ones accounted for 23—the rest encompassed whisky, beer, and cognac. Wedge saw similar growth in 2011: Twenty-five personalised tastings conducted and about 50 wine cabinets sold. Both agree that the market is growing. Subscribers to All Things Nice have now crossed 7,500, while Wedge’s clientele number over 2,500, plus several thousand American Express cardholders. As far as they’re concerned, the more Indians raising their stemware, the merrier. Santé! 