Champagne deconstructed

Champagne is distinct for the level of familiarity that Indians have for this most sought after bubbly. In recent times, this drink has cut across economic barriers. **Bhisham Mansukhani** looks at the factors that have led to this phenomenon, the number of decades it has been at the forefront of a modern winemaking and marketing approach, and an emphasis on respecting the environment where it is produced.

"INDIANS ARE DRINKING CHAMPAGNE NOT SIMPLY BECAUSE IT DENOTES LUXURY BUT BECAUSE THEY ACTUALLY LIKE IT."

It's a tipple that even teetotallers are embarrassed to refuse, and in a country where wine still receives an uncertain welcome, champagne has won over most. Deserved in victory and needed especially in defeat, as champagne lover Napoleon Bonaparte famously remarked, this most imperious of bubblies is striking for having made the earliest and most sterling impressions in India, decades before the still wines began to be drunk and consumed more widely by people, many of whom regarded it as an entitlement rather than a genuine passion.

IMAGE COURTESY: LESIGNEUR FABRICE- COLLECTION GVC

IMAGE COURTESY: DVIRS- COLLECTION CIVC

As India straddles a new decade, it's bracing for nothing but change on the champagne front. In the old days, champagne was synonymous with occasions that included marriage, anniversaries, birthdays, and rare success. Toasts were mouthed and glasses promptly bottomed down and that was it. Cut to the mid-noughties and Indians were embracing and identifying with the western romance for champagne, as urban professionals made it through stressful hours in the comfort that it would always end at the bar, looking at slivers of bubbles pacing up within a tulip glass just topped up with champagne, clear or pinkish, at a nearby hotel.

The week, for some of the luckier ones, ends in the comforting environs of five-star hotels that serve up a generous spread of local and international cuisine to go with unlimited pours of champagne, in what else but a champagne brunch. Both, the trends of champagne-by-the-glass and champagne brunches, are part of a larger phenomenon of a highly evolved view of champagne in India, which is significant because champagne hasn't suffered from the inhibitions Indians generally have about wine nor because it is uber-luxurious. If anything, champagne is by far the most known and sought after international wine in India, today.

Forging alliances

Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) represents and promotes the region of Champagne and its producers collectively. The body had long seen and recognised India as a potential market, albeit the numbers in context of other markets weren't spectacular.

CIVC's India Director, Rajiv Singhal, affirms with conviction

that India is drinking more champagne now than ever before. The incumbency and pressure to sustain this unprecedented level of enthusiasm for champagne, however, rests firmly on the champagne houses and importers, in alliance with hotels, where most of the 200,000 bottles of champagne are popped.

"INDIANS ARE APPRECIATING CHAMPAGNE RATHER THAN SIMPLY DRINKING IT."

Singhal cites three clear reasons for the increase of champagne consumption and its permanent place in the Indian social space. "For one thing, there are more avenues to consume champagne rather than simply ordering a bottle at a hotel or restaurant. Few can make that impulse buy, and those that do were drinking champagne frequently anyway. But, to be able to order champagne by the glass or go to a brunch on a Sunday at a five-star which offers it by the glass, represents accessibility and value, and Indians across the affluent and middle-class have recognised this. The hotels and champagne houses that have supported their initiatives have been well-rewarded and overall champagne consumption and the awareness of it have increased." Singhal emphasises that the trend herein is that Indians are drinking champagne not simply because it denotes luxury but because they actually like it.

IMAGE COURTESY: LESEIGNEUR FABRICE - COLLECTION CIVC

Amit Gupta, Food and Beverage Director, Shangri-La, New Delhi, agrees, "That is one most fundamental change that's occurred. Indians are appreciating champagne rather than simply drinking it because that's what the occasion calls for. Champagne has been associated with luxury and festivities since inception, but recent trends set in motion by champagne producers hope to remind consumers that champagne is not just a celebratory drink but can also be a very fine wine."

Rukn Luthra, Managing Director, Indian Sub-Continent, Rémy Cointreau India, further emphasises, "That champagne has gone from being a ceremonial drink to one that is appreciated and sought-out because it is preferred, is the single most telling change in the Indian market. It has happened because champagne houses, importers and hotels, have together made the effort to help in this transition, and that Indians themselves are far more aware and discerning." While Rémy Cointreau has also pursued the route of the brunch and

IMAGE COURTESY: RÉMY COINTREAU

IMAGE COURTESY: RÉMY COINTREAU

champagne-by-glass strategy for its champagne, Piper-Heidsieck, it now plans to introduce special cuvees and vintages to grow this premium end for Piper-Heidsieck.

Dharti Desai, whose import house, FineWinesnMore, imports Canard-Duchêne, is encouraged by a mainstream demand for champagne, for which the occasion and the profile of drinkers have now become wider. "October through to February is a good time for champagne sales. There's a general celebratory mode and it's also the gifting season, which continues through to Valentine's Day. It's not simply more champagne but different styles of champagne which are becoming known. I say 'known' because the terms are familiar, which doesn't necessarily mean it is being consumed as much. Brut NV still occupies over 85% of the market, and this has a lot to do with the variable of price, primarily. Also, retail hasn't taken-off the way it has in other emerging markets, where local taxes aren't as high as they are in India. One concern though is that champagne is becoming a victim of its own popularity. I've seen it happen myself more than once, when at an exclusive dinner at a certain hotel, the waiter has poured sparkling wine from a country other than France, announcing it to be champagne. While it was perhaps just a plain mistake, it is amplified in the context of just how crucial the role of hotels is for the future of champagne in India." Dharti, however, does point out that champagne appreciation communities are an effective way for importers to create a captive audience, which may or may not require relying on hotels for promotion and sales.

"OCTOBER THROUGH TO FEBRUARY IS A VERY GOOD TIME FOR CHAMPAGNE SALES."

Free-flowing

One champagne house, though,

IMAGE COURTESY: LESEIGNEUR FABRICE - COLLECTION CIVC

IMAGE COURTESY: MOËT & CHANDON

IMAGE COURTESY: MOËT & CHANDON

IMAGE COURTESY: THOMAS PIERRE/SPA PRESS- COLLECT IONT.CIVC

has worked closely with hotels as well as its fashion brands to reach out to connoisseurs of all things luxury, in the process capturing a king-size share of India's overall champagne sales. Moët & Chandon is almost synonymous with champagne in this country and remains the most widely available champagne. Moët & Chandon Marketing Director, Gaurav Bhatia, avers, "Moët & Chandon has been available in India since 2002 and has enjoyed a first-mover advantage in the market for champagne in India. It continues to sustain a positive growth rate almost a decade later. However, more than the quantitative growth, it has been more satisfying to observe and assimilate the qualitative changes in the market. India is no stranger to luxury, and certainly no stranger to champagne. The proof of this lies in the steady and consistent rise in champagne consumption by an interesting mix of consumers. India is one of the most heterogeneous markets in the world. It is possibly the only country where consumer behaviour varies within a city! While this is certainly a challenge, this diversity also makes India distinct. It is not unusual to see men enjoy a flute or two of Dom Pérignon or to see revellers celebrate a Friday evening at a nightclub with a bottle of Moët & Chandon brought out in all ceremony. Having said that, champagne has gained an avid following even in evolved pockets like Chandigarh, Jaipur and Pune."

No matter what the proportion of brand visibility or volume of sales are, neither champagne houses nor importers can deny that the evolution of champagne in India would stall if not for the hotels. While that itself isn't news, the influx of more champagne brands into India has meant that hotels themselves have had to relook and expand their offering, and depending on the profile of customers they target, up the ante. No hotel has done that as consistently as the Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai. While its sister property in Delhi was the first to introduce the champagne brunch in India, the Mumbai hotel which moves over 400 cases of champagne annually, remains an invariable hallmark of all things luxury and hence champagne. The hotel's Deputy General Manager, Parveen Chander Kumar, was in fact instrumental in launching India's first champagne brunch when he was Food and Beverage Director at Taj's Delhi property in 2005. Priced modestly at ₹1200 back then, the brunch was one of the key events that eventually led to champagne's current, imperious

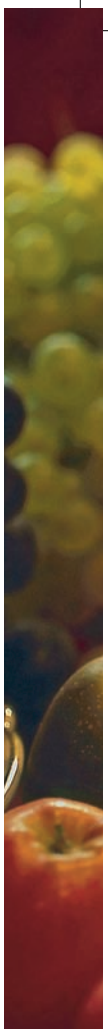
IMAGE COURTESY: GUILLARD MICHEL - COLLECTION CIVC

perch. Considering the steep price of champagne in retail (₹5000 and upwards for a single pop), the champagne brunch presently priced at around ₹4500 for unlimited pours along with a large cuisine spread, perhaps represents the best value for champagne aficionados. Parveen, however, tempers the excitement about champagne with a reflection on how things aren't quite how they used to be. "Back in 2003, when we'd just had our new Managing Director, Raymond Bickson, come on board, the emphasis on our wine portfolio was heightened. We took our offering to up to 360 wines, flew in a sommelier, hired management consultant McKinsey to run the numbers and created a supply chain along with key importers for ensuring availability. It was soon after that Taj introduced both the champagne brunch and a champagne-by-the-glass programme. Both these initiatives changed the guest's mindset about the idea of champagne. Earlier, it could only be ordered by the bottle, now it was flowing. State governments, though, played spoilsport with local levies, which inflated prices and in effect, affected availability."

The exorbidant levies, Parveen said, have particularly affected availability of special cuvees and vintage champagnes because the acquisition price itself is high, which affects availability. Back in 2004, he had over 18 vintage champagnes listed in Delhi. In Mumbai now, it's down to eight. He's candid about champagne's future in India, which he says remains contingent on the relationship between the producers and the hotels, particularly the support of the former. "Champagne houses will have to continue spending marketing dollars and enable hotels to launch and retain promotions. Moët & Chandon has done that to a large extent, as has Brindco for the champagnes it imports, namely Louis Roederer and Pommery."

Another reason why hotels have played a key role in making champagne the preferred drink is the experience that's been created around it. Nowhere in Mumbai is this more apparent than Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai where it's rooftop patio bar, Aer, overlooking a concrete skyline all the way to sea, makes for an ideal setting to savour a tulip of champagne. And that's what the hotel has encouraged with competitive pricing. This has seen Aer becoming the end-of-

IMAGE COURTESY: LEBRONEUR FABRICE - COLLECTION CIVC



HOTELS HAVE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN MAKING CHAMPAGNE THE PREFERRED DRINK BECAUSE OF THE EXPERIENCE THAT'S CREATED AROUND IT.

IMAGE COURTESY: LESBIGNEUR FABRICE- COLLECTION CIVC

day destination for young and middle-aged professionals wearied by a long day, seeking what else but that fine sparkling. Aditya Ramani, Manager at the hotel's oriental restaurant San Qi, says, "The champagne-by-the-glass programme was a strategy that the hotel pursued, right from the time it opened. Additionally, we've promoted champagne cocktails too. We see that as our USP, taking Indian guests' understanding a step further. One of our cocktails, Zypher, is popular simply for its presentation — champagne and flavoured liquor with rose petals at the bottom. The Kir Royale and Bellini are frequently ordered too, indicative that like spirits, Indians are comfortable experimenting with champagne's flavours."

The prophets of doom, who feel vindicated by the ongoing world economic crisis, would gasp at the fact that Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai sold four jeroboams (three-litre bottles) of Cristal at ₹2 lakh a piece, Diwali through to New Year's. The hotel is poised to add Taittinger and Billecart-Salmon to its portfolio this year. It's actually a second coming for Billecart-Salmon, courtesy Wine Park Proprietor, Vishal Kadakia, who also supplies Philippe Gonet to Four Seasons. Kadakia approached the champagne producer at Vinexpo in Bordeaux earlier this year, convincing them to reconsider India, given the promising times ahead for the wine in this country. "It did take some persuasion but I accentuated the potential of the Indian market, where while champagne is well-known, there was room for more producers to establish themselves. I was also candid about my approach, which in the current market is to work with hotels to make a glass of champagne affordable but served with a certain class, in keeping with the standards of this celebrated *champenoise*."

Imminent glory

So, 2012 is poised to see an increase in the number of champagnes available, as well as styles with more roses and blancs being introduced into the fray. It all augurs well for India's champagne story. Rajiv Singhal points to the fact that till recently, never mind actual volumes, India topped champagne's export markets with regard to the share of vintages and special cuvees as part of total consumption. He also mentions the increasing number of Indians visiting the region of Champagne itself, taking a mere 45-minute train ride out of Paris to literally breathe and sip the region's ferment where it's made. He's also contemplating the idea of a community of champagne connoisseurs. Over in Delhi, the Dom Pérignon Lounge at F Bar, India's first, where a single table along with a bottle of Dom Perignon goes for ₹50,000, is described by Gaurav Bhatia as the producer's first step towards creating tactile champagne experiences, which he believes India is now ready for. India has undoubtedly come a long way in how it views and drinks champagne. All the more reasons to pop open another one!

CIVC exclusive

Thibaut Le Mailloux, Director of Communication, CIVC, replied to questions posed by **Liquid** in an exclusive interview on the changing perceptions about champagne the world over and about the implications of global warming for the region and its wine.

How has the perception of champagne changed the world over, in the past decade?

Champagne has continued to grow all over the world, especially in emerging markets such as Russia and China. So, the perception has naturally changed because new champagne lovers from various regions and cultures, are appreciating our wine, and this is making it a growing global success. At the same time, champagne has continued to expand its reach in France and Europe, which are the mature markets of this wine.

What role do you believe the CIVC has played in this regard?

The CIVC has no commercial role but has clearly contributed with the settlement of Champagne Bureau "embassies" in the world (13 offices already, with a 14th opening in Brazil, soon), to inform wine drinkers of the specificity of the champagne sparkling wine, its region of origin, Champagne in France, and to promote the image of our wines overall. Wine importers and consumers from the various countries where we operate, can find any official information about champagne on their local version of www.champagne.com. This accessible, official information is a key tool in the development of champagne outside of France.

Has the profile of the essential champagne drinker evolved in the past few years? Who would you identify as the new profile of champagne drinkers?

One could assume that the champagne drinker is more versatile in terms of occasions. Champagne is the drink of celebrations, but is not only being tasted at celebrations anymore. For example, it can be consumed on relaxed occasions such as picnics and brunches among friends, and in terms of wine, with a growing expertise, the new champagne drinkers tend to vary the styles of champagne that they drink, according to occasions and food pairings. Not only champagne blends but also Blanc de blancs, Blanc de noirs, Rosé Champagne, etc. are very popular.

Has global warming affected the region of Champagne and the quality of the wine produced?

Global warming is affecting the region, but it is rather favourable to the quality of our Champagne wines so far. It indeed helps the grapes to reach a level of maturity where grapes can fully express their aromatic potential. Simultaneously, acidity, which is key to the style of Champagne wines, is not decreasing in a significant way, so the balance between acidity and levels of sugar have perfect measures, which is key to the style of Champagne wines, is very satisfying.

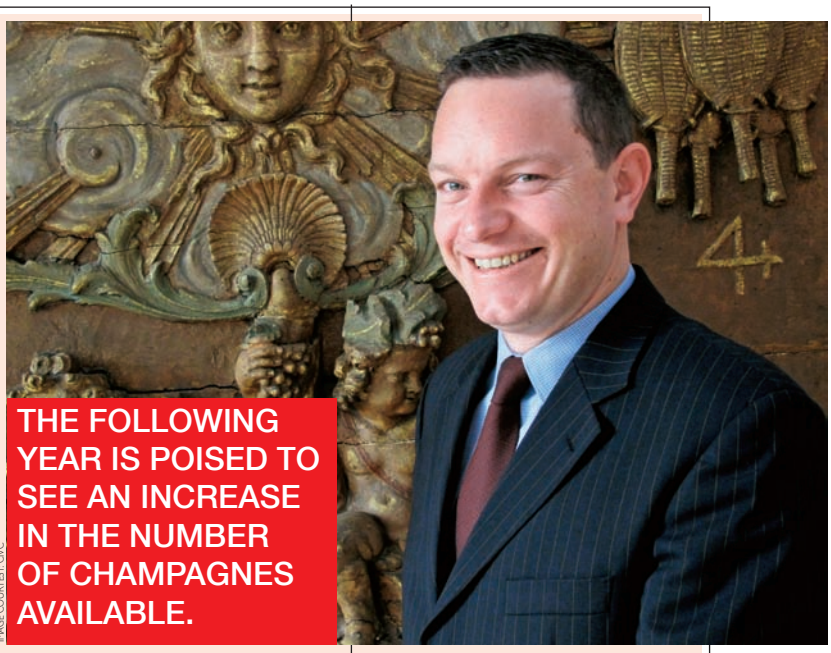


IMAGE COURTESY CIVC

THE FOLLOWING YEAR IS POISED TO SEE AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CHAMPAGNES AVAILABLE.