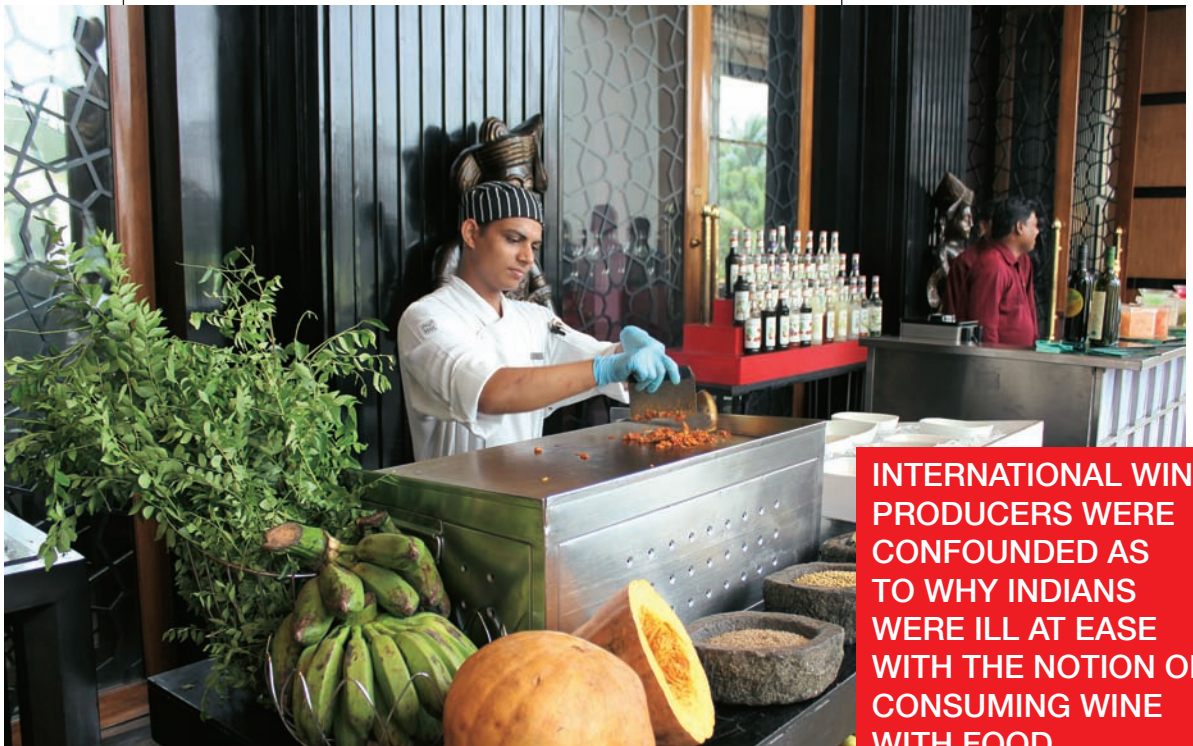


The great Indian odyssey

Indians have much to thank their hotels for, not in the least for successfully luring them into marrying their cherished dishes with wines and spirits, a practice which now feels less like European import but is rather a step in the right direction, writes Bhisam Mansukhani.





A live Sunday Brunch counter at the Renaissance Hotel, Mumbai

INTERNATIONAL WINE PRODUCERS WERE CONFOUNDED AS TO WHY INDIANS WERE ILL AT EASE WITH THE NOTION OF CONSUMING WINE WITH FOOD.

During the past decades, alcohol has suffered from a perennial image problem in India. It's been summarily frowned upon in large family households, confined to the dark dingy recesses of bars, placed strategically away from schools and temples, and liberally demonised in films and religion. Only in the noughties has alcohol's image been resurrected a bit in a counter-culture that's seen international brands across the universe of spirits, beers and wine, albeit disproportionately, converge in the Indian market. The biggest challenges that these international firms encountered and found rather curious in the early years was the ban on advertising, inviting a search for some rather unusual innovations towards surrogate vehicles of

promotion, some of them bordering on absurdity like ghost travel agencies and grooming kits.

The rise of wine imports in the past decade, as an answer to the demand predominantly from five-star hotels and wealthy Indians, and a burgeoning yet modest domestic wine industry, witnessed in its wake wine tastings, appreciation sessions and on occasion, grand wine dinners in the tradition of European sit-down affairs. Here again, international wine producers were confounded as to why Indians were ill at ease with the notion of consuming wine (at that point viewed as garden variety alcohol) with food. Consider the present day, and while advertising is still firmly prohibited, a potential vehicle i.e. dinners paired with wines and

spirits have certainly emerged if not altogether formed. How this seemingly static situation has turned into an exciting one, where wine and even whisky dinners fill up with patrons who're trading up on lifestyle choices, is part of the great Indian growth story that continues to magnetise global attention and investment. The visible transformation at the heart of this—Indian tipplers going from ignorants to wine enthusiasts and consuming-to-appreciate rather than mere inebriation and even ordering the occasional glass over dinner—is redoubtably owed to the efforts of the country's dynamic hospitality industry. This industry hasn't simply grown in size but in aspiration too. Already celebrated for maintaining the world's highest



Udiksha Panshikar, Assistant Food and Beverage Manager, Trident, Bandra-Kurla, Mumbai

standards of service, hotels can take the credit for literally putting alcohol on the dinner table and keeping it there.

It's a partnership of mutual benefit, which is seemingly coming together nicely for liquor companies and hotels, given that hotels take up a massive percentage of imported alcohol—almost 90 per cent of wines—and the former would much rather explore surrogate promotions with hotels, which they view as more effective than the other rather awkward options including the branded grooming kits. The heart of this joint strategy has been to inculcate and build on the Indian consumer's acceptance and even preference for consuming alcohol with food. Interestingly, while it took a while for Indians to get used to the European concept of food and wine pairing, they've already begun to get comfortable with the likes of beer and even whisky. Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai is one hotel that has hosted both wine and whisky dinners over the three years since

it opened. Four Seasons Food and Beverage Director, Moorthy Mudaliar, says that along with an aggressive wine and spirits pricing strategy, wine and whisky dinners were key factors in making the hotel more visible and also promoting the pairing culture. The hotel most recently held a Chinese degustation and whisky dinner, wherein a whisky expert along with the chef took guests through the experience. "Guest preferences are fluid and still forming. It's up to

hotels like ours to get urban Indians accustomed to this pairing culture. We do invest a lot in storage, glassware and service staff and their knowledge too. So organising pairing events, be it wine or whisky, benefits the hotel, the suppliers and the guests," he says.

Udiksha Panshikar, Assistant Food and Beverage Manager, Trident, Bandra-Kurla, Mumbai, agrees by adding, "Pairing dinners are a firmly rooted trend and herald a positive, contemporary perception



Vineet Bhatia, Chef, Ziya, The Oberoi, Mumbai

of food and alcohol. Our hotel has already organised wine dinners in association with prestigious Italian estates of the likes of Castello Banfi as well as a champagne dinner with Moët & Chandon and will likely host a Gaja dinner soon." Panshikar also points out that while hotels surely have decisively contributed to the pairing culture, how they perceive these dinners is important. Is it a specific promotional vehicle, a revenue model or is the objective simply to perpetuate a modern culinary culture? "Our hotel answers affirmatively to the last one. These dinners are aimed at a profile



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HOTELS HAVE BREATHED A REFRESHING DRAFT INTO THE BRUNCH CONCEPT BY MAKING THE FOOD FRESH AND BY TAKING THE BEVERAGE OFFERING SERIOUSLY.

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that ranges from connoisseurs to enthusiasts to the plain curious, who dine out frequently and are open to absorbing interesting concepts. To view pairing dinners as a revenue centre would, at least for now, needlessly filter an audience still in its infancy. Wine dinners in India are more social than formal occasions. The template is not simply transported from one continent to another but rather adapted," she reveals.

Trident's sister property, The Oberoi, Mumbai, has introduced one such enthralling idea at its recently re-opened and rechristened Indian speciality restaurant, now called Ziya. Having re-invented itself as well as pulled off a coup by roping in Vineet Bhatia, the first Indian chef to have his London restaurant awarded a Michelin star, Ziya defines its food simply as contemporary Indian. The restaurant, less than a year in, already has a first—a seven-course



Sun dried tomato chicken tikka with wine at Ziya, The Oberoi, Mumbai

Indian degustation menu paired with international and Indian wines. The hotel's Assistant Manager for Food and Beverage Service, Aditi Kenjalkar, explains, "This menu debunks some staggering myths, namely that pairing Indian food with international wines is difficult and that Indians aren't used to the idea of the pairing format. That said,

Chef Vineet Bhatia, is well aware of the pairing science and selectively chose dishes to go with the wines." Some of the menu's memorable highlights, which begins with a crisp champagne tulip, include sundried tomato chicken tikka and black olive chutney khichdi matched with Valpolicella Classico, and grilled prawns alongside white Burgundy (oaked Chardonnay). Grilled peri fish is paired with an Indian Chenin Blanc which finishes slightly sweet, complementing the fish's spicy flavours.

Formal pairings apart, hotels have breathed a refreshing draft into the brunch concept—one that had been on autopilot for a bit—not by just making the food fresh but taking the beverage offering more seriously beyond the staple of aerated drinks, beers and basic cocktails. Champagne perhaps deserves the credit for crystallizing the idea and trend of

the Champagne brunch, which is one of the strongest indications yet of the urban Indian's easy embrace, at least of wine with food. Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai has been running the Champagne brunch for some time now, first at its continental restaurant and now at the Oriental restaurant, San-Qi. According to Moorthy, the most exciting draw of a champagne brunch is that diners can by themselves couple a multitude of cuisines cooked in different styles and this singular meal experience partly lays the ground for a culture that marries food and wine. Manish Garg, F&B Director, Renaissance Hotel, Mumbai, reinforces this fact, affirming a similar trend at the hotel's Italian restaurant, Fratelli Fresh, which also hosts a champagne brunch. "Not much thought was expended regarding the hitherto, conspicuous absence



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Manish Garg, Food and Beverage Director, Renaissance Hotel, Mumbai



Moorthy Mudaliar, Food and Beverage Director, Four Seasons Hotel, Mumbai



Lamb paired with wine at Ziya, The Oberoi, Mumbai

of alcohol at the meal table or how easily it has made room for itself on the table and in the guest's mindset. Indians have always loved champagne and food and bringing them together would only seem like a natural thing to do. It goes to show that Indians have no problem marrying wines they know with food they like. The same could eventually be true of spirits too. Brunches, in that context, become doubly important because the nature of the package, albeit flexible, clubs food and beverage in a broad sense. The hotel's other brunch at the Lake View Café takes things a step further, not just offering a substantial beverage menu to go with the spread but also an interactive bar that allows

guests to be their own bartender, creating their own cocktails on their own whims and ingredients of choice. "A brunch is about the fun of mixing and matching out of the ordinary anyhow, so why just limit it to food?" Garg comments.

The Lake View Café brunch's interactive touch is one of the gathering illustrations, like The Oberoi's pairing menu of how hotels have successfully married food and beverage on the dining table and convinced the modern Indian to sit in front of the alluring edibles and either opt to be handheld through a journey of the senses or go it themselves. India's next culinary revolution though, is well and truly on its way. **T**