

Indians say “cheers” to booming local wine industry

NEW DELHI (Reuters Life!) - They're a nation of beer and whisky drinkers, but wine is fast becoming the tippable of choice for India's growing ranks of young, affluent professionals who are quaffing down vintages and boosting the local industry.

From being negligible almost a decade ago, wine consumption in India has grown about 30 percent a year over the last 10 years as the economy booms.

And while the figures are low by global standards — just 5 milliliters (0.2 fluid ounces) per capita compared to 2.5 gallons per capita in the United States, experts expect more bottles will be up-ended as wealthy Indians slake their thirst for wine.

The wine market in India is dominated by three major local players, Sula Vineyards, Grover Vineyards and Chateau Indage, and sales have rocketed, especially in trendy city bars and clubs.

“They come in here every Wednesday to Saturday night and drink their wine,” said Raj Khan Pathan, a bartender at Wink, one of Mumbai's popular nightspots, referring to his young patrons.

Rajeev Samant, CEO of Sula Wines, said drinkers in their 20s and 30s were a main factor driving the growth of the wine market.

“If you look in the lifestyle pages of any newspaper you'll see pictures of people drinking wine, and especially Indian wine, as it is much more widely available,” he told Reuters.

“People are starting to drink not just to get drunk. And incomes are high enough that they want quality beverages.”

WINE SNOB COURSE ANYONE?

The relatively new wine culture has spilled over into other businesses, with wine ap-

preciation courses, vineyard tours and wine pairing classes becoming more popular.

Tulleho, a wine and beverage marketing company based in Delhi advertises on its website courses on “becoming a cocktail guru,” guided tours of India's biggest vineyards, and even a class in “becoming a wine snob.”

Tulleho's chief executive Vikram Achanta, who has been educating wine consumers since 2000, says his business has grown between 70 and 80 percent in the last three years alone.

As the local wine industry blooms, expensive imported vintages are also becoming popular, especially in posh restaurants. New Delhi's Imperial Hotel said it was selling 3,000 to 4,000 bottles per month, mostly of imported wine, and many of those go to Indians, rather than foreigners.

“Drinking wine is a big trend in India,” says Stephane Soret, one of India's leading sommeliers. “And more importantly, being seen drinking imported wine.”

But India's domestic wine industry still needs to overcome several hurdles that could nip the trend in the bud, experts say.

Despite high tariffs on imported wine, Indian wine makers face stiff competition from foreign firms eager to get into the rapidly growing market.

According to Soret, these local wine makers must find new ways to increase consumption and convince consumers of the value and quality of their product if they are to survive.

This would involve more professionals and more brands entering the market, but the frantic rush of new, uneducated players to meet demand is not helping.

“I see guys who one day are importing

shoes — they want to make a few bucks so the next day they switch to wine,” Soret explained. “That's just not how it's to be done.”

The majority of wine retailing is in the hands of the government, which in the past has led to poor storage. Some local producers are even making wine from table grapes, Soret said.

Because local producers can not meet demand, many companies are importing foreign-made wines, and then bottling and selling them under a “made in India” label. Quality is not always their top concern, experts say.

“The challenge is promoting wine and making your customer knowledgeable about the wine, the grape, the temperature — everyone have to be trained, even the customer,” said Palash Basu assistant manager at the Imperial's 1911 restaurant and bar.

(Editing by Miral Fahmy)