



Raymond Bickson, MD of **Indian Hotels**, is taking advantage of India's new import regulations to offer his guests – for the first time – a wide range of wines by the glass

Less-taxing times

THE majority of your key hotels are in India. The tax structures on imported wines are very confusing to most outsiders, yet many important wineries continue to try to do business with you in India. Has the situation improved over the past year or two, and what is your prediction for the future of these very stiff duties on imported wine?

The taxes on imported wine have always been a mystery to the outside world. Duties on wines are all based purely on costs, ranging anywhere between 210% and 270%, and progressively declining with the income in the cost/insurance/freight (CIF) price.

Last year, the Indian government passed a new policy announcing that hotels earning large sums of foreign-exchange earnings can now import goods while paying no duties at all. Most hotels have now started importing a much better and higher-end product.

What are the significant wine-drinking trends among your guests at your top hotels in India, and how are you responding to these trends to better serve your guests and your bottom line?

India has always been a predominantly Scotch-whisky-drinking country. Wines were never popular until recently. But, over the past five years, the response to drinking wine has been overwhelming. Gone are the days when wine drinking was only for the select few. Today, people are better travelled, and their knowledge of food and wines has increased tremendously. Tastes, too, are slowly changing from the heavy Old-World wines to the younger New-World labels.

Is the demand for New-World wines growing as quickly in India as in the rest of Asia? If so, to what do you attribute the transition from Old-World to New-World wines?

Yes – just as it is a phenomenon around the world, India is also shifting from the Old-World to the New-World wines. They are more enjoyable, young and fruity and, of course, you don't need to be a wine connoisseur to enjoy them. The price is also affordable and they marry well with Asian food.

I understand that about 90% of your current wine sales are concentrated in 25 of your 64 hotels – 21 of which are in India, two in the Maldives and two in Sri Lanka. What percentage of total wine sales in these hotels are by the glass? Well, at this stage, I must be honest and say that the percentage of sale of wines by the glass does not contribute more than 20% of total wine sales. It was this that prompted me to bring in an international *sommelier*, who has reworked the complete list. The launch of our new *Wines-by-the-Glass* programme has borne much fruit, doubling sales to 40%.

What is your plan to establish improved standards for wine-preservation systemwide, to ensure that every glass is fresh and that you have the flexibility to offer better wines by the glass?

Besides the large selection of wines by the glass, we now also offer a large selection of Champagnes by the glass. Our wine-preservation system keeps our still wines from oxidising, and increases the shelf life of an open bottle by almost three times by creating a vacuum. The system also allows us to re-cork even the most expensive Champagnes using carbon dioxide, which allows us to satisfy even our most discriminating customers.



Raymond Bickson: doubled sales of wines by the glass.

What is your plan to establish improved minimum standards of wine knowledge for your servers and restaurant managers?

Based on the international *sommelier's* findings, we have designed an exhaustive wine list. Wines from all over the world were selected – keeping in mind that the list created was to enter the *Wine Spectator* competition for the finest list in the country.

Contracts with the suppliers providing the wines include detailed training programmes on their specs, and tastings for the entire staff. Four managers have enrolled on the internet to undergo the preliminary wine course from the *Wine Spectator*. On completion of this course, the team will progress into the advanced stage of learning.

Do you intend to offer more sophisticated wine by the glass and food promotions year round that encourage your guests to try a variety of your core wines and learn with which foods they best pair?

Certainly. Once our complete product is in place, we intend to focus on special wine dinners with winemakers and vineyard owners from around the world. This will give our guests the opportunity to enjoy world-class wines with the finest food this country has to offer.

Our waiting staff are also being trained to recommend wines with specific food choices. From this year, our restaurant menus will recommend a particular wine with each food item. ■

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