



Fratelli's Big New Experiment

An Indian businessman and a French winemaker walked into a wine cellar in rural Maharashtra, and decided to change the way the world looks at Indian wine.

By Pooja Vir

The Fratelli's Distillery in Maharashtra

They chose quality single-estate grapes, combined them with decades of winemaking expertise from Burgundy, added a dash of Napa Valley personality and launched three luxury wines from the Indian terroir. Kapil Sekhri's Fratelli Wines and Burgundy's largest wine producer, Jean-Charles Boisset and his Boisset Collection, have come together to create India's first luxury wines, to be sold in both Indian and international markets. Recently presented at plush events in Mumbai, New Delhi and Bengaluru, the J'NOON white and red wines and JCB No. 47 Brut will soon see similar launches in California, Burgundy and London. The decision to introduce not one but three

expensive, limited edition wines (only 2,400 bottles per label) in a country that is still a wine newbie is an interesting one. Some may even call it foolish, or arrogant. The intention, however, is anything but. Sekhri and Boisset (also called JCB) are committed to expressing their terroir, and in their words "push the idea of what Indian wines are capable of."

Often called the James Bond of the wine world, JCB is as gregarious as they come. The acclaimed owner of 24 wineries in California, France and Canada has an audacious charm that has made him famous around the world. He claims to have created the perfect recipe for a wine bubble bath;



JCB No.47

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he has collaborated with musician John Legend on an exclusive collection of wines; has designed over 90 limited edition brooches for his online boutique; will soon launch fragrances with revolutionary perfumer Olivia Giacobetti; and is working on an alternative to the champagne flute with Baccarat. All this alongside a generous pour of awards, both for himself as well as his wines.

Having JCB's endorsement is no small feat. The collaboration has certainly caught people's attention. Says sommelier Sonal Holland, "Until now, nobody has dared to create a luxury wine in India. And if someone with JCB's pedigree is lending his name to our

wine, it speaks volumes to our potential." This isn't Fratelli's first international collaboration. Launched in 2010, Fratelli Wines is an Indo-Italian venture between three sets of brothers, Alessio and Andrea Secci from Italy, Kapil and Gaurav Sekhri from New Delhi, and Ranjit and Arjun Mohite-Patil from Solapur. In three short years, it has gone on to become the second most distributed wine brand in the country, with nearly 20 different wines on offer. Their commitment to quality wines continued with the launch of M/S Wines in 2016, a collaboration between Decanter magazine's consulting editor and British wine expert Steven Spurrier and Fratelli's Piero Masi,

a master winemaker from Tuscany. In a country that isn't known for its wine, Fratelli have dedicated themselves to setting new benchmarks for Indian wines. The second largest wine producer in India today, almost three-quarters of Fratelli's production is premium and super premium wines for the Indian market.

Kapil describes his venture with JCB as a leap of faith. "The usual story is for the big guys to look down upon us, and ask 'why India?'. But when I met one of the big guys who said 'why not?' I knew that any collaboration with JCB had to go beyond just a marketing exercise. In order to make our brand big in India, we will need to sell it, successfully, globally."

The journey to J'NOON began with a little road trip. It was the winter of 2017 and longtime Indophile JCB was visiting India for the very first time. On his itinerary were a few wine dinners to

showcase his French and Californian wines that Fratelli was importing into India. On their way to one such wine dinner in Pune, Kapil and JCB took a detour to Akluj, home to Fratelli's vineyards. After a tour of the vines, they settled into the cellar and "started playing with a few blends", says JCB, and "the only intention in that moment was to do something fun. Like two artists who may have decided to paint, or sculpt, or draw."

The next day, as their road trip continued, so did their play. "If we were to make a wine that could tell the story of our combined passion for winemaking, what would we call it?" asked Kapil. The partners have set themselves an ambitious goal to make people all over the world take notice of Indian wine, and the passion they share for this goal seems to fit in perfectly with the emotions driving the collaboration. So, what happened in Akluj did not stay in Akluj, and their junoon



J'NOON
Red

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(an Urdu word for 'passion'), was Francised to become J'NOON.

At blind tastings of J'NOON around the world, including with Steven Spurrier and others of enormous wine tasting calibre, the tasters couldn't believe that J'NOON was a wine from India. When I tasted the J'NOON White at its Mumbai launch, my first response was that of a pleasant surprise. An unusual blend of barrel-fermented Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, it is a rather pleasurable wine, vibrant with fruit flavours (their label urges you to notice green apple, white pear, jasmine and lemongrass) and reminiscent of a fresh Pouilly-Fuisse. I could not believe I was drinking an Indian wine.

The JCB No.47 is a 100 per cent Chardonnay Brut. Named in honour of the year of India's independence (1947), the sparkling wine displays notes of tropical fruit

and brioche, characteristic of Bruts from Burgundy. The JCB stamp on this wine is evident and complex as it is, it has a funky aftertaste and is probably my least favourite of the trio. The J'NOON Red is a wine to watch. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot/Marselan and a small percentage of Sangiovese, this wine is very, very young. Bottled only two weeks before launch, the wine presents itself as very closed. But wait a few years and there is the promise of luscious black fruit and a full bodied finish.

Kapil and JCB are relying on this reaction to score points with their customers at home and abroad. No stranger to the prejudices against Indian wines, especially by the domestic customer, Kapil has often battled with the "How can you serve Indian wine?" question. Given this attitude, is it really the right time to launch a luxury Indian wine?



Kapil Sekhri and
Jean-Charles Boisset

• DRINKING MAN

"There could not be a better time," JCB says. "Look at how many soils and climates you have. If you can't make great wines, why can we in Europe? India just needs to wake up to her potential. As a wine industry, India has only just started. This is the time that we need people at every level of the pyramid. What Sula and Grover are doing at the entry level is just wonderful. We admire them a lot for building such a great foundation for wine drinking in India. While that is one approach, we wanted to see where we could contribute the most. Kapil and I felt we needed to do something to make Indians very proud of what they have. We have spent a great many years making wine, and our contribution could not be something average."

J'NOON is most certainly not 'average'. The newly launched trio of wines are the most expensive in each of their categories - with JCB No.47 Brut at Rs. 3,500 (\$47, £40); J'NOON White at Rs. 2,500 (\$40, £30); and J'NOON Red at Rs. 4,000 (\$50, £40). An obvious question to ask is: If I have Rs. 4,000 to spend on a bottle of wine, would I buy an Indian red? J'NOON isn't aimed at the supermarket shelves, and so I went looking to spend my Rs. 4,000 at premium wine suppliers in India. For this price, Sonal Holland's SoHo Wine Club recommends a Valpolicella Classico Superiore Ripasso from Italy and Robert Mondavi Private Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County from USA. With indicative pricing between \$10 and \$20, neither are by any means a premium wine in their home country.

Vishal Kadakia's Wine Park, which imports wines

from Argentina to Australia, has on offer a 2015 vintage of Vietti Barbera d'Alba Tre Vigne. A superior entry-level Barbera wine, Indian duties and taxes pitch it at the same level as the luxury Indian wine.

For Fratelli, the big challenge is to get the average Indian wine drinker to trust the promises made by a local, premium wine over the brand power of international wine.

Internationally too, J'NOON is likely to struggle against the pre-conceived notions of an Indian wine. When shopping for a sparkling wine at London's luxury superstore Selfridges & Co., and faced with a choice between Billecart-Salmon Brut Reserve (£46), Ruinart (£49) (both much-loved champagnes) and JCB No.47 Brut (£40), I am willing to bet the shopper's first choice would not be the Indian wine.

Sekhri's approach is characteristically pragmatic. "Get the product right and the market will follow." JCB, on the other hand, is more flamboyant with his response. "The key," he says, "is not to take ourselves too seriously. We are very sophisticated and can also have a very good time. There is no reason I cannot serve a Grand Cru Clos de Vougeot with a pepperoni pizza." While this attitude may work in other wine countries, the fine dining restaurants of India are decidedly more formal. Can J'NOON's superior quality guarantee a radical change in Indian wine attitudes? I, for one, certainly hope so. Sekhri and JCB are far from two peas in a pod. But it's their differences, not their similarities, that could make this pair the perfect winemaking force for Indian wines.

Tasting Notes

JCB No.47

100% Chardonnay Brut

We named this single-vineyard sparkling wine No. 47 in honour of the year of India's independence, 1947. From the sandy soils in Motewadi, the wine has prominent mineral notes with aromas of green apple, tropical fruit and brioche; it is rich in the mouth with great texture, yet dry and beautiful to pair with Indian cuisine. The wine was barrel fermented in French oak barrels and then the secondary fermentation took place in the bottle, following the methode traditionnelle of sparkling winemaking. The wine spent a total of 24 months in barrel and bottle before release.

₹3500

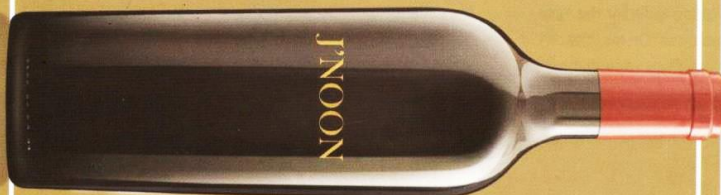


J'NOON White

60% Chardonnay, 40% Sauvignon Blanc

This blend of barrel-fermented Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc from the sandy and rocky soils of Garwar combines green apple, white pear and stone fruit flavours of Chardonnay with fresh, vibrant lime, lemongrass, white pepper, jasmine and herbaceous fruit flavours of Sauvignon Blanc. This white wine places our palate between Pouilly-Fuisse and the white wines of the Northern Rhône Valley. The wine was aged for 12 months in French oak barrels and stainless steel tanks.

₹2500



J'NOON Red

Cabernet Sauvignon 57.5%, Petit Verdot / Marselan 38.5%, Sangiovese 4%

This blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, co-fermented Petit Verdot and Marselan, and Sangiovese in Garwar spent 24 months in French oak barrels and stainless steel tanks. The Cabernet Sauvignon contributes backbone as well as freshness to this exquisite blend. The Petit Verdot, Marselan and Sangiovese grapes paint the wine deep purple and provide luscious flavours of black fruits with structured tannins, a full body and a long, silky finish. It places us to the right bank of Bordeaux, with freshness, notes of spearmint and graphite against a backdrop of cedar, fresh tobacco. Bone dry, it would pair beautifully with rich foods.

₹4000

