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Indian wine Fratelli going global

Fratelli made its mark at the World Economic Forum and is setting its sights on the American market

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"There's no reason India can't make some of the best wines in the world," says Mr Gaurav Sekhri, 45, one of the co-founders of Fratelli wines, an Indian winery based in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra.

The claim may seem ambitious, but it comes from one of India's biggest wine producers, alongside the likes of the long-established Sula and Grover Zampa vineyards.

Fratelli, which is Italian for "brothers", was set up in 2006 by three sets of brothers from India and Italy - the Secci brothers Andrea and Alessio from Italy, and the Sekhri brothers Kapil and Gaurav and the Mohite-Patil brothers Ranjitsinh and Arjunsinh from India.

Fratelli now produces two million bottles a year - from classic Chenin Blanc, Merlot and sparkling wines to the uncommon Sangiovese Bianco, a dry white wine made from the red Sangiovese grape.

The wines - which have a recommended retail price of between \$38 and \$57 - are available in Singapore through distributor The Straits Wine Company. You can find them on wine lists in restaurants and bars such as Shahi Maharani, Rogue Trader and Garibaldi. They are also available on RedMart.

Mr Gaurav Sekhri says the idea to produce a made-in-India wine was raised by his younger brother Kapil and the Secci brothers while enjoying some wine during a holiday in Italy.

The conversation was as simple as: "We don't get good wine in India, let's do that. But we need someone with expertise in winemaking."

Noted Tuscan winemaker Piero Masi was roped in and they found the right conditions for vine-growing in a village called Akluj in the district of Solapur, 170km south of Pune.

"We had done some research and found that wine in India made sense, because young people are travelling abroad and they come back with a habit of enjoying wine with food," says Mr Sekhri.

"But our brief to Piero was, 'Please make wine that we are happy to drink ourselves and that we're happy to serve in our home'."

Vine saplings were brought over from France and Italy and grown over 97ha of land, making the partners the largest vineyard owners in the country.

Their first vintage was released in 2010. Fratelli now grows 13 different grape varieties and has 30 different labels - all in the span of eight years.

Slowly but surely, its wines are gaining recognition on the world stage. For instance, Fratelli wines, including the flagship Sette, were served at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, during a dinner hosted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for about 100 chief executives of multinational companies and top Indian industrialists.

Sette - a blend of 70 per cent Sangiovese with 30 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon - is made from the top 1 per cent of grapes from Fratelli's vineyards and matured in French oak for 14 months.

Fratelli wines are also available in London, the Netherlands and Japan, and the company plans to enter the American market later this year with the launch of its latest release, the limited-edition J'Noon.

J'Noon is a collaboration with renowned French vintner Jean-Charles Boisset, who heads Burgundy's largest wine producer, Boisset Collection. The name is a play on the Urdu word "junoon", which means passion.

The wines in the range include JCB No. 47, a 100 per cent Chardonnay Brut; J'Noon White, a blend of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc; and J'Noon Red, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot/Marcelan and Sangiovese.

Mr Sekhri says it is a huge endorsement that "someone like that saw potential in our vineyards and the quality of wine we make to put his name to it".

He acknowledges that there are challenges to overcome before Indian wine is widely accepted on the global stage "because India is not as known for wines" and there is a stigma associated with locally made wine in the domestic market.

"We're making some high-quality wines that are very well-priced, but a lot of consumers in India feel shy to serve Indian wines at their parties or dinners," he says.

But he is confident that consumers will come around and that "eventually quality sells".

"(Globally,) wine is also a very congested space, but in that aspect, it gives us an edge since India is not an obvious country of origin."

That said, he feels there is room for even more wine to come out of India.

"India has all the ingredients - the soil, the weather and the market - so there's no reason why we won't see more people getting inspired to make good-quality wines," he says.