



TALE OF TWO ANCIENT BEVERAGES

TEXT: Ritu & Rajiv Singhal



Wine and Tea, traditional beverages that have been an intrinsic part of our daily lives for time immemorial, are ancient – they date back many millennia. Historians have endorsed the birth of wine making to almost 8,000 years ago and traced it to the village of Gadachrili Gora in modern day Georgia – which is also known as “the cradle of wine”. According to a Chinese legend, tea originated in China around 4700 years ago when the Emperor Shen Nong chanced upon the infusion of wild tea leaves in boiling water.

A Unique Concept

The idea of drawing parallels between two seemingly unconnected beverages that had originated in two different continents was conceptualised and conceived by Rajiv Singhal. Against the very high standards of the visionary South-East Asia Director of the French Food and Wine Marketing and Promotion Agency, Jean-Francois Balusseau, it passed muster and a spot was reserved for a "Wine & Tea" session in the pioneering French wine promotional activity programme that Group Ritu launched in India in the late nineties on behalf of the French Ministry of Agriculture and other clients. The belief was that, "in a nascent and emerging market for wine in India, it was important to relate the tenets of wine appreciation to a drink that is so deeply ingrained in the Indian culture so that the consumer could unravel the typicity of wine better."

In January 2005, the first-ever Wine and Tea Appreciation session was launched at the Leela Kempinski Mumbai – a unique and never-done-before activity around wine in India, maybe even the world! Several sessions on wine and tea were

held in Delhi and Kolkata over the next few years – and they attracted a lot of attention in the world of wine and the world of tea. Wine specialists, Ch'ng Poh Tiong, Franck Thomas and Daniele Raullet Reynaud interacted with their Tea counterparts, Sanjay Kapur, Catherine Lashko and Vikram Mittal to bring out the complementarities and the similarities between wine and tea and to identify characteristic notes – floral, fruity, grassy, woody, tannic, spicy – usually associated with wine, in the tea.

Hungarian Touch

Almost a decade later, this idea was revived in conversation with our dear friends, Annamari Somogyi and her husband, the Ambassador of Hungary to India H.E. Gyula Pethő. Annamari is a dedicated tea connoisseur and was so excited to discover the connection that had been drawn out between tea and wine in formal 'tasting' sessions that she made an exceptional exception to allow Rajiv (as the first-ever male presenter) to present to her exclusive T-Club.

On Hungarian territory, the Residence of the Ambassador of Hungary to India in Diplomatic Enclave in New Delhi, Rajiv



presented Hungarian wines as Annamari did Indian teas. The audience was captivated as they both explained the connect between these two beverages. The presentation was hugely appreciated, and it seems that Annamari was inundated with requests for an encore by the members and guests.

It was decided that at a sit-down dinner, Hungarian wine and Indian tea to match would be paired with Hungarian food. The wine hosts, the FINE India team represented by yours truly, and the tea hosts, *Aap ki Pasand* Master Tea Taster Sanjay Kapur and Naina, and our Hungarian hosts had the "gruelling" task of narrowing down the choices of the wine, the tea and the food at a tasting dinner – we all survived.

The Grand Pairing

When Annamari and Gyula play host at the Residence only the best is on the table. For the grand evening, the dinner table was

immaculately set for the 24 guests, mostly Heads of Mission and their spouses, with finest Hungarian tableware from the national treasures of Herend, fine cut glassware, and abundant pink roses in large brandy snifters. The menu carrying the Hungarian crest was complemented by a tasting place mat that was designed by Naina so that the guests could keep track of the various wines and teas being served – and avoid any confusion – through the four course dinner.

Our hosts welcomed the guests and introduced them to the unique nature of the dinner. The welcome drink was a glass of Hungary's finest sparkling wine Hungaria Grand Cuvee Brut which was matched with an Iced Tea Julep and served with *Sajtos Pogácsa* (Hungarian cheese puffs). The sparkling wine and iced tea were so similar to each other – the pale-yellow colour with refreshing citrusy and liquorice flavours – and set the tone for the evening.

As we sat down, a presentation by Ritu detailed the symphony of wine with tea – Sanjay and Rajiv chipped in. The Gunzer Tamas Rose 2014 from Villany and Rose Gold Tea – rose petals in black tea – were served with the first course – Avocado Pastry Roll with Hungarian "Flag" (tomato, mozzarella and green capsicum) for the vegetarians, and salmon flower and salami-olive stick for the non-vegetarians. Freshness, fruitiness and rose all round.

Kolonics Juhfark 2013 from the Somloi region was served next, paired with Lady Grey Tea with Linalool and the choice of Feta Spinach Roll or Grilled Salmon with a side of Sweet Potato and Carrots. The Hungarian indigenous varietal Juhfark is also known as "Ewes Tail" because the grape bunches resemble a tail! A dash of Linalool was added to Earl Grey Tea to match the wine's fruitiness and nuttiness. Sanjay also thought that

the Chardonnay Tea could match this wine – yes, a new tea with strands of Chardonnay that Sanjay identified when he was inspired by the wines that we introduced him to during tastings in the early years of the new millennium.

The third course paired the Kovacs Nimrod Monopole Rhapsody 2014 with Royal Masala Chai and *Letcho* Hungarian Ratatouille and *Hortobágyi Palaesinta* Hungarian Pancakes stuffed with Paprika Chicken served with rice. The famous Bikaver – "bull's blood" – wine is a blend of Kekfrankos, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet from the Eger region. Gyula shared the legend and origin of bull's blood, "When the town of Eger in the wine making region of the north-eastern part of Hungary was sieged by a large army of the Turks in the 16th Century, the Turkish soldiers were drinking the local dark red wine saying it is actually not a wine but bull's blood, giving



Sanjay and Naina Kapur

Rajiv & Ritu Singhal

H.E. Gyula Pethő and Annamari Somogyi

them the strength to fight." The rich tannins and spiciness of the Bikaver were well complemented by the tea – a blend of the strong Assam black tea, spices and milk the woody note of which is drawn from the *Canellia assamica* bush.

A meal can not be complete on Hungarian territory without Tokaji wine – the nectar of gods and wine of kings. Gyula had drawn the Pendits Aszu 6 Puttonyos Tokaj 2013 from his cellars and this was paired with a Darjeeling Grand Cru Muscatel Tea that had a sweet spicy character. Both were divine with the Somlo Sponge Cake.

Through the evening, we were able to showcase that in

Hungary, the perfect vines were nurtured for the perfect glass while in India, perfect bushes gave the perfect cuppa. Guests were curious as to why this unconventional fusion was attempted – to create a new channel of thinking that could help wine and tea lovers understand both beverages better through what is known about the other.

Similarities

The key link between the two beverages can be attributed to the "Terroir" – the phenomenon of identifying, tracing and tying the origins of an exceptional produce to a specific climate,



Photo: Embassy of Hungary, New Delhi



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weather, altitude, soil, sweat (and blood) of the grower and an all-encompassing unique environment. So, whether it be the great wines of Champagne, Tokaj, Napa Valley; or the special teas of Assam, Darjeeling or Nilgiri – when we celebrate these wines and teas, we pay homage to their “terroirs”.

The similarities between the two are striking – both having been the preferred drink of the kings. Both are known for their medicinal properties, and their consumption gained momentum as water was found to be undrinkable. Both are culturally rich, just as tea is a way of life in India, in the old world wine countries, most people grow up with wine!

Akin to wine, the appreciation of tea is also about an indulgence of the senses. While taste is the most prominent of the analytical senses, most aficionados are captivated by the aroma. Master Tea Tasters and Master Wine Tasters establish a benchmark

sensory evaluation that leads to a better appreciation and understanding. Some countries around the world have managed to keep alive the traditional ceremonies that showcase the very elaborate tasting rituals around both tea and wine.

Both are entirely natural – when we talk about tea and wine we are talking about purist and high quality. Some characteristic notes in any top quality wine or tea should not be mistaken for an added essence. Flavonoids or polyphenols are the taste-givers. For instance, when you trace litchis in Alsace Gewurztraminer, or fresh grass in Bourgogne Chablis, or woody tones in Assam tea, it's a manifestation of the terroir.

Geographical Indications encompass both beverages. Champagne, Tokaj and Port are a few examples of wine appellations; Assam, Darjeeling and Nilgiri are examples of tea that were christened in the place they were born – and



*...we pay homage to their
“terroirs”*



now fiercely protected. A well-structured classification system defines the various grades for both wine and tea and is based on the region, varietal, style of processing, vintage, sweetness etc.

Grape vines and tea bushes are grown in specially demarcated areas and governed by stringent rules. Specific micro-climates interplay with the growing conditions and the labour of love of the workers to yield the celebrated produce. Thousands of years of experience have gone into the attempt to perfect the art of growing tea leaves in India and maintaining vineyards in Europe. Both tea growers and vigneron are increasingly exploring the opportunities in organic and bio-dynamic produce.

Tea leaves are plucked in the gardens and immediately transported to processing centres, where processing is a mix of Oxidation and Fermentation. Grapes are harvested from the vine and pressed within the shortest time. The juice is moved to the wineries in controlled conditions where the processing

is based on Fermentation – in the case of some wines like Champagne, double fermentation is deployed.

A read of the literature reveals that the drinking of both wine and tea finds favour with the doctors – antioxidants like catechins and resveratrol that are found in tea and wine lend health benefits.

Both wine and tea offer the elegance that appeal not just to our senses, but to our love for ritual and tradition. They enhance social value by bringing people of all ages together. The similarities – imagined and real – between wines and tea rest on interpretation.

So, when you take a sip and swirl your favourite drink to take in the flavours and the aromas... a well-aged Chardonnay is as much a feast for the senses as a pure bred Darjeeling whose full-bodied second flush can be enchantingly aromatic.

