

Byo

Interview by Scott Bolles
Date: 22/09/2004
Words: 458

Publication: Sydney Morning Herald
Section: the (Sydney) magazine

Eat drink

Does wine work with a curry? It's a hot topic for sommelier Harshal Shah of Abhi's in Concord.

"As wine savvy as people are becoming, few have yet to find the ideal match for Indian food. We've had some smart wines brought in lately. It's quite flattering to see a guest bring a 1990 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti that probably costs 20 times the meal itself. It says a lot about our clientele that they aren't too precious about the wines in their cellar. It wasn't even a special occasion - the couple simply wanted to drink that wine that night. They had a spicy fish masala and a butter chicken. I sometimes wonder what the folks at La Romanée-Conti in Burgundy would say if they knew.

"At least 50 per cent of the customers are BYO. Accessibility has been my main focus in creating wine lists for both restaurants [Shah is also sommelier at Aki's in Woolloomooloo]. I think it's quite impressive for a suburban Indian restaurant like Abhi's to offer a 2000 Trimbach Reserve Pinot Gris for under \$58. In the same vein, I'm just about to list a single vineyard beaujolais for under \$55.

"I think my job as sommelier is rather tough, firstly because of the nature of the cuisine and secondly because of the expectations of the customers. Abhi's at Concord has been going for nearly 15 years, and many of our customers have been coming from day one. The demographic is primarily middle-aged couples and families who come for tried-and-true comfort food - a butter chicken or lamb curry.

"The list has something for everyone, even though it may not always go with the food. The 1999 Henschke Keyneton Estate is a ripper of a wine, especially after it's been decanted, but try pairing it with fiery Hyderabadi chicken. The tannins bring out the worst in the food while the spices in the chicken make the wine taste dull, even insipid.

"Not all Indian cuisine comprises heavy flavours and the trick is to achieve a balance in the flavours and then a harmony with a wine. We're lucky at both Aki's and Abhi's that the chefs are fantastic and the food achieves this balance. There are some delightful fish and seafood dishes - delicately spiced - that go well with lighter, aromatic varieties such as pinot gris and gewurztraminer.

"Viognier is another great wine for Indian food. I've found that if a table gets through one bottle, they more often than not have a second. It's aromatic but not as overbearing as are some chardonnays. Sparkling reds are also ideal."

Bottle of the night 1990 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti as left at Abhi's, 163 Concord Road, Concord.
Ph: 9743 3061.