

It's a family thing

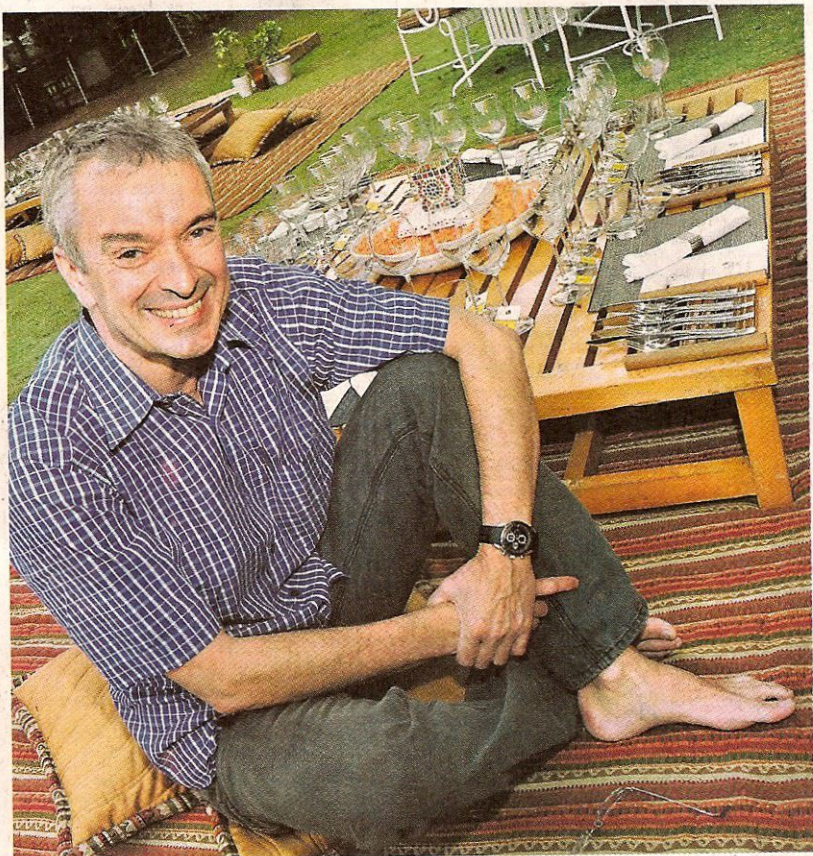
CHAT The beauty about wine is you never stop learning, says Etienne Hugel

"Etienne Hugel, same name as the wine. That's how I got my job," jokes Etienne Hugel, the Director General of Hugel Wines, as he introduces himself to me. The man is everything we expect the French to be — good looking, charming and passionate. From a family that has been making wine for over 370 years, Etienne calls the Hugels a dinosaur of the wine business, and his passion for his business is blatant in the way he talks about it.

"We export nearly 90 percent of our goods, and it does not take a genius to know that Asia is the next big thing. Two years ago we used to export 600 cases a year to China, but now we export 200 cases a month," explains Etienne, as he talks about the business viability of India and China. At Hugel Wines, 95 percent of the wines they manufacture are white. "Each region of France makes a different kind of wine, and in Alsace we have the driest climate and the soil is a mosaic of different kinds of soils, which makes it ideal for white wine."

Alsace has had a politically volatile history, and these changes had serious consequences on the business, "In 1920, when we lost our nationality, we started focussing on exports and it is only in the last 100 years that they began to focus on the domestic market. We still produce the same wines, except with a lot more knowledge."

Etienne and his brothers have been trying to break into the Indian market for a while but the government here has been giving him a hard time. "You guys are the world champion in taxes, it is nearly 300 percent. So right now we are focussing on just being present in the market, so that whenever the market matures we will be ready," says Etienne who was in town for a promotion of Hugel wines at The Lalit Ashok. "The reason we are keen on the Indian market is because the compatibility of our wines with Indian cuisine is amazing. The wine is white, dry and flavourful, which is ideal for Indian food."



PERFECTLY PAIRED Indian food, white wine PHOTO: MURALI KUMAR K.

The rules of wine are simple — delicate wines for delicate food and intense wines for intense food. Who knew it was that simple, right? Wrong. "The beauty about wine is you never stop learning. I have enough knowledge to be credible in my profession. To understand wines, you need to have interest, experience and memory," says Etienne. If someone whose family has been in the business for over three centuries is still learning, this is no easy task.

Etienne's family is one of the few that have still maintained their business in the family. "This is such a rare phenom-

enon, which we want to keep alive, before going obsolete. My children are keen to join the family business as well."

While India does have a decent coterie of indigenous wine, in the wine maker's book of requirements there are some things money cannot buy — climate and soil. "It is not by accident that wines are produced in a certain region," says Etienne and he continues, "Wine is the best social lubricant there is. People come together and are much happier with wine. We should not be taxed, we should be subsidised."

CATHERINE RHEA ROY