

Michelin-starred Indian chef Atul Kochhar is as passionate about drinks as he is about food, as his latest venture, an Indian-inspired restaurant set in a vineyard, shows. *Richard Foster* talks to Kochhar and his head sommelier Costanzo Scala about the challenges of matching wines to Indian cuisine

THE RIGHT WINE FOR THE JOB

Atul Kochhar's rise to becoming the first Indian chef to be awarded a Michelin star is well charted. What has not been documented in quite such detail is his commitment to the drinks side of the restaurant business. Kochhar, director and partner of Benares Restaurant, in London, says: "I wanted to get the beverage department equal to food and that was my quest in this place."

The desire to make drinks a key component of the Benares experience was epitomised by his decision to hire top-quality sommeliers to rejuvenate the restaurant. After three years, he felt the time was right. "We had established ourselves by 2006," he says. "I wanted my bar to succeed. Although the wine list was good, I personally wanted a fabulous one."

In 2006, the bar was redesigned to encourage people to come in for early evening drinks and a few nibbles. Kochhar also set up an in-house marketing team, something he regards as one of his best decisions in running the restaurant. "We are serious about drinks," he says.

The transition from chef to restaurateur has taken time, however. "I stepped in like a chef," he admits, with all the accompanying baggage. "It was most difficult in fighting with my own personality. I was temperamental. I would throw things around." He then began to realise that he had a wider responsibility. "As head of the family, I had to be more careful of my mood swings because they affected the morale of the team," he says.

The evolution of Benares was, undoubtedly, helped by the objective advice of his two business partners, who possessed the financial expertise that he lacked. Both partners have been with Kochhar since day one, allowing him the freedom to focus on the day-to-day running of the restaurant.

One of the most intriguing issues facing Kochhar was

matching wines with Indian food. He stresses his personal involvement with the wines from the outset. "When I came to this country [in 1994] people said it was Indian food with beer," he recalls. "But I pointed out that wines do go well with Indian food. At Tamarind [his first UK restaurant] we started that drive." Kochhar has continued that mission ever since.

The team at Benares undertake a lot of wine tastings. As Kochhar and his chefs develop new recipes so, in parallel, runs the search to find the right wines. The main responsibility for the wine list lies with Costanzo Scala, the Italian head sommelier. With an average of one new dish introduced every month, the wine team are kept busy. Kochhar sees Scala's role primarily as showing the customers that the choice of wine requires more subtlety than they might anticipate. As Scala emphasises: "This is really refined food".

Kochhar believes in developing his sommeliers so they can pass on their knowledge to the next generation and has encouraged them to take on younger people who can benefit from their expertise. It's a practice that stems from his belief that the restaurant business is too short →

Right: Atul Kochhar, director and partner and Michelin-starred chef, Benares Restaurant: serious about creating a drinks offer to match the quality of the food

THE FACTS

Benares Restaurant
 Established: 2003
 Covers: 130 – 80 main dining room and three private dining rooms
 Wine range: 400+
 Price per bottle: £18–£2,000
 Food/wine sales ratio: 55:45

Wickham Vineyards:
 Established: 1984,
 Shedfield, Hampshire
 Acres: 24 acres for vines out of total 44 acres

Vatika at Wickham:
 Established: August 2008
 Covers: 42
 Wine range: 120



term in its outlook. “Everyone’s busy pinching from each other,” he says. “No one thinks of training their people.”

Apart from working closely with his sommeliers, Kochhar enjoys teaming up with leading winemakers to broaden his horizons and learn more about wine. He recently, for example, visited the Dom Pérignon estate with fellow Michelin-starred chefs, such as Angela Hartnett and John Campbell, to work alongside chef de cave, Dr Richard Geoffroy.

Geoffroy’s aim was to find the best wine for a range of dishes. Kochhar was impressed by Geoffroy’s decisiveness when matching his own. “I cooked a scallop dish, which was quite neutral,” he says. “But it came with a feisty sauce of ginger, chilli and mint. When he tasted it, he said straight away, 1954 DP.”

“I wanted to get the beverage department equal to food”

The fact that Kochhar’s latest UK venture, Vatika, is set in a vineyard provides further evidence of his interest in wine. Indeed, the initial approach came from the vineyard at Wickham in recognition of Kochhar devotion to wine and culminated in him taking on the lease of the restaurant this January.

Vatika opened its doors on August 1 2008. “We wanted to make Indian food a little more global,” Kochhar explains, “and to be more acceptable, like modern Italian, French or Spanish cuisine.” Take the menu, for example. “It doesn’t read like an Indian restaurant,” he says. There is no mention of regionality – just descriptions of the ingredients.

Guided tour

To enhance the link between wine and food, Vatika’s customers are being encouraged to come early and have a tour around the vineyard. In the first few months they will be shown the different grape varieties and the wine-making process by William Biddulph, the resident winemaker. Naturally, the wine list differs from Benares; it features eight wines from the vineyard, four of which Kochhar rates highly.

Kochhar is impressed by the progressive attitude of the people at Wickham, who have ambitions to grow quickly and are busy tying up with other vineyards locally. They also have a sister vineyard in the Ipswich area, twice the size of the Wickham estate, and another one in the Duras region in France.



Vatika is unique. “I don’t think anyone else has opened an Indian-inspired restaurant in a vineyard,” Kochhar says.

Further proof of the distinctiveness of Vatika is provided by its commitment to fresh local produce and its full engagement with the local livestock farmers, for whom he has a great deal of sympathy. So, unlike Benares, pork and beef feature on the menu at Vatika.

Kochhar is brimming with confidence about Vatika’s future. “I have never been so confident about any restaurant,” he says. There are two reasons for his unswerving belief: first, its small size will enable him to handle it personally; and second, its culture, based on its location in a vineyard. “It can’t go wrong,” says Kochhar.

In Vatika maybe he has found the perfect marriage between Indian food and wine.

Above: the chefs at Benares develop, on average, one new recipe each month, which keeps the wine team busy in their search for the right wine to pair with that particular dish

COSTANZO SCALA: THE SOMMELIER’S VIEW

In one sense Costanzo Scala has not moved far since starting at The Westbury Hotel in 2001 as restaurant supervisor. But although only a few minutes walk separate the Westbury and Benares, he has travelled a long way in terms of his education.

Scala arrived at Benares in 2006 via stints at the Oxo Tower, where he held his first sommelier position, and China Tang at The Dorchester.

After his early experience of modern European and Chinese food, Scala says that adjusting to Indian cuisine was a learning experience. “It was challenging at the outset,” he recalls, “and it took time to get used to the spices”.

Scala enjoyed the challenge of starting from scratch, because there was no wine department at Benares. And, as a sommelier, he had more freedom because he faced fewer rules, but more complex layers of flavour than

before. That freedom enabled him to come across some unusual discoveries, such as finding Greek wines that worked well with Indian food.

Scala’s approach to matching wines to Indian food has been a gradual exploration. His priority in assembling the wine list was to provide broad varietal ranges. For example, there are 10 Rieslings from Germany alongside others from Alsace, New Zealand, Austria and Italy.

Another aim was to encompass as many price points as possible and give customers choice. “They don’t feel obliged to spend too much for a bottle of wine,” he explains. “Prices start from £18 per bottle, which for a Michelin-starred restaurant is very good value, right up to £2,000.”

Due to the difficulties involved in finding the right wine to accompany each dish, Scala feels the role of the sommelier is more important in

an Indian restaurant. “When you get it right, you get it very right,” he says.

There is wide variation in the advice given, depending on the diners’ preferences, and more flexibility is required because of the variety of dishes.

Some customers want to accentuate the strength of the spices, so wines with high acidity, such as Sauvignon Blanc, are recommended. For others, the aim is to tame the spices, so a creamy, full-bodied wine such as Chardonnay or Soave, is on hand.

With the experience of the last few years, Scala is now tackling Vatika’s wine list, which is a different challenge to the one he faced at Benares. The menu is “more of a combination of British food with an Indian twist” and the wines need to reflect both elements of this combination. Vatika’s setting in a vineyard marks a return to Scala’s European roots where “the accent is on fine and rare wines”.