



A glass of classy wine

Master of Wine **Sonal Holland** is India's most accomplished and celebrated wine professional, educator and entrepreneur. Here she speaks about making a space of her own

GITA HARI

Sonal Holland's vast cultural knowledge has made her a sought-after strategic consultant for international brands seeking a foothold in India's complex marketplace. She has been a role model for women, having shattered the glass ceiling in the AlcoBev industry in India, and has been named among the 'Top 50 Most Powerful Women in Indian Luxury' by *Luxury magazine Luxebook* for four consecutive years. She is the Founder of SoHo Wine Club and Sonal Holland Wine Academy. In an interaction with the *Free Press Journal*, Sonal opens about her journey. Excerpts from the interview:

From where did you get the inspiration to become a Master of Wine, since it is a less treaded path by women?

At the age of 28, my ultimate career goal was to have a corner office. Over

of wine among domestic wine drinkers. The *India Wine Insider* report uncovers prevailing consumer realities and identifies future growth opportunities beneficial for the Indian and international wine trade, and hoteliers, to make informed decisions.

Considering India has more of whiskey lovers, has the concept of classy wine drinking really picked up?

Wine has had a somewhat tumultuous journey in India; it's been considered an elitist and expensive beverage choice. Over the years, however, thanks to the efforts of local wine makers, wine has become more of a household name in our country, as well as much more accessible. What's more, wine is widely touted for its health benefits (when enjoyed in moderation, of course), which makes it a more attractive option for those who are conscious about their health.

the next five years, I had changed my mind, arrived at a new aspiration; that of reinventing myself in a new avatar as a wine-entrepreneur. I began to see the opportunities that existed for a qualified wine professional in the nascent wine industry and decided to make a strategic shift to explore a career in wines. The hard work paid off; after 10 years of pursuing various qualifications in wines from London, in 2016, I became the most decorated wine professional in India, and was bestowed with the world's most prestigious wine title, Master of Wine (MW) with a present count of only 409 MW's across 30 countries.

I founded the Sonal Holland Wine Academy in 2009 that offers certified WSET wine and spirit courses, which has since completed over a decade in the business of education. I had set up SoHo Wine Club in 2016 to demystify wines to budding oenophiles in a land of whiskey lovers. We curate a fab collection of wines and experiences for the most discerning palates in India.

You have spearheaded the groundbreaking initiative of India Wine Insider. Please tell us more about it.

India Wine Insider, in collaboration with London-based Wine Intelligence, is the country's most comprehensive survey on the urban Indian wine consumer. The initiative spearheaded by Sonal Holland Wine Academy in 2017, with this research-backed knowledge paper gives an invaluable glimpse into the awareness, attitudes, and usage

What are the challenges you faced as a woman while pursuing your career?

Charting a wine career in a country like India came with its own unique set of challenges. Not only was I working in a traditionally male-dominated industry, but I was also grappling with an audience where women rarely drank, or did so in secret. I was, therefore, up against an audience that didn't entirely understand what I was trying to promote and why. I had to find creative ways to introduce wine to an audience that was both not as inclined to see it as a primary beverage of choice, and also to women, who were hesitant to openly enjoy drinking.

Tell us about your various other accomplishments.

The digital channel, Sonal Holland Wine TV is dedicated to wine education and entertainment, which was recognized by the Digital Women Awards for its innovative content. In addition, I enjoy broadcasting and writing about wines, and am often called upon as a key-note speaker to share my understanding of wine among

audiences, both in the country and overseas.

Your latest achievement would be...

An advanced certification in Sake and Shochu by Tokyo, Japan, was conferred upon me in 2020, making me the first Indian to become a certified professional in Sake and Shochu. I am the Founder Director at Vine2Wine Retail that operates specialist wine stores in Mumbai and Bengaluru.