



Sophisticated palates

Six Senses founder Sonu Shivdasani discusses his wine strategy

I understand that you categorise your resorts among three brand groups. Please explain, and tell us about any new properties you are developing.

In the middle of 2005 we plan to open the Soneva Taimana Resort in French Polynesia, with about 60 villas – including 50 over water.

At the end of 2005, we hope to open the Soneva Estate and Six Senses Spas retreat at Maskeliya in Sri Lanka.

It will comprise 60 Six Senses Spa bungalows and 10 Soneva-level villas. It is our intention to establish the Six Senses Spa retreat as a destination spa, along the lines of Chivasom in Thailand.

The Evason Hideaway brand has similar values to the Sonevas in terms of recreating the reality of the destination in a genuine way. But it is slightly more commercial, with more and slightly smaller rooms. We are trying to aim at the Banyan Tree market with this brand. The Evason brand is more commercial than the other two.

Since you measure everything in terms of the quality of the guest experience, what role does premium wine play in your present guest experience?

Wine plays a very important part. It is a very important complement to the dining experience. As well as wine tastings and wine dinners, guests are recommended glasses of wine to take with each dish on our menus.

What type of wine preservation do you employ, and have you considered using *Le Verre de Vins* to extend the shelf life of your wines to three weeks?

We currently use *Vacu Vin* corks and manual air-extractors. We are looking to introduce *Le Verre de Vin* shortly.

How do you merchandise and market premium wine at your resorts? Is it the same approach at all locations?

We have extensive wine lists with 250-500 wines, depending upon the property. We also have *sommeliers* and, as mentioned earlier, we also arrange wine tastings.



Preferred wines are sometimes specified on the guest profile and, in such instances, if we do not have the wine in our cellar we fly it in.

In resort destinations where you operate [particularly the Maldives which is a Muslim country and where alcohol is forbidden for locals] how difficult is it to build extensive wine cellars, and keep the wines in excellent condition.

Before we opened Soneva Fushi, the Maldives had a reputation for poor wines.

The local suppliers had a poor selection of generics and the wines were not stored very well, so we built our own underground wine cellar. We also import our wines directly from abroad. All is now in place and it works well.

Are the tastes of yourself and your wife reflected in the wine offerings at your properties?

Some of our favourites are on the list, but our F&B directors, executive chefs and *sommeliers* at each property are responsible for putting their lists together. The properties share ideas with each other.

What are your own personal favourites, and how large is your personal wine collection?

In whites, I love the *Pinot Gris* from Alsace, while the *Viogniers* from Condrieu are also very nice, especially *Chateau Grillet*. In reds, I love a good *Vega Sicilia*, and I find that the *Cru Bourgeois* from Bordeaux have a good quality/price ratio. I also like the *Super Tuscans*.

Provence and the South of France have some nice reds, such as *Vignelaure* vintages from the 70s and *Trevallon*. I have also enjoyed some good bottles of the *Mas de Daumas Gaussac*. ■

How do you handle wine training, and do you intend to create what many operators refer to as a "Minimum-Standards Wine Training Outline"?

We have training videos, and training sessions [two weeks per property] by a wine specialist. There is also continuous training from our *sommeliers*.

Do you see any wine trends emerging in the locations in which you operate?

Wines by the glass are popular, as couples often find a whole bottle too much for them to consume.

Six Senses attracts a high-worth clientele. Do they make particular demands/requests for wines?

• Fred Tibbitts is a global wine consultant to some of the world's leading chain hotels and restaurants. Website: fredtibbitts.com