eat out
TOP SHELF

The fourth edition of the Indian Wine
Consumer's Choice Awards, in association with
HT48hours, invites you to pick the country's finest produce

Meenakshi Iyer
■ meenakshi.iyer@hindustantimes.com

A wine connoisseur will tell you that a bottle with a shiny medal sticker on it is more likely to be picked up off the shelf, even if it belongs to a lesser-known winery. Since the Indian wine industry is still at a nascent stage, consumers are often not familiar with all the different varieties out there. Thus, they are on the lookout for a guide that will help them make that buying decision.

Wine awards like the Indian Wine Consumer's Choice Awards (IWCCA) accomplish the task of recognising the most deserving wines. In its fourth edition, the IWCCA is the only Indian accreditation that focusses on Indian vintages and new wines launched in the market.

For the past four years, the IWCCA has been inviting wineries to participate, and awards the best through a blind tasting by consumers. "Sometimes marketing or familiarity or, for that matter, unfamiliarity with a brand can colour our decision on how much we like a wine. In a blind tasting, the wine is judged for the qualities of the wine itself and nothing else," says Nikhil Agarwal, sommelier and CEO, All Things Nice, a wine and spirits consultancy.

For the people, by the people
Internationally, at wine awards like Decanter World Wine awards and International Wine Challenge, wines are often judged by wine experts, critics and buyers. However, IWCCA is decided by the opinions of consumers, the people who will be ultimately buying and drinking the wine. "Since the wines are judged by consumers, awards like these give us a different kind of feedback. Like in films, critics have a certain opinion on the movie, whereas the viewers may think about it in a different way," says Ravi Gurnani of York Winery.

At the competition, wines are judged based on the grape variety, for instance all the Sauvignon Blancs will constitute a single category. Judges rate the wines based on their appearance, aroma and taste. But with over 20 wine producers and 50 wines across various categories vying for the top spot, how do judges pick the best? "There were a lot of wines that we had never heard of before. And, you'd think more of the well-known wines would do well but the results can surprise you," says restaurateur Parth Timbadia, who was one of the 100 judges at the IWCCA last year.

"This year, there is a serious buzz around Indian wines in the country and internationally. The winning wines also reflect the preferences of the wine drinker in India, which provides invaluable feedback to wine producers," says Agarwal.

This year, 21 wineries and 136 labels will be participating at the IWCCA this year. "I think that quality of Indian wine is incredibly exciting now with so many wineries pushing the quality envelope. The highlight of the wine competition for us this year is to bring forward the best of Indian wines," says Agarwal.

■ (Clockwise from top) Judges at the Indian Wine Consumer's Choice Awards (IWCCA) last year; over 120 different varieties of wines were showcased during the event; Nikhil Agarwal interacting with the judges at the event

SOMMELIER'S GUIDE TO WINE TASTING

We pick 5 popular wine varieties and list down things you must look for in them

SAUVIGNON BLANC: "This variety is pale yellow with flashes of green colour. This dry, light-bodied wine has aromas and flavours of gooseberry, tropical fruit, lemon, bell pepper and asparagus. The wine often is herbaceous and pungent."

CHENIN BLANC: "Its colour ranges from light yellow to gold. The wine has flavours of tropical fruit to an intense honeyed overripe tropical fruit when produced in a dessert wine style. Chenin Blanc produced in India can be off dry (semi-dry) to very sweet; however both styles display good acidity to balance the wines."

SHIRAZ: "This variety has aromas and flavours of blackberry, plum, pepper and chocolate. Shiraz is often medium to full-bodied and is dry and tannic (depending on the climate). With oak-ageing, it can take on leathery and vanilla characteristics."

MERLOT: "This wine variety is ruby red with fruit aromas and flavours of plum. It is dry and full-bodied with softer tannins compared to Cabernet Sauvignon or Shiraz."

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: "Dark ruby red in colour, the wine has aromas and flavours of black currant with hints of bell pepper, sometimes even eucalyptus. The wine is generally medium to full-bodied, dry and tannic. With oak ageing, the wine takes on vanilla, cigar box and cedar characteristics."

— Inputs by Nikhil Agarwal, All Things Nice