



# The Whisky King o'Blighty

On how the Sawhneys became big purveyors of fine spirits

I went to school in St George's, Mussoorie. Some years back, I was in London and a chap called Narinder Singh Sawhney rang me up. He turned out to be from my school, a product of the '60s who had migrated to the UK soon after and settled in Hanwell, west London. They invited me to their home for dinner but on the way, we took a detour so that I could get a first-hand look at their business. We drove to a rambling industrial site where Sawhney, his young son Sukhinder and I entered a locked warehouse. What do I see—thousands and thousands of bottles of Scotch whisky, of every variety and quality, piled up on shelves up to the roof. Imagine showing such a treasure, and to a Sikh at that!

I had to hear their story. Sawhney told me of his struggles, how he had tried various ventures, and finally set up a liquor off-licence called The Nest. Apparently, it was the first independent off-licence. Today there are many, generally run by Asians. The Sawhneys focused on rare spirits and special brands. The idea came to them from the Irish, who live in large numbers in Hanwell, and who are, of course, the world's greatest lovers of spirits, and aficionados of high-quality whiskies, particularly single malts. Soon The Nest became well-known in London for its focus on rare brands, quality and good business practices. By the mid-'70s, Harrods and Selfridges began to seek them out when they wanted rare and limited edition vintage malt whiskies that were distributed on allocations. Word got around in London that if you wanted a bottle of 21-year-old Royal Salute or a 30-year-old Ballantine, the people to go to was the Singhs of The Nest. As I learnt, even the Palace, when looking for a rare malt suited to the palate of a visiting dignitary, looked for the Singhs of Hanwell.

Sawhney's young sons, Sukhinder and Raj, grew up with whisky all around them, but unlike the Jat boys in Amritsar, they weren't encouraged to imbibe the spirits. Sukhinder began collecting liquor miniatures early on and soon had a collection of 200, whereupon he joined a miniatures club. Which is when he learnt that 8,000 miniatures were up for sale somewhere. He couldn't afford the market value but he still put in a spirited bid of £1,000. Surprisingly, no one matched it and the big insurance company—who were simply getting rid of stock—sold the batch to him. The

young, hard-nosed businessman kept the single malts and sold the rest, for a good profit.

The Sawhneys told me the boys had to struggle hard. Sukhinder had become a qualified chartered surveyor, but in the '80s recession, he couldn't get a job. It didn't help that the company of Chartered Surveyors found every excuse to keep out newly qualified immigrants. Sukhinder then decided to fall back on his passion and convert The Nest into the best drink shop in the country. The boy was bent on becoming the malt king of Great Britain. He began to travel to Scotland to bid for rare bottles. Soon enough, he was a known face at the Scottish distilleries and with their drink masters.

Sukhinder then set up whiskyexchange.com and began to supply worldwide. The business is now split 50/50 between retail and wholesale. He complements large commercial suppliers. What they can't find, he somehow will, even the rarest of bottles. Recently, Sukhinder paid £1,00,000 for a bottle of Trinitas, a 64-year-old malt from the Dalmore distillery in Scotland. Only three bottles were produced ever. Already, he gets regularly asked for the Dalmore 62, of which only 12 bottles were produced (he's sold two). Trinitas is said to contain some of the oldest and rarest of whiskies in the world. Some have been maturing on the shores of the Cromarty Firth for over 140 years. Recently, Sukhinder has also taken



an interest in rum. The Royal Navy had a tradition of giving a tot of rum to sailors on a ship every evening. Around 40 years ago the practice was stopped, and about 8,000 bottles lay for 40 years in some navy warehouse. The rum was last drunk officially at the Prince Andrews-Sarah Ferguson wedding in 1986. Sukhinder bought a few flagons from a former sailor and then, suddenly, a chance came to buy the 8,000 remaining bottles of navy rum. He grabbed them for he's sure they'll turn out a goldmine in the future. At the warehouse, he proudly showed me the locked glass cupboards stacked with rare brands of whisky, brandy and liquors. Each bottle could fetch between £1,000-10,000 now.

We reached the Sawhney residence and they offered me a rare brand. Of course, like good Punjabis, we unfortunately followed the malt with plenty of *saag*. For me, the peasant that I am, the malt goes well with sarson ka saag. After all, in the village we believe the whole purpose of drinking is to get the head into a good spin. In the end, it's not the quality of the drink, or its cost, that makes the difference—it's the company. ■