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THE WINE MAGAZINE

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Mira A Honeycutt profiles six Indian women who are making a name in an industry dominated by men

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BLAZING A NEW TRAIL IN CALIFORNIA

Mira Advani Honeycutt meets six women of Indian descent who are making a mark in an industry dominated by men

Men dominate California's wine industry. Women are very much a minority. Although women have come far in recent years, according to a 2020 study conducted by Women Winemakers of California and Beyond, approximately only 14% of the 4,200-plus bonded wineries in California report a woman as their lead winemaker and even fewer as winery owners. Yet, almost under the radar, there is a handful of Indian women who are blazing an impressive trail in this patriarchal landscape. This group includes vintners such as Anita Sahi, Priyanka Dhar French, Anisya Fritz, Neeta Mittal, Janu Goelz and Raghni Naidu.

All these women are following their passion to produce a range of wines from Bordeaux, and Rhône-style to Burgundian varietals, from Napa and Sonoma to California's Central Coast, and picking up awards and high ratings along the way. For all of them, their traditions and family values have been the assets they bring to their profession. "Failure is not an option," said Janu, echoing her parents' emphasis on success. "We were brought up with sweat equity," commented Priyanka, whose parents emphasized the importance of education. "That has been a cornerstone for me."

ANITA SAHI, Proprietor/General Manager, Copia Vineyards, Paso Robles

Born and raised in the Chicago area, Anita Kothari was drawn to all things culinary at a young age. From her stints in television and with public relations firms, she transitioned to the restaurant industry working with such luminaries as New



Mykaela Faulconer

Anita Sahi and husband, Varinder pictured among the vines at Copia Vineyards

York's restaurateur Drew Nierporent where her true wine education began, helping her to develop a sophisticated palate. "To be able to orchestrate dinners using a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winning wine cellar that is 20,000-plus bottles deep was a privilege," recalled Anita.

Anita met her husband Varinder Sahi in Chicago in 2015. A one-hour date over a glass of Provençal Rosé, arranged online, led to 12 hours together. The romance had clearly kicked in and the two moved in together in Indianapolis where Varinder was based. At the time, his family owned vineyards in Lodi, California, which motivated Varinder to study viticulture at the University of Davis California. Part of the course included a trip to Paso wineries.

"It was a deep dive," said Anita who accompanied Varinder on the trip and the two got an in-depth tour of vineyards and wineries. Soon the couple was interning with one of Paso's most esteemed winemakers, Eric Jensen at his Booker winery. Two years later, they acquired Copia Vineyards, not far from Booker.

I meet Anita and Varinder at their hillside Copia Vineyards, a 50-acre ranch on Paso's prestigious Willow Creek District appellation, rich with calcareous soil. Their contemporary-style home sits on a hilltop complete with an infinity pool, a rose garden and a lush vegetable patch.

Some 20 acres were planted in 2019 to Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Verdot. Their first few vintages were produced with fruit sourced from Paso and Santa Barbara County vineyards. This year the Sahis look forward to their first Copia Vineyards harvest. While Varinder is the hands-on winemaker, Anita brings her culinary knowledge and experienced palate to the blending table.

Reflections of Anita's heritage come through in her gracious hospitality when she's curating a tasting experience. "Taking care of people is a mark of pride," Anita expressed. The Indian touch is reflected on the labels in the style of the Saraswati mantra. "The triangle represents knowledge," she said, referring to the knowledge she continues to gather on her wine journey with Varinder on their Copia estate.

Copia's annual case production is 1,500 cases. Its portfolio includes Rhône-style blends and Chardonnay.

PRIYANKA DHAR FRENCH, Winemaker, Signorello Estate, Napa Valley

Priyanka's power-packed resumé reflects not only her experiences in global wine regions but also her work alongside such luminaries as renowned enologist Michel Rolland and noted winemaker Andy Erickson during her five-year tenure as cellar master/viticulturist at Napa's



Mira Advani Honeycutt

cult winery, Dalla Valle Vineyards. (See page 36)

Is it any wonder that she was head-hunted in 2019 by Napa's historic Signorello Estate for the winemaker position? Here, as the third winemaker of a winery known for complex and structured Napa Cabs and a brilliant Chardonnay, she will continue to uphold its decades-long legacy.

In the devastating 2017 Napa fires, Signorello's original winery, founded in 1977, was destroyed but the vineyards were saved. The rebuilding process has started with ground breaking scheduled this summer. Overseeing construction of the new 28,000 square foot winery and caves is among Priyanka's responsibilities.

"I've always followed the path of estate-driven wines," said Priyanka, a Mumbaikar who at the young age of 34 has amassed a wealth of knowledge while interning or working at wineries in France, California and New Zealand, where she met her husband Alex French.

Priyanka comes from a family of scientists so she knew early on the general direction in

Priyanka Dhar French, Napa's first Indian woman winemaker

Priyanka was head-hunted in 2019 by Napa's historic Signorello Estate for the winemaker position as the third winemaker of the winery



Anisya Fritz, oversees the gardens and culinary programme at Lynmar Estate

Lynmar Estate is a paradise tucked into the small town of Sebastopol. Acres of well-manicured vineyards form a mosaic around bursts of flowers and an abundant vegetable garden

which she was headed. Chemistry caught her attention, especially food sciences. “It’s an application-based science,” said the pragmatic winemaker, who graduated from Mumbai’s Institute of Chemical Technology. The introduction to wine came via one of her college field trips, which included visits to a spice blending company, the Amul milk processing unit, the Parle biscuit factory and Sula winery in Nashik. The last one appealed to her.

Priyanka’s plans to study winemaking abroad didn’t sit well with her parents, but they recognized her determination. She was accepted into the Masters’ Programme in Adelaide, in Bordeaux and at the University of California Davis (UC Davis). She chose the latter and graduated with a Master of Science degree in Viticulture & Enology.

It was here that Priyanka earned internships at such prestigious wineries as Napa’s E & J Gallo and Louis Martini, and later at Hospices de Beaune in Burgundy, France. Of her multiple experiences, Priyanka states: “My biggest education has been expanding my own palate.

In 2011 she was tapped by Tonnellerie Demptos to represent its French oak barrels in India, a stint that lasted one year and gave her

a taste of the Indian wine scene. She decided to continue with her travels to New Zealand and then to Napa at Della Valle winery. (See pg 36.)

The young winemaker’s goal is to carry her knowledge back to India’s wine industry. She admits that she’s not familiar with India’s tropical wine environment, but feels that she could in the future bring her technical knowledge to this burgeoning wine region. “But for now, I know I’m needed here, while they rebuild Signorello,” she says.

Signorello’s annual production is 3,000 cases. Its portfolio includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir.

ANISYA FRITZ, Proprietor/Director of Consumer Experience, Lynmar Estate, Sebastopol, Sonoma County

Located in the heart of Sonoma’s Russian River Valley appellation, Lynmar Estate is a paradise tucked into the small town of Sebastopol. Acres of well-manicured vineyards form a mosaic around bursts of flowers and an abundant vegetable garden.

This is the result of the long-term vision of Anisya Fritz and her husband Lynn. “We are here for a lifetime as stewards of the land,” she told me, seated in Lynmar Estate’s

contemporary-styled hospitality lounge. “We are not looking at short term.”

With a background in international business, Anisya met Lynn Fritz in 1996 when the two founded the Fritz Institute in San Francisco, a humanitarian non-profit organization with a global outreach including India. Along the way, they got married. It wasn’t until 2008 that Anisya decided she needed a hiatus. That’s when Lynn proposed she take on the role of Lynmar’s Director of Consumer Experience, an aspect that was fast becoming a significant part of the California wine industry.

“I didn’t know anything about wine; I had to learn from the ground up,” said Anisya, a former executive who drew on her business acumen to manage sales and hospitality. There were challenges in learning the business from scratch, especially the language of wine and food, admitted Anisya, who now meticulously manages the gardens as well as the culinary programme.

Lynmar Estate began with the 40-acre Quail Hill Ranch acquired by Lynn in 1980. The original parcel has grown over time to the current 102 acres as Lynn began acquiring neighbouring parcels and pieced together a contiguous ranch. In 1990, Lynmar Estate was established, and began producing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from its 40-acre vineyard planted in 20 different blocks and farmed to sustainable practices.

Hailing from Kerala, Anisya née Thomas, came to the US in the early 1980s and received her Masters Degree in Business from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. But she grew up as a military brat travelling across India. “Twelve schools in twelve years,” she mused, an experience she claims was helpful in the earlier days of working long hours at the winery with different people. “You learn to be flexible.”

Hospitality, said Anisya, is a significant part of Indian culture. “Sharing warmth and treating strangers like family is an essential part

of our culture.” She views her winery team as one big joint family. “We belong to each other and this place.”

Anisya is also rooted in the community as she mentors young people interested in food and wine. Since business is such an essential part of the industry, in 2012 she created a ten-week Certificate course in Wine Entrepreneurship that she teaches at nearby Sonoma State College.

Lynmar’s annual production is 11,000 cases. Its portfolio includes Pinot Noir and Chardonnay crafted by winemaker Pete Soergel.

NEETA MITTAL, Co-Founder LXV Wine, Paso Robles

Achieving the status of one of the Top Ten tasting rooms in America by the USA Today newspaper is no small feat. The LXV Wine Tasting Lounge is a sensory landscape of wine and spices, located in a humble shopping strip in

Neeta Pillai was always drawn to the Indian arts and it’s the richness of Indian culture that has been instrumental in creating the LXV image

Neeta Mittal introduced wine and spice pairings at LXV Wines



Janu knew she was on the right path when her very first vintage of 2017 Grenache Blanc won “Best of Show” at the Central Coast Competition in 2018

Free spirited Janu Goelz pictured at work in the winery



Paso Robles’ quaint and charming downtown area. The LXV Ranch, on the other hand, home to the Mittals’ newly planted Armaa.N Vineyard, is on Paso’s prestigious appellation of Willow Creek District. The 13.5-acre property is planted to eight acres and includes Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Syrah.

Holding an engineering degree, Mumbaiker Neeta Pillai was always drawn to the Indian arts and it’s the richness of Indian culture that has been instrumental in creating the LXV image. Of her heritage, Neeta says, “It’s actually been an advantage.” She has woven an Indian-ness into the world of food and wine and LXV is now known for its wine and spice pairings.

Neeta and Kunal Mittal, who celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary this year, met as students at the University of California Berkeley. Their stomping ground was nearby Napa Valley. “Our romance started in wine country,” said Neeta, as we chat seated on

the deck of her ranch overlooking the well-manicured vineyards.

The Mittals were based in Los Angeles (she was a screenwriter/producer and he was an IT executive at Sony Studios) when they decided to commit to producing wine and discovered the region of Paso Robles. Their LXV Wine brand was launched with the inaugural vintage of 2010 Rising Tempo, a well-received Rhône-style blend, its fruit sourced from Paso vineyards.

“In two years we decided this is not us,” said Neeta. Her palate favoured Sangiovese and Kunal leaned toward Bordeaux. The LXV portfolio has since evolved to reflect their tastes, Bordeaux-style wines crafted by noted Paso winemaker Jeff Streckas. Fruit for the wines is sourced from Paso and Santa Barbara County vineyards and produced at a Paso winery.

LXV Wine’s annual case production is 2,000 cases. Its portfolio includes Bordeaux style blends and Sangiovese.

JANU GOELZ, Founder/winemaker, Alara Cellars, Morgan Hill, Santa Clara Valley

Janu knew she was on the right path when her very first vintage of 2017 Grenache Blanc won “Best of Show” at the Central Coast Competition in 2018. Not only was this the first time she had worked with this variety, but it was also the very first time she had entered a wine competition. “I must have been doing something right,” said Janu.

Born and raised in Morgan Hill, Janu (Janaki Arasu) graduated from the University of San Francisco in International Business. But her career path took her from acting and fashion to television. Janu knew winemaking was her calling when she met her future husband Jason Goelz, founder/winemaker of Jason-Stephens winery in Gilroy, in 2012 at a party. Janu caught the wine bug and soon immersed herself in what she jokingly calls “the University of Jason”.

Janu launched her Alara Cellars in Gilroy, a two-hour drive south of San Francisco. The inaugural 2016 vintage was released with 12

different wines, its fruit sourced from the appellations of San Benito and Arroyo Seco in nearby Monterey County. Production is done at a winery in Paso Robles and a tasting room is located in downtown Morgan Hill. (All these locations are no more than an hour or two driving distance from each other.) Alara wines reflect Janu’s free spirit. “I’m not a scientific winemaker; I’m more palate-driven,” said Janu of her well-defined palate that owes much to her heritage of Singaporean/Indian food.

Annual production is 2,000 cases of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Barbera, Sangiovese, Negrette and Cabernet Pfeffer.

RAGHNI NAIDU, Owner/founder, Naidu Vineyards & Wines, Sebastopol, Sonoma County

Raghni’s approach to showcasing her brand goes beyond just a typical visit to a wine tasting room. She has curated an immersive experience of the Sonoma lifestyle with a stay at Naidu’s private and secluded guesthouse where the wines can be savoured along with a tour of the vineyards, local farms and lavender fields. “Enjoy the wine country at your own pace, create a memory of it,” Raghni recommends.

The day I visited Raghni, the guesthouse was occupied so we tasted the wines under an oak tree in her four-acre Pinot Noir vineyard. “Pinot is what got me into drinking wine,” she said of her choice for this appellation.

Naidu Vineyards released its wines in 2020 with its inaugural 2018 vintage of estate Pinot Noir, and a Viognier and a Zinfandel/Carignane blend (the last two from sourced fruit). Wines are crafted by winemaker Matt Duffy and produced in the nearby town of Santa Rosa.

Raghni née, Khanna grew up in Amritsar where fine dining was part of her life. Her wine introduction, however, came via her travels. While studying sales and marketing in Melbourne, Australia, she met her future husband Kaushik Naidu and the two moved to San Francisco.



Mira Advani Honeycutt

“That’s what got me where I am today,” said Raghni, adding that their weekends were spent exploring the Napa and Sonoma wine country. In 2018, the Naidus acquired the nine-acre ranch which had been planted to a Pinot Noir vineyard in 2000.

“I’ve lived in different countries and my experiences have shaped who I am today,” Raghni reflected. Her heritage and family values, she explained, enables the hard work and perseverance that she brings to her business every day. The backbone of the California wine industry was and are immigrants, Raghni points out. “Although when you think of a winemaker, an immigrant woman may not be what one expects, but I’m trying to change that whenever I can.”

Naidu Vineyard’s annual case production is 250 cases. Its portfolio is focused on Pinot Noir, with other varietals and blends changing with each vintage.

While listening to their stories, passion and commitment, it is evident that these women have tapped into their inner *shakti*, marrying the best of American entrepreneurship with their Indian heritage and blazing a trail in California’s wine industry. ♦

Raghni Naidu, an immigrant woman in the changing California wine industry

Raghni grew up in Amritsar where fine dining was part of her life. Her wine introduction, however, came from her travels