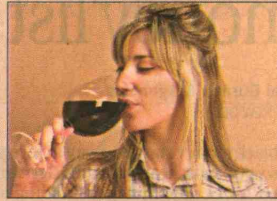


USL PLANS TO TAKE BRITS ON A HIGH WITH RITU



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THE traditional British custom of 'beer and a curry' could soon have to face a cultural shift. United Spirits Limited (USL) hopes to lure Britons into changing their Friday night habits, and go for a 'wine and a curry' instead.

USL has just kicked off its plans to introduce Indian wines under the brand name "Ritu" to UK and France, targeting the Indian eateries.

Ritu, says Vijay Rekhi, MD and president of UB Group's USL, was chosen as it sounds Indian, and sounds a bit like Four Seasons, USL's domestic wine brand. Four Seasons was considered too much an entrenched European brand name to differentiate itself as 'Indian' wine. Unlike the domestic market, selling wine to France and UK requires a completely different orientation. "We are focusing on limited markets, in the UK, France, and Singapore, recruiting distributors. The critical thing in mature markets is to ensure the acceptance of the product." While many Indian wine producers export in limited quantities, most have traditionally been under European labels, or for limited circulation. This will be an organised attempt to break into the European markets with an India-labeled wine.

Instead of opting to battle with the rest of the wine-producing world on crowded supermarket shelves, USL hopes to uses the curry house circuit, like Kingfisher beer, and leverage the India name. The move, say wine industry watchers comes at an interesting time when Indage, which also tried exporting to curry houses, has gone bust. Grover has also gone subdued, while the other good new ones, like Reveilo and York are still too small to export, leaving Sula as the main competitor for USL.

To start with, Mr Rekhi believes that the UK market will take up to 10,000 cases a year – the French market, he believes will be about half that volume. USL has already tied up with importers, and will be offering its entire range of varietals to importers, for bottling under the 'Ritu' brand name. USL has a Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, and Voignier. In India, says Mr Rekhi, USL sold some 600,000 bottles last year, and plans to double that.