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## Asia



Richard Mintz of Two Hands Wines

# Ferment In Aussie Wine

**"COMMODITY" PUSH LEAVES BOUTIQUE VINTNERS GRIPING; WILL NATURE DRY UP A GLUT?**

AUSTRALIA	A \$9.00
CHINA	RMB 45.00
HONG KONG	HK \$50
INDIA	RS 150
INDONESIA	RP 28,000
JAPAN	(TAX INCL.) ¥1090
KOREA	W 6,500
MALAYSIA	RM 15.00
NEW ZEALAND	NZ \$11.00
PAKISTAN	RS 200
PHILIPPINES	P 160
SINGAPORE	S \$10.00
TAIWAN	NT \$200
THAILAND	B 170
UNITED STATES	US \$4.99



# Designing Woman

Architectural restorer **SUNITA KOHLI** bridges both cultural and historical divides.  
By Pranay Gupte

**W**HEN PAKISTAN'S LEADING real estate developers, the Hashwani Group, set out to restore a dilapidated section of the ancient city of Lahore, they also planned to redo a crumbling Sikh *haveli*, a 30-room mansion that overlooked the 17th-century Lahore Fort, built by the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan, and the 17th-century Badshahi Mosque, which was constructed by his son, Emperor Aurangzeb. They then decided to build a 70-room boutique hotel around the *haveli*. The Hashwanis concluded, however, that only a Lahore-born architectural restorer would possess the historical sensibility to get the designs just right.

So they asked a leading Pakistani architect, Wasif Ali Khan, to conduct a search. Khan had only one candidate in mind, and he knew exactly where to go to find a Lahore native who would fit the Hashwanis' requirements—strangely, that was to neighboring India, with whom Pakistan has fought three wars since both countries became independent 60 years ago.

Politics wasn't an issue for Khan, and he traveled to New Delhi to contact architectural restorer and interior designer Sunita Kohli. He'd never met Kohli, but he knew that she had restored ancient forts and palaces around India, helped design hotels in the Middle East and also rehabilitated or redecorated public buildings.

He knew, too, that Kohli had restored Sir Edwin Lutyens' foremost architectural legacies from the British Raj—Viceroy's House, Parliament House and Hyderabad House, all in New Delhi—and is quite possibly the greatest living authority on the British architect's

work for the empire (*see box, p. 74*).

Not only was Kohli born in Lahore, but her parents, Indar Prakash and Chand Sur, hailed from prepartition India, from which Pakistan was carved out by the British from the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and subsequently established itself as an Islamic state, while India remained a secular one.

So in what represented an unprecedented cross-border business arrangement of its kind, the Hashwani Group asked Kohli to accept the assignment. The entire deal was done in less than a month, but only after Kohli visited Lahore, a 45-minute flight from New Delhi. "It was moving to be in Lahore, a garden city created by the Mughals 500 years ago," she says. "I stood in front of Lakshmi Mansions, the Victorian building in which I was born. And I visited the Badshahi Mosque, which can accommodate 55,000 worshippers. That visit was meaningful in more ways than one, especially in view of Indian-Pakistani relations."

In addition to her ongoing work in the "Lutyens Zone" of New Delhi, Kohli has restored the official residence on Racecourse Road in New Delhi of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. She also rehabbed the nearby office of the National Advisory Council that Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born president of the Indian National Congress, headed. (Gandhi and Kohli are close friends, though Kohli is guarded about the relationship.) The prime minister's residential complex, as well as the NAC, was designed by Robert Tor Russell, Lutyens' contemporary, who created several civic buildings during the colonial period. Kohli's restoration drew attention to Russell, who had long been the "forgotten architect" of the British Raj.

After Sonia Gandhi's husband, former

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was assassinated by a female Sri Lankan Tamil suicide bomber in May 1991, the government appointed Kohli—and another person close to Rajiv, entrepreneur Romi Chopra—to conceive, create and supervise the memorials for Rajiv in New Delhi and in Sriperumbudur, the tiny town in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu where he died. They worked in cooperation with a high-powered national committee headed by the prime minister.

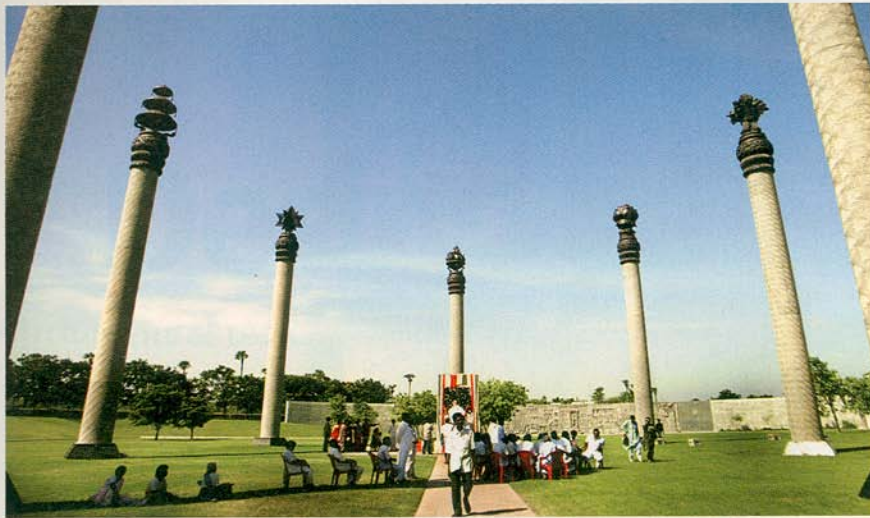
Kohli has worked on projects outside India as well, designing in Bhutan an international conference center in the Buddhist style for King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. In Egypt she has created resorts and hotel boats for the Oberoi Group, as well as a resort in El Arish that was commissioned by the Egyptian government, where she designed the public areas in Bedouin style.

She also founded in 2005 the National Museum of Women in the Arts in India (in conjunction with the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, on whose international advisory board she sits). Says architect Richard Meier in an e-mail: "There is enormous interest from all parts of the world about the current renaissance in Indian architecture. Designers such as Kohli, whose new museum for women in Delhi will most likely be influenced by the great work of Lutyens and probably the Mughal architecture at Fatehpur Sikri, is but one example of the new emerging architecture."

So where did Kohli learn her craft? "I'm entirely self-taught," she says. "This profession was serendipitous, unplanned. I grew up in Lucknow, after the family migrated from Lahore after the partition. Lucknow was a city of great refinement. I grew up surrounded by the genteel shabbiness of a culture that still



RAJAT GHOSH FOR FORBES



**Seven pillars of wisdom: Kohli's memorial for Rajiv Gandhi in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu.**

retained a wonderful flavor of cuisine, exquisite manners and language.”

Kohli majored in English literature at

Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi (she has published several books) and then earned a master's degree in English at

Lucknow University. She taught at Loreto College in Lucknow. At the time of her marriage in 1971 to Ramesh Kohli, who is now one of India's most successful equity investors, Kohli was working as a copywriter at what was then Delhi's biggest ad agency, Advertising & Sales Promotion Co.

She and her husband spent their free time visiting *kabadi* shops—where second-hand goods and antiques are sold—not only in Lucknow, but also in Rajasthan State, and in such nearby hill resorts as Dehra Dun and Mussoorie. They'd find early-19th-century lights and Edwardian furniture. Kohli decided to convert her interest into an antiquarian business through which she sold Davenport desks and Regency wine tables.

Learning from master craftsmen in Lucknow, Kohli began reproducing furniture and also restoring antiques. She found that

the palaces of Indian maharajas lay in disrepair, and so her restoration business took off.

How did a furniture maker and restorer transform herself into an interior designer, architectural rehabilitator and hotel builder? "When clients commissioned me to restore furniture, they also asked for advice about how to redecorate their homes," Kohli says. "Interior design as a profession actually came to India only in the 1970s."

Kohli's "breakthrough" assignment came in the mid-1970s, from the Oberoi Group, to design a small hotel near the world-famous Khajuraho temples, the site of 10th- and 11th-century Indian erotic sculpture. Another early commission was designing the Mena House hotel overlooking the Pyramids of Giza in Cairo.

As her furniture business expanded, Kohli started receiving commissions from diplomatic friends to redo the interiors of

embassies and ambassadorial homes, including that of New Zealand's envoy, Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the first man to climb Mount Everest, in 1953. Other diplomat friends with whom she's continued to be close include Frank G. Wisner II, the U.S. ambassador to India, and his wife, Christine, stepmother of France's recently elected president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

In recognition of her work, India gave Kohli its highest civilian award, the Padma Shri, in 1992. She is the first—and to date the only—designer-restorer upon whom the award has been conferred.

There are several architects whose works have impressed Kohli, among them I.M. Pei—whom she met for the first time recently in Berlin—Frank Gehry of the U.S., Italy's Renzo Piano and Mexican Ricardo Legorreta. The late Luis Barragán, another Mexican, has also influenced her. She also admires

the late Indian Prabhat Patki and the late Geoffrey Bawa of Sri Lanka, who created innovative resorts in Bali and other South-east Asian spots.

Unlike most top architects and designers in India, Kohli maintains a relatively small staff at her modest office in South Delhi—only nine architects. Kohli's company is privately owned, so she doesn't disclose her fees. On certain public projects she works pro bono or contributes her income to one of the many charities that she supports, such as those assisting homeless children.

For Kohli, past is prologue to her creative process: "My whole country is a museum, and what are museums other than repositories of memory?" she asks. "The pluralism of our culture comes through in its varied designs—it's easy for me to move between Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, Jain and Christian art. It's cultural energy, I suppose." **F**