

SUKU SHAH, the chairman and managing director of Olive Tree Trading Pvt. Ltd., is one of India's rare Gujaratis who is happy to boldly admit he has extravagant and non-vegetarian gourmet tastes when it comes to food and drink. He is a Gujju businessman from Bombay who has studied and lived in the US, his wife is a Sindhi, he imports and distributes exclusive and high-end Italian and Japanese food products, naturally his tastebuds are used to a happy melange of all things good that go into a cooking pot. "Like an excellently-grilled fish over which has been drizzled some fine olive oil, that kind of thing," explained Suku.

Olive Tree, he started in 2001 in Pune, with the idea of importing, distributing and marketing quality products in the food and beverage industry that would enhance healthier lifestyles pertaining primarily to Mediterranean and Oriental cuisines. He started simply with olive oil. And there is a story behind that. Suku, who was then in some other business, was holidaying in Goa with his family and dining at a five-star restaurant. He found the quality of olive oil being used there to be extremely inferior. When Suku complained, he was told this was the best olive oil available in the country, if he wanted better than that — he would have to import it himself. "I saw that as a challenge," he said matter-of-factly.

Fortunately, he had a friend in Italy by the name of Angelo Cremonini, with whom Suku immediately established contact. Cremonini, and another Italian by the name of Pico Cipolla, helped him set up Olive Tree with Suku's first import order being for olive oil from Olitalia, a leading maker of the oil in Italy. It just needed an enterprising Indian to begin some new adventure like that, because in no time, Olive Tree was expanding and growing. And Suku was entering into exclusive import agreements to represent other Italian companies as well in India.

Five years into the business only and look at the companies he promotes and their products he markets and distributes in India. There's balsamic vinegar from Cremonini; pesto, pasta and stir through sauces, anti pasto and olives

from Sacla; pasta from De Cecco; Arborio and Carnaroli rice from Riso Scotti; caper berries, salted capers, artichokes, grilled onions, sundried tomatoes, black and green olives from di'Vita; dried porcini mushrooms and polenta from Cose De Bosco; peeled plum tomatoes from Alfonso Sellitto; pastries and cookies from Vicenzi; white truffle oil and black truffles from Tartufalba; crisp bread from Finn Crisp; silken tofu from Mori Nu; silk soy milk from Whitewave; soynuts from Peanotz; and, food products, table and kitchenware from Japan.

"All these products are pretty much market leaders internationally and are known for being consistent in their quality," Suku says. He is a firm believer in using his products and is reluctant to name which among them all is his favourite. "I absolutely use whatever I import and market and my favourite would be a combo of, let's say the Silk soymilk, De Cecco pasta, Sacla pasta sauces and, my all time favourite, the cookies from Vicenzi. I must add, these brands are all exclusively imported by Olive Tree, there is no parallel importer or representation for them in India," he revealed. What was India doing for these kind of products before Suku Shah and Olive Tree came along? He shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

Suku cuts a striking figure. The success of his business, his constant interaction with the Italians perhaps, has given him a European look. Farzana Contractor, who photographed him, remarked that there was something faintly "mafiosi" about the way Suku looked with his well-cut suit and narrow, highly-polished shoes. Suku looked pained at that. "The mafia is dead in Italy," he said, as if to excuse himself for his looks.

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He grew up in Bombay, studied in LA, returned and took up the family business of running engineering factories. Suku then broke away to move to Pune and set up his own business in 1994. This was a crankshaft-making unit. He sold this in 2001 and was holidaying in Goa when the olive oil incident occurred and threw him heart, body, mind and soul into the business of setting up Olive Tree. Five years later, not only is he hugely successful, but he supplies his Italian and Japanese food products to most leading five-star hotel chains and upmarket fine dining speciality restaurants in India. He also has a growing retail distribution network which spans across all the states. He makes

special delivery of Japanese green tea, black truffles and white truffle oil, the stuff to make sushi, Japanese miso, and porcini mushrooms to connoisseurs of fine foods in Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore. And Suku is now about to launch an energy drink from Finland called Battery. He is also going to be selling home Espresso machines under the popular brand name Lavazza. Inquiries have already started coming in for the Espresso machines from Olive Tree's upmarket customers in the corporate and film world. "It is a niche product and people would like to keep it in their homes and offices," Suku said.

Olive Tree's portfolio includes over 50 products. "That's not 50 different sizes, but 50 different products," Suku said modestly. "I cater to the very high-end, discerning customer. An Olive Tree product is guaranteed for freshness and high international quality standards."

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