

MENU

CANADA'S FOODSERVICE MAGAZINE



**CIDER 101:
CELEBRATING FALL
IN QUINTESSENTIAL
CANADIAN STYLE**



GRIT + PERSISTENCE

**Manjit Minhas:
BEER BARONESS | ENTREPRENEUR
MOTHER | DRAGON**

**REPORT:
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Grit & Persistence

Manjit Minhas on smashing stereotypes and building an empire.



By Kartikey Bhargava

Alberta-born Manjit Minhas is a legit beer baroness. Starting her businesses with her brother Ravinder at the age of just 19, today she has more than 90 different brands of beer, wines, spirits and liqueurs to offer the Canadian public. I sat down recently with Minhas and talked about her path from fledgling entrepreneur to a successful business owner worth \$155 million.

Getting Started in the Liquor Business

Although she studied to be a petroleum engineer, Minhas and her brother decided to get into the liquor business mainly because their parents owned a few stores in Calgary and the siblings began producing a branded liquor for their parents' business. Soon buyers came knocking for the popular concoction. "There were about a thousand stores in the province at that time in Alberta, and we had other stores calling to ask us if they could buy it. We said no in the beginning because it's a private label for our parents' stores only. Then we started thinking, well, why not? We started expanding it to be available to the general market. And that's when things really started to take off for us."

In 2003, Minhas and her brother jumped into the beer market, believing there wasn't enough competition and that there was a real lack of great Canadian brands at that time. Their first beer, Mountain Crest Classic Lager, was 5.5 per

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Photo by Curtis Trent



cent and one of the stronger products on the market at the time. They also sold it for a “buck-a-bottle” which was unheard of at the time. From that success, the duo began to experiment with different flavours and, when their parents finally retired in 2004, they were already reasonably successful.

Their partnership has benefitted from their being brother and sister. According to Minhas: “We’re very close as siblings, but also we have different strengths. He oversaw some parts of the business, and I oversaw other parts of the business. We were able to grow at a pace that was fast but comfortable for us while still being private. To this day, we are still a private company, and we have no outside investors.”



*make sure
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on challenges in the beer industry

Manjit Minhas faced many challenges going into a very male-dominated industry that wasn't hospitable to her as an East Indian woman—she did not fit many of the beer-industry stereotypes. Colleagues even going so far as talking over her as she was giving a presentation. Minhas had to be persistent to survive and thrive in an unwelcoming industry.

“The way we did that was just literally grit and persistence. I realized that I’m going to stand out no matter what I do because of those things. So, then I became always the best at research, not only [for] my own brands but for the industry. It was just that I was going to be the go-to person for any buyer, for any retailer, for any government official that wanted to know anything happening in the industry.”

That reputation for being more knowledgeable than everyone else allowed Minhas to build strong industry relationships. Twenty years later and she is probably one of the most well-known names in Canadian brewing.

Today, there are other challenges, not least of which is the archaic lack of interprovincial trade legislation which hurts Canadian brewers and distillers across the country.

“I do think that for known entities coming into our country just dumping their product here and

taking back all of their profits and not contributing to our economy is a big challenge that Canadians still face. Because compared to a lot of other countries, we have open borders. But within the countries, there are not. Within countries, there are definitely a lot of trade barriers within provinces. Which is really hard on small consumers and so I think that's a challenge.”

FOCUSING ON QUALITY INGREDIENTS

Minhas and her brother have expanded into spirits and liquors, driven by two of their company-wide value components: producing the products at a fair cost and using quality ingredients. “People are willing to pay for something that has quality ingredients. For example, we don't use high fructose corn syrup in anything. We only use organic sugarcane...It's important that the ingredients in the product, whether they be beer or whether they be distillery products, it has to be quality ingredients and consumers want to know what the calorie count is.

“I think that as time goes on, consumers are getting smarter about what they consume and who owns their products and where it is coming from and who are they employing and where are their profits going.”

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ON SUSTAINABILITY AND THE PLANET

As with many other businesses on the planet, sustainable practices are becoming increasingly important. Minhas Breweries, Distillery and Winery takes its responsibility to heart. “We’ve always been very conscious that we are citizens of not only Canada but part of this planet. As long as we’ve run manufacturing facilities, breweries, distilleries, wineries, we’ve always been very conscious of our water consumption. We have a completely closed system. Whatever we heat, we cool. And we are very conscious that we don’t waste water.

“About a decade ago, we started tackling the packaging problem because we’d started seeing it ourselves. It’s a win-win situation when you can tackle that problem. Not only does it help the planet and reduce waste, but also at the end of the day, it helps the bottom line because you’re not wasting money.”

**ON THE FUTURE OF MINHAS
BREWRIES, DISTILLERY AND WINERY**

Minhas describes their new range of products which are all about flavour: “We have just launched ready-to-drink Caesars in three flavours, original, spicy and dill pickle and it’s in a nice big 1.75-litre share bottle. And it’s a pretty bottle. It’s not a single-serve, and it is 14 per cent alcohol. So, there is absolutely no extra shot needed of vodka in it. It is made to literally shake and pour on ice.”

In addition to their popular Irish Cream and Eggnog, Minhas Distillery is also launching a Pumpkin Spice Liqueur.

Not to mention the upcoming launch of Artingstall’s Brilliant London Dry Gin which Minhas Distillery created in partnership with producer and director Paul Feig.

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on dragons’ den

**& helping
entrepreneurs**

Minhas’s appearance on Dragon’s Den is more about mentorship and helping other entrepreneurs get started than anything else like celebrity.

“I’ve had many fabulous mentors in my life professionally and personally and many people along the way that have given me guidance...so I strongly believe that my success has been based first in Alberta and in Canada. And then I was able to go around the world, and I think that it’s only fair and right for me to give back to Canadians; they helped me build my company, and I can do the same.”

The entrepreneur is happy to give advice on how to make a success of any new business venture. The key is having something unique to offer—without it, you won’t achieve your goals,

“There has to be something unique. You have to have a value proposition just as every other business does in this world in order to be successful...And then my other piece of advice is you need to start small but dream big.”

Another key attribute that entrepreneurs need to be successful is a grounding in sales. According to Minhas:

“I do believe that sales is a skill that every single entrepreneur must know and must know how to do well. And if you don’t, I can guarantee you won’t make it off the ground. Because it is something that everybody in this day and age needs to know, not only how to sell their product but sell themselves to other companies and tell their story.”

As far as the alcohol industry is concerned, finding the right niche is important, and it’s not always the thing you like to drink yourself,

“First and foremost, make sure that just because you love the taste of gin or you love an IPA, doesn’t mean that you need to go out and create your own. And make sure that there’s actually a business plan there first. And make sure that you have something unique. If you’re just another vodka for the sake of being a vodka. I can bet my money that you’re not going to be very successful.”

It’s no surprise that Minhas finds herself in the top 100 women entrepreneurs in Canada and that she has won a few awards. Not only has she appeared on Dragons’ Den but her story has been told in many publications over the years since she and her brother went into the brewery and distilling business. ♣