

You don't have to hanker for firang crystalware anymore. Sushil 'La Opala' Jhunjhunwala has introduced India's first range of hand-crafted lead crystal. **Shashi Baliga** reports

SUDHARAK OLWE



CRYSTAL CLEAR: S Jhunjhunwala

IT IS the kind of idea that makes you wonder why no one had thought of it before. Why, till now, didn't anyone think of making genuine lead crystal tableware in India, especially since the grey market is stocking and selling everything from the machine-made Cristal d'Arques to exquisite hand-crafted Lalique and Baccarat pieces by the thousands?

Sushil Jhunjhunwala, who has just launched Solitaire, India's first range of hand-crafted 24 per cent lead crystal, has the answer: "Because you need vision and you need the ability to take risks."

He should know. Behind his avuncular exterior lies a canny ability to foresee future markets and a firm belief that he can

play with the best. In 1988, when he launched his La Opala brand of tableware, there was no shortage of skeptics. "Even my own family was not too happy," he reveals. How was he going to sell an entirely new product in the Indian market at the same price as its foreign counterpart? Would the consumer be ready to exchange the lure of 'imported maal' for a locally made product? "I faced some really difficult times in the

first year," Jhunjhunwala admits. "But I was ready to wait." That contradictory combination of risk-taking and patience paid off handsomely - La Opala has been a runaway success, with the company now producing around 8,000 pieces a day.

Pretty much the same questions are brought up as Jhunjhunwala introduces Solitaire. He admits he will have to work hard to educate Indian

MAN IN A GLASSHOUSE

consumers about the finer points of lead crystal and plans to tackle this problem at the dealer level. Plus, he says, "Now we can cash in on the brand equity of La Opala - consumers know that they can expect quality from us."

But quality at what price is the question. Solitaire will be priced between Rs 750 and Rs 900 for a set of six whisky glasses, Rs 260 and Rs 850 for bowls, Rs 225 to Rs 450 for ashtrays, Rs 475 to Rs 850 for vases and Rs 950 for ornate decanters. That puts it at roughly the same level as the imported machine-made crystalware selling in the grey market. How many Indian consumers would know the difference between hand-

crafted and machine-made pieces? Not too many, concedes Jhunjhunwala, as he points out, "A hand-crafted piece bought in the West would cost at least four times as much as Solitaire," he explains, "so my products will really be very competitively priced. I'm hoping that Indians travelling abroad and picking up pieces there will now start buying them in India."

He also envisages at least 25 per cent of his sales to come from hotels and corporate gifting. There is also a buy-back agreement with Doosan Glass Co Ltd of Korea, his collaborators, though the percentage has not been fixed. Doosan is the maker of the Parka brand of crystalware,

which has 40 per cent of the Korean market.

According to Jhunjhunwala, Solitaire will be made available at over 500 outlets across the country. The range will feature classic and contemporary cuts and 30 items to begin with. Later, the company plans to introduce more barware and coloured decoratives, too.

Jhunjhunwala, whose family has been in the glass business for over 70 years, admits that large sales volumes are not quite possible in this premium segment and says he plans to peg production at 2,500 pieces a day.

For the time being, that is, he adds quickly.

