

Postcard from the edge

A CANADIAN SOMMELIER EXPLORES INDIA'S WINE INDUSTRY

Wine isn't the first thing that comes to mind when you think of India. But consider this: most people I talk to abroad are surprised to hear Canada makes wine. So, if anyone can sympathize with Indian wine producers, it's the Canadian wine industry.

With absurdly high taxes on imported wines and a middle class nearly twice the population of Canada, the local industry in India is, in theory, well situated for success.

The heart of India's wine industry is centered. In the state of Maharashtra, the area of Nashik is known as India's Napa Valley, and it's home to 40 of the country's 60 or so wineries. The states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also have significant area under vine. But particularly in Nashik, producers are discovering the potential for cellar-door sales and wine tourism. Initiated by Sula Vineyards, many wineries now offer wine tastings, dining, lodging, music and arts festivals.

The market holds a lot of promise but the challenges are daunting. Alessio Secci, director of Fratelli Wines, explains: "The wine industry is trying hard to spread wine culture in India, but producing wine in India—where the consumption is growing but it is still just a niche—is a great challenge."

Nick Van Aarde, a South African winemaker working with Vallée de Vin, says that past quality issues have deterred locals from supporting their own. "Most Indians would rather drink imported wine if they could afford it."

And then there is the challenge of determining which grapes are best suited to Indian terroir. Most producers are still experimenting and have yet to find their focus. But certain varieties do seem to be emerging as the better candidates: sauvignon blanc, chenin blanc and viognier for whites. Syrah and sangiovese lead the reds.

Indian producers hope to find fans abroad. For people seeking new and interesting regions and producers, Indian wines offer an exotic twist. They also offer great value for money. "We do in fact believe that our wines can meet international quality standards and be appreciated by foreigners," says Secci. "[They] will be surprised to discover the quality of Indian wine."

Some producers are already finding success in foreign markets.

"Our wines are exported to 20 countries and have found a place on many prestigious wine lists around the world," says Cecilia Oldne, head of international business for Sula. "Our sauvignon blanc is available in the Armani Hotel in Dubai and... Daniel Boulud's three-Michelin star restaurant Daniel's listed our chenin blanc." **CB**



Picking grapes in India's Nashik wine region.



Get them

The 2009 Sula Sauvignon Blanc is at the LCBO for \$11.95. The 2008 Sula can be ordered from Kolonaki Group, 416-630-7392, kolonakigroup.com.

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