

India uncorks its finest

Indian winemakers are keen to bring their country's wine to the worldwide arena.



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Guests at Sula Vineyards can stay in its three-bedroom villa after enjoying some fine food and wine.

By: Caroline Eden Special to the Star, Published on Fri Oct 01 2010

NASHIK, INDIA—As well as a good nose for business, Lilo Gurnani is also in possession of a fiendish sense of humour, a vital quality for a man who has invested over 6 crores, around \$1,325,000, of his own money into India's newfangled wine industry.

“I asked a friend how to make millions in the wine industry” he says, pausing for effect, “he told me start with billions and you'll end up with millions!”

I chuckled but his son, Ravi Gurnani, smartly dressed with designer spectacles, looked as though he'd heard the gag before.

The Gurnanis, who own [York Winery](#), are not alone in their quest to bring Indian wine to the worldwide arena. In the bustling, old cotton mills of South Mumbai, Rajeev Samant, a fellow wine trailblazer, runs his business — [Sula Vineyards](#). Belonging to wine's newest new world, he is young, charming, smart and exactly the kind of winemaker who gives wine traditionalists the heebie-jeebies. It was by chance that he ended up in the business when he returned to India after studying engineering at Stanford University in California.

“I came back and my father had 20 acres of land for sale. I said to him, rather than sell it, let me try to work with it. I grew teakwood, roses and mangoes,” he says. “But it was when I exported table grapes to Europe that the idea struck me: If they are good enough to eat, then maybe they would be good enough for wine.”

When asked how the wine scene has evolved in India since he corked his first bottle in 2000, he rejects a

call on his BlackBerry and enthuses: “The market is still small. Over a year we sell about what London polishes off on a good weekend, but it is growing. We predict that every three years or so the market will double. The elite class has grown massively. Before, at parties and social events, wine used to be in the corner. Now, if a decent wine is served it is drunk more than anything else.”

One such example of a good Indian wine is the Sula Rasa Shiraz 2007, winner of a silver medal this year at the prestigious Syrah Du Monde competition in France.

Samant says of the award-winning red: “It was clear that we had an exceptional lot. We produced 700 cases and it is, to date, the best wine to come out of India.”

India is well known for spiritual tourism, beaches and desert escapes. Could winetasting trips be added to the list, I ask?

“The resort at the vineyard, [Beyond](#), is expanding to cope with demand. At the moment there is a three-bedroom villa close to the estate, but in the autumn this year our 20-room hotel will open, which will include a small spa offering wine treatments. Sula attracts thousands of visitors throughout the year, some are international.”

With this, I decided it was time to find out for myself.

The next morning as the 8:20 Pushpak Express pulls out of Mumbai’s chaotic Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station. My fellow passengers are engrossed in newspapers or fast asleep. I, however, am far too excited to doze, and instead busy myself with envisaging luscious vines and the lazy afternoon ahead spent sipping Shiraz.

Then, almost without warning, the monsoon arrives. Raindrops the size of milk tops lash the train windows, a smoggy haze descends ominously over the slums lining the city limits and I realize I could be in for more of a wet weekend than an Indian summer.

When I arrive, just over three hours later, the sun breaks through the clouds, a feeble attempt to shine on Nashik before yet more rain arrives. Dogs dart through the Wild West-style wada houses into courtyards and a pair of scary large rats wobble for shelter under a cart.

“Much rain is coming down, madam,” said the taxi driver with a head wobble.

Nashik is not archetypal wine country — it doesn’t look like it, it doesn’t smell like it and it certainly doesn’t sound like it. Mangoes, guava, onions and tomatoes share the fields with enormous water buffalo, which in the summer months languidly swim in the monsoon-swollen lakes to a soundtrack of frog song. It is tropical, hot and untamed. Yet to wine pioneers such as Rajeev Samant and Ravi and Lilo Gurnani this is the epicentre of the Indian wine revolution. It was here that they, along with a handful of others, saw potential.

Soon enough, however, I sat on a veranda with eight bottles of premium Indian wine laid out in front of me. The chief winemaker at Sula Vineyards, Ajoy Shaw, is taking me through the different labels while simultaneously enlightening me on Indian viticulture.

“Indians do not own corkscrews and prefer to drink spirits as wine is expensive in comparison,” he says. “We are trying to change the way people think about wine here, whilst also showing the West that Indian

wine is now perfectly drinkable. The industry here is still in its infancy — we have to educate as well as sell and produce the wine.”

Quite a challenge in a country with a population of 1.1 billion. But quite the enormous potential, too.

We begin the tasting with a sparkling Sula Brut, which was completely quaffable and perhaps lighter than Champagne. Ajoy tells me that the Japanese are fans of this one and that the market there is keenly buying up magnums.

Moving on to the Sauvignon Blanc, Ajoy helps with the tasting: “Long finish, slightly fruity with hints of bell peppers.” I nod and make a mental note to order a full glass of this one later.

We then sample some blush before carrying swiftly on to the delicious Sula Cabernet Shiraz. With plum and vanilla notes and big but subtle tannins, this was a firm favourite. Lastly, the pièce de résistance — the Rasa Shiraz 2007. We sip it slowly, savouring the taste, and enjoy notes of mint and smoky spice.

Keen to sample some of the competition, I stop to visit the Gurnanis at York Winery, a little way down the road. I try a few whites before moving on to the York Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 — recently commended at the London International Wine Fair. It is a fine wine and the Gurnanis admit winning awards certainly helps to placate the non-believers.

“It’s been a tough journey so far to gain recognition, but we’re firmly in it for the long run,” Lilo says, before adding that he hopes to break even on their investment by 2013.

As night falls, I head to the [Taj Gateway hotel](#) with its elegant service, good local wine list and old colonial design. It dawns on me that Indian wine is not such a new phenomenon. It has been slowly but surely growing organically for well over a decade, developing its own style and refusing to simply copy more established markets. Many grapes have been experimented with and now that the industry is booming, winemakers in cooler parts of India are experimenting, too, with Pinot Noir and other varieties.

Before leaving India, I stop to rest at the elegant [Oberoi Hotel](#) at Mumbai’s Nariman Point. Recently reopened following the terror attacks of 2008, I am met by a gleaming white lobby complemented by a cherry red grand piano where the notes of “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” drift into the whiteness. Sitting close by is 28-year-old sommelier Lindsay Groves, who left her home in Burlington, Ont. to join the group as India’s first foreign female sommelier.

When asked about how diners interact with her, Groves says, “Diners here in Mumbai are not too sure what to make of sommeliers just yet. They take a little time to get used to me hovering.”

We walk over to Vetro, the hotel’s contemporary Italian restaurant, and to the glass-encased wine cellar that holds no less than 1,200 bottles of the finest wines. Groves picks up a 1998 French Cheval Blanc and says, “This is our most expensive wine, it sells for around 104,000 rupees. That’s around \$2,200 U.S.”

Lindsay, who has seven years experience in the industry and first tried Indian wine in London, is clearly keyed up about her new role. She says, “We stock Sula and Grover labels at our Indian restaurant Ziya. The nature of the cuisine there makes me want to add more Indian wine labels — exotic ingredients need versatile wines, fruit-driven styles. It’s the new world wines that work best.”

Caroline Eden is a freelance writer based in London. Her trip was subsidized by Jet Air.

