

Grape fever

The tiny wine industry in India is slowly coming of age as the buzz about its reputation spreads among the cognoscenti.

Chetanya M takes a trip through grape country to discover what's making it sparkle

For a hot country known for its spices and tea, it is difficult to imagine that its tiny wine industry would attract any attention. Even five years back no one spoke of Indian wines or their flavours, and the drink was almost unknown to Indian palettes. But the picture is fast changing. Though only a small number of vineyards produce grapes for wines, their reputation is spreading among the cognoscenti.

The infant Indian winemaking industry

is hoping to get a foothold in the international wine market. Indian wines have begun to find space on the menus of Indian restaurants abroad, there is a buzz among the globe-trotting elite about the French or California wines they taste, and Indian wines have begun to be noticed by masters of wine around the world.

A master of wine, Jancis Robinson, says of the Indian wines she sampled, "None of these wines is of premier cru rank but they are certainly up to good Vin de

Pays status." Another wine critic, Jonathan Ray, rated them between "not so good" to "better than expected" to "way beyond expectations: well structured, with plenty of blackberry flavour and soft tannins" for the 2002 Reserve from Grover Vineyards.

Kapil Grover, CEO, Grover Vineyards, feels vindicated by a recent issue of Decanter magazine, which named his 'La Reserve' as the best red among New World wines. The magazine noted of the La



Reserve, "This unexpectedly good wine is recognisably Cabernet with ripe crushed berry fruit, good tannins and pleasant acidity for current drinking." Grover was jubilant. "It has put Indian wine on the world map," he said.

The moot point is whether such praise will put Indian wines on supermarket shelves in Europe or America. While that may be a long way off Oz Clarke, one of the presenters of the BBC's Food and Drink programme, feels that western wine drinkers are "desperate for new experience". He says, "I think when they see Made in India, they won't say: What a weird idea. They'll say: Fantastic! I haven't tried it. Give me some."

Though the 700,000 cases of wine produced locally are only a drop of total world consumption, and are insignificant compared to around 85 million cases of hard liquor sold in the country, consumption is galloping at a 30 per cent growth rate as the affluent Indian discovers the pleasures of wine. The majority of wine in India is produced by three companies, Grover, Chateau Indage and Sula Vineyards, which aim to reach international standards and markets.

Sula was started by Rajeev Samant, 35, who abandoned a comfortable job in a Silicon Valley software company to pursue his passion for wine at his family farm near Nashik in Maharashtra. He found himself growing grapes on 35 acres of family-owned land, with an investment of \$1.1 million at the risk of being branded weird and maverick. No one ever imagined that there existed a market for wine in India, where drinkers prefer spirit and beer brands.

Though Samant's knowledge of wine was confined to titbits gleaned from his former girlfriend, who hailed from Modesto, California, the risk he took paid off. When California-based wine maker Kerry Damskey saw Sula's first grape harvest, he said "Amazing, comparable to the best grapes in the world." The Sauvignon Blanc that Samant cultivated at Nashik "has a floral intensity, a character found in New Zealand and South Africa," Damskey added. This was music to Samant's ears.

Starting with 4,000 cases five years ago Samant now produces 36,000 cases of wine. "Selling hasn't been a problem. The problem was to produce enough to meet the demand. We have revamped our

production line to meet the supply needs," says Samant. Sula has already exported 7,000 cases to the European Union and the US, mostly to Indian restaurants. Sula's brands are christened Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Champenoise.

One of the earliest Indian wine makers is Grover Vineyard in Bangalore. Kanwal Grover started the 150 acre vineyard in Bangalore in 1988. Grover was in the business of supplying parts for missiles. This required frequent travelling to France. It was from France his association with wine began.

In 1996 Veuve Cliquot took a stake in Grover Vineyard. By that time the world renowned wine expert, Michel Rolland, came down to Bangalore to offer his know-how to Grover. "We are passionate about wine," said Kapil Grover, a director of the company. He says his father was adamant on quality. Before opening the winery, Kanwal Grover had experimented for six years with different locations in India to find the ideal soil and weather, where quality grapes could grow. He also tried out 35 different varieties of grapes before he settled down on his vineyards planting mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Clairette.

With Rolland's assistance, Grover's made a more complex and oakier Cabernet Sauvignon — La Reserve — while its Rose

International brands are now showcased on Indian shelves and luxury hotels and restaurants have started serving vintage brands.

Dry and Blancs de Clairette are light, refreshing wines comparable to the best in the world. So when the wine experts come down to his vineyard, they often comment that Grover's had created a little corner of France in Bangalore.

Shamrao Chougule founded his wine business, Chateau Indage, in the mid-80s. A part of the \$25 million Indage group, it is the largest wine producer in India with 42 brands under its umbrella, controlling half of the domestic wine market. Its vineyards are at Narayangaon in Maharashtra, off Pune. The company produces a rich variety of red, white and sparkling wines. Sources



FLORAL INTENSITY WITH A CHARACTER OF NEW ZEALAND: Sula's founder, Rajeev Samant



PASSIONATE ABOUT WINE: Kapil Grover, CEO, Grover Vineyards

say it took nearly two years and 3,000 pages of study by Champagne Technologies of France to decide upon Narayangaon nestled in the surroundings of the Sahayadri valley as the idyllic setting for a world class winery and vineyards.

The detailed study of soil, climatic conditions, rainfall and topography was made to produce grapes that matched the wine grapes of France such as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Shiraz and Malbec. The company has also pioneered the use of ancient Indian varieties such as Arkesaham and Arkavati grapes along with Thompson seedless and Bangalore Purple.

The lime rich and Chalky soil married to a controlled macro climate in the Sahayadri valley struck a perfect balance for cultivation of the right variety of grapes. Champagne Indage produces sparkling and still wines from two state-of-the-art, automated wineries. With a bottling capacity of 6,000 bottles an hour, all stages of production use the latest technology for Methode Traditionelle sparkling wines with the accent on quality standards.

Owing to the removal of restrictions on

the import of wine four years ago, international brands can now be showcased on Indian shelves. Moet Hennessy and Veuve Cliquot are among those who set up shop in India, anticipating a gradual growth in the market. Simultaneously, that luxury hotels and restaurants started including international wine brands on their menu.

In those early days, the primary obstacle that stood in the way of wine majors was that India did not follow a tradition of drinking wine. But then, as a marketing executive of Veuve Cliquot puts it, "Nobody drank wine in Australia 20 years ago. Wine consumption is a habit that takes root in a slow and steady manner. There is no reason to believe that India is an exception to the rule."

Wine tasting sessions at up-market restaurants have helped acquaint Indians with the nuanced flavours of wines. Of these, some sessions were presided over by people like the world's leading wine taster Hugh Johnson. International and domestic wine brands have suddenly become acceptable in Indian bars and the number of people discussing the nuances of French, Italian, South African, Californian and South American wines has increased at high-profile parties. For the first time, Indian wine companies

Grover Vineyards experimented for six years with different locations in India to find the ideal soil where quality grapes could grow.

are figuring in the list of invitees at major world wine exhibitions including Vinitaly at Verona, Italy.

India's wine market is emerging. Past lessons from wine markets across the world suggest that the start is always slow. Growth in consumption was slow in Australia, the US and South American countries, a decade and half ago.

Projections suggest that the Indian wine market, despite its low volume, will go places. One problem at present is the high price consumers have to pay. Imported wines cost between \$18 and \$65 a bottle, owing to high duties. Once duties are lowered consumption will go up.

Indian wine producers are trying to meet the challenge. Indage group has brought in a series of wine priced at \$2.25 to \$2.65. According to them future of wine in India largely depend on its ability to become a mass consumption product for which prices have to come down. Now, India's two largest spirit and beer companies, United Breweries and Shaw Wallace, are planning to launch their own wine portfolios and may even invest in vineyards.

There are also reports that some foreign wine companies are on the lookout for vineyards near Nashik — now known as the Mecca of Indian wine. The geographic location is ideal for making it a hub for export to other countries. Land prices around Nashik have more than doubled during the last couple of years as more entrepreneurs explore the business possibilities of setting up their own vineyards. This development, say experts, is an indication that the Indian wine industry has truly come of age. 🍷

On the Web

Sula Vineyards: www.sulawines.com
Chateau Indage: www.indagegroup.com