

Indo Vino Nouveau
 By HUGO RESTALL
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NASHIK, INDIA -- The tasting room looks out over rows of vines stretching out toward the mountains. Cool breezes waft across the balcony as the winemaker pours a glass of his reserve Shiraz. A sip reveals a mellow wine with lots of red fruit and just enough tannin to allow it to continue developing for several years. After buying a case of the wine and stashing it in the car boot, it's off to the next winery down the road.

It could be a tour of California's Napa Valley -- except that the pourer and other customers are speaking Marathi, the language of India's Maharashtra state. This idyllic scene is set in the town of Nashik, about four hours' drive northeast of Mumbai, India. In the space of a few years it has become a thriving wine region that is starting to attract tourists and develop well-known labels. And for Indians, who have long preferred whisky as their main tippie, wine is suddenly the trendy drink.

Talk to wine experts and many still express skepticism that drinkable wine can be made in India, let alone vintages worthy of being served in fine restaurants. Rajeev Samant, a software engineer with Oracle in Silicon Valley, is proving them wrong. A decade ago, he decided to return to his native India to set up Sula Vineyards. This year his winery is bringing in its eighth harvest, and is expected to produce 1.2 million bottles of wine.



Ajoy Shaw, Sula Vineyards' head winemaker.

Around the world, the best wines usually come from higher latitudes, at least 35 degrees from the equator. Nashik sits at just 20 degrees north. So how is it possible to produce sophisticated wines in such a hot climate?

The secret is simple: Grow the grapes in the winter. Nashik has long been famous for its table grapes, and the local farmers know how to prune the vines a second time ahead of the summer monsoon so that they are dormant through the hottest period of the year. Then from October to March, the warm afternoons and cool nights approximate the climate of, say, the Rhone in summer. The strong sun brings up the sugar levels, but a chill down to about 7 degrees Celsius in the evening brings out the subtler flavors of a wine made in a temperate region.

True, some adjustments have to be made. The vines are grown high and spread out, to help dissipate heat, and with more leaf canopy. At Sula, the grapes are pruned so there are no more than two bunches on each fruiting cane. And the soil needs to be sloping so that there is excellent drainage during the monsoon, lest the roots get waterlogged.

However, the unusual schedule has brought a major advantage to the nascent industry: As the new wineries are doing the critical work of harvesting and fermentation in an unusual season, winemakers from elsewhere have the time to come and supervise. Some highly respected consultants are jetting in during the down time at their own vineyards to lend a hand in Nashik's rise.

That's not to say that making great wine in Nashik is going to be easy. The vineyards are still experimenting with different varieties and methods to see what works best. But that is also part of the attraction for Ajoy Shaw, Sula's chief winemaker. Trained as a microbiologist at nearby Pune University, he joined Sula soon after its founding, and has been gaining experience in Napa and Bordeaux, as well as at home.

Some uptight connoisseurs will pick faults with Nashik wines, since the whites tend to be quite sweet and the reds lack tannin and are meant to be drunk right away. That's intentional -- Indians are accustomed to a sweet aperitif before dinner. If they try switching to wine and find it too dry or puckery, it might scare them off wine drinking for good. "We wanted our wines to be mellow, supple and easy to drink, not something full or very heavy or overly tannic," Mr. Shaw says.

However, there could soon be room in the market for more sophisticated wines as tastes and vineyards mature. Already, Indians are graduating from Chenin Blancs to Sauvignon Blancs, and from red Zinfandel to Cabernet Sauvignon. Renaissance Wines, which is on its second harvest, has planted some Pinot Noir, Merlot and Chardonnay which should start producing next year. Vintage Wines is already producing a Chardonnay. And Sula is planting Rhone varietals like Roussanne, Grenache and Viognier.

In some ways, the Nashik vineyards have more control over the sugar and acid levels in their grapes at harvest than elsewhere. The threat of rain sometimes forces winemakers in Europe to bring in the grapes early. Here the wineries can time the picking according to the lab results.

But first they have to judge when to kick off the start of the growing season in September with a first pruning. Mr. Shaw says it took Sula three or four years to get this right. This year, the summer monsoon ran long, shortening the growing season. Then rains plus heat led to shrivelling of the grapes before they were harvested. While this should still be a successful year, all the vineyards are still mastering the local conditions.

Given domestic demand is growing at about 30% per year, the temptation might be to take the low road and churn out cheap wines. However, a surprising number of vineyards are making intelligent choices about controlling the amount of sugar in the grapes, and therefore alcohol in the wines. For instance, Sula is shooting for 13% to 14% alcohol in their red wines, and 12% to 13% for the whites.

Sula wines are already available in many other countries, often in Indian restaurants. But since a tariff of 264% on imports gives India's own wines such a substantial price advantage at home, there is little need to export. Indeed, the foreigners are coming to Nashik -- global liquor giant Seagram started producing wine here this year.

So does Nashik have a shot at becoming another Napa? Certainly it is an emerging destination for wine buffs. At Sula, about 200 people visit every weekend, and they sell 200 cases of wine per month in their tasting room. At Renaissance Winery, Director of Business Development Prashant Thanawala is planning a restaurant and an area for those who don't want to stay in a hotel to camp out close to nature. Affluent Indians are bored with five-star hotel getaways, he says. They are discovering that wine is not only healthy and hip, it can also be fun.

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