

Tippling Point

The taste for wine hasn't quite caught on yet with Indian tipplers. Winemakers are leaving no grape uncrushed to remedy this 'gastronomic aberration', finds **Aaron Rodrigues**

The peak season for wine tourism might have just got over, but tourists from within and outside the country, which include a few French viticulturists, South American wine-tasters and appreciative Australians, are still flocking to vineyards to get a feel of the Indian wine-tasting and harvesting ritual. Wine tourism in the country has certainly come of age and is now one of the more

successful strategies winemakers are using to propagate the drink. Ironically, this comes at a time when the oldest and largest player, Indage Vintners, is facing liquidation and the industry, as a whole, is staring at large unsold stocks—leaving many grape farmers in the lurch.

The number of wine tourists visiting Sula Wines, a Nashik-based winery, during weekends has increased from a mere 100-odd

in 2006-07 to 500-700 in 2008-09; on weekdays, the number has jumped to 250 from 50, says the company's vice-president Pradeep Pachpatil. This may have a little to do with better connectivity between Mumbai and Nashik, according to Sancia Sequeira, a tour guide from The Grape Escape. The Mumbai-Nashik road was considered a difficult drive about a decade ago but has now become a pleasant



▶ approach to the wine capital.

“Winemakers are making their presence known by having these wine-tasting events and wine bars,” says Ms Sequeira, adding that when she first began organising these events, there would be barely 20 tourists—and only on weekends; this number has steadily increased to 500 this year.

Sula may be the most visited, but the impact of wine tourism can clearly be seen in other wineries in the vicinity. Near Sula is York, a new winery. Just off the Mumbai-Nashik highway are wineries like Indus, Zampa and Vallonee which are laying out the red carpet for tourists.

Away from the national capital for wines, Four Seasons, a wine subsidiary owned by Vijay Mallya’s

United Spirits, has shown interest in entering the wine tourism space by April-end. It has set up a hotel at its winery in Baramati, Maharashtra.

Sula Wines also plans to bolster

its tourism strategy by allowing tourists to make their own wines. “Soon, we will introduce a concept wherein you can make your own wine—you choose the vineyards and come on a specific day for picking the grapes and preparing your own wine. We will take care of your wine and, whenever you want, we will bottle and ship it,” Mr Pachpatil adds.

Winemakers love talking about the health advantages of drinking wine. Give them a minute and they will tell you about the benefits to your lung and heart (and blood vessels in the elderly). This has made them go the whole hog in touting the health benefits at their events and festivals. According to Mr Pachpatil, communicating the health benefits is a key part of the ▶▶

Wine Shine

■ **Vintners are promoting wine tourism to push up sales**

■ **Some even allow tourists to make their own wine**

■ **Marketing spiel includes touting the health benefits of wine drinking**



▶ strategy to promote the product. "People want to know about wines and also the benefits of drinking wine," says Violet D'souza, owner and director of Indus Wines.

She is even quicker to remind everyone of the French Paradox. The French consume a lot of red meat, but they also consume a lot of wine which is supposed to keep them healthy. Recently, at a wine exhibition, the health benefits of wine were listed on a banner in Marathi for local farmers.

Grape skin, especially of red grapes, contains a high concentration of resveratrol, a non-flavonoid phenolic compound found in wine. Resveratrol is a cancer preventative agent; it protects the body's cells, the nervous and cardiovascular systems and also reduces cholesterol levels. To get the required health benefits from wine, experts recommend drinking 180ml of red wine daily. However, recent studies conducted by various scientific institutions have shown that moderate consumption of beer has the same beneficial attributes that wine has.

Besides, wine is still considered an elite drink. Wine-drinking makes up just 1% of total alcohol consumption. However, the younger generation seems to be taking a fancy to wine and sales are picking up. According to Dublin-based research firm, Research and Markets, India has emerged as one of the fastest growing markets for wine. Its latest report forecasts that domestic wine consumption will grow at 25%-30% annually between 2009 and 2012.

However, the market has not panned out as expected by winemakers. The global recession of 2008-09 has left them saddled with huge unsold inventories and forced them to drop prices. "The market itself has forced these conditions

(upon winemakers). The downturn resulted in a slowdown in the sales of wine at the Rs400+ level and pulled down demand; supply outstripped demand," says Sula Wines owner and founder, Rajeev Samant. He also believes that prices will drop over the next three or four years. "In fact, you're going to see more and more wine available at, say, below Rs200 a bottle, at which price it will become very affordable for a lot of people," he said. Mr Samant adds that winemakers now have the expertise to allow them to generate economies of scale to produce wine at lower prices.

Even the packaging has unmistakably Indian elements. Indus Wines has a lotus for its logo, while Sula Wines has a smiley sun; Mandala Valley has a peacock. "If you pitch it (a wine) in a Brand India context, I am sure the wine will sell. We have to be proud of our heritage," says Abhijeet Kabir, co-founder, Indus Wines. While packaging of wines has become more India-centric, marketing strategies have also become more aggressive, according to a Wine Market report dated 21 August 2008. They now come in half-bottle sizes and with screw caps that do away with the bother of uncorking the bottle. Even the taste of wines has been modified to suit the Indian

palate.

More people are going in for red wine over white. Nashik had originally become famous for its white wines. However, better red wines are now entering the market. Even rosé wine has made its debut and is mainly targeted at women. "Red wine is for men and rosé is for women," says Mr Kabir.

However, even with so much effort to popularise wine-drinking, producers are still facing problems. Winemaking is a capital-intensive business. "For every extra litre you sell in one year, you have to set up 1.25 (times) capacity the previous year. Therefore, it's natural that prices are going to be up," Mr Samant said.

This will also affect other potential players. After Sula's success, several farmers (who were selling the grapes) tried entering the wine-making business but lacked the know-how, so their products were not up to the mark. One big problem that the industry faces is the heavy tax structure. According to Mr Samant, in Maharashtra or Delhi, both large wine-consuming states, the tax component on a bottle that retails at Rs450, is almost Rs200. However, the industry remains upbeat. "I would say every year, more people are drinking wine and prices are coming down," says Mr Samant.

Mr Kabir points out that a comprehensive effort is needed from farmers, government agencies, media and the industry to make the wine business competitive. "No revolution happens overnight," he says. ■

