

Indian Wine Academy

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Interview: A Day with Dhuru of D'Ori in Dindori

Chateau d'Ori is one of the new wine producers of India in Dindori, near Nashik. To get a glimpse of what was inside the vineyards and the minds of its Chairman, Ranjit Dhuru, Subhash Arora took time out recently to spend a couple of days with him.



Ranjit Dhuru with the vineyard and guest house in the background

Waiting for Dhuru at the Mumbai airport that fateful morning, I glanced at TV18 blasting away the Breaking News. Stock market bulls had been crushed with the BSE going South 2035 points. The other headline news was about 38 bus passengers who had died near Nashik in a crash. The one-hour delay caused by the late departure of Kingfisher Airlines flight in Delhi due to the airport closure because of Republic Day rehearsals was a minor irritant, in front of this depressing news.

I was waiting for Dhuru to pick me up to go to Nashik. What a day of crushes and crashes I had chosen to visit his vineyards and winery at Dindori, in the 'wine

capital', I thought to myself!

Before I could reflect on the millions I would have lost (hopefully on paper) during the morning flight of an hour and fifty minutes, Ranjit Dhuru arrived in his Rs. 55 lakh (\$140,000) beautiful, blue Touareg SUV from Volkswagen and I felt slightly reassured. Proud of his acquisition, he did confess to me having almost bought a Tata Safari because of its performance. He had chanced across the Touareg which was a bit expensive (about 6 times!) but had stolen his heart and he had bought it a couple of years ago.

The journey to Nashik takes around 3.5 hours-at least on paper. The endless city traffic in Mumbai can add an hour or two-or three, to that time. Ranjit did seem excited about the fact that Laloo Yadav (our railway minister of Harvard fame) was proposing a TGV style train to Nashik, which would cut down the travel time to an unbelievable 1.5 hours. Add 2 hours to reach the station from the airport and you would get a clearer picture of Mumbai traffic.

Our journey was very pleasant with Ranjit sharing his thoughts about the Sauvignon Blanc crush which might be a few days earlier than the usual Feb beginning or the middle. He was being disturbed perennially by phone calls- the non-wine world around him seemed to be more concerned with the stock market crash, right now.

Ranjit Dhuru is a lawyer by profession and the Chairman of a well-known public limited and traded IT company, Aftak, which he founded in 1986 and took to \$100 million size, employing over a thousand employees, the majority being in their working office in Pune. The news had apparently permeated that his stock had also gone southwards along with BSE and was making fund managers across the globe who had holdings in his company rather nervous. But he was cheerful enough to talk of his passion – Wine and the indigenous production.



'Don't worry, the crash is temporary' says Dhuru to an investor in his IT company.

Bordeaux Snob

To the un-initiated, Ranjit might come across as a Bordeaux snob. Right from the name of his import label-Chateau d'Ori to his imported wines, his personal taste of wines and his wine purchases and collections- he has been a serious En Primeur buyer his preference for Bordeaux sticks out like a sore thumb.

He even chose a French winemaker of Greek descent, Anthony Fakorellis from Bordeaux when he decided to give shape to his passion and decided to set up a winery and convert land he had bought into vineyards, four years ago.

He took this time to import and sell 8 labels of wine, all from Bordeaux left and the right banks including Graves, Pauillac, St. Emilion and Pomerol. It is no mean achievement that during the last 4 years he carved a niche of about 5000 cases market, especially as he concentrated on Maharashtra and primarily the Mumbai market.

He got slightly disturbed when I asked him why he had chosen a typically Bordeaux name for his label and winery. 'What is wrong in that?' he retorted. 'Aren't we addressing grapes like Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon by their French names? Besides, there are so many wineries in the world who use French names.'

The genesis

It is not that Ranjit is blindly in love with Bordeaux or France. 'During the course of business we had bought an IT company in Munich and I used to travel a lot to Europe and the US on business and where I started enjoying wines,' he told me. He also started visiting several wineries. It really hit him during a visit to Opus One winery in Napa valley when the winemaker proudly told him that Mondavi had a tie up with Rothschild in Bordeaux to make this excellent wine.

He reasoned, if even Mondavi would go thousands of miles to Bordeaux to make a quality wine, why not go to the basic source. He started frequenting it and went to several tastings for En Primeur too. In the process, he collected wines like Angelus, d'Yquem, Cheval Blanc, Pontet Canet, Domaine de Chevalier.

During his visits, he had met a French negociant, Ivan Cruse, who helped him along and rest is history.

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Chateau OK, but why d'Ori



Dhuru with his viticulturist- Nera and Ori hills in the background

Appreciating his passion for Bordeaux I asked him why he had chosen the name d'Ori (in government records his winery is listed under D as *Dori Winery* in the vernacular). 'When you see the vineyards you will know, why. Our land is adjoining twin hills of Nera and Ori-in fact there is a small temple also known as Nera temple. So we chose d'Ori as our name. It does make perfect sense...

Especially, after seeing the vineyard location. I could visualise a wine resort (like an agriturismo in Italy). The small mountains adjoining the vineyard would make for lovely walks and if he could lay his hands on a few acres, he could use them to make permanent cottages, with all the modern amenities, making it a great vacation place on the vineyards.

Till then, he has to live with the 430 acres he has bought (which must have appreciated about 370% since he bought the land). 'But you must appreciate the conversion cost-it was a barren piece of land'. 'The conversion includes 3 man made lakes- it is my theory and my winemaker's view that water body helps the quality of grapes,' he adds. With a 100 acre of land already under cultivation, including 18 acres of high density Merlot vineyards, the biggest in India, he seems to be on a good turf, for now.

Quality is the key

Quality and an eye for detail is another thing that impressed me about Ranjit. 'Most wineries in this area claim to make the best wine in the very early years of their vines. I believe they have to be 3-4 years old before we can get good enough fruit for wines.

That's the reason Ranjit chose to sell off the grapes for the first 3-4 vintages. 'In fact, the first real fruit was not of any good quality. But a winery in the area insisted on buying them, so we sold them. But I believe we are ready only now to use our own grapes for the wine.'

Winery

The winery, located in the middle of nowhere looks straight from the James Bond movie, Dr. No. Made as a beautiful round structure, as much underground as over it, the winery is still undergoing finishing touches. When it is fully ready, it will be a state-of-the-art building with the 'latest concept in Bordeaux, of keeping the tanks in concentric circles in a circular structure, so that with the gentry's cranes, the movement is minimal and all under one roof.



Winery under completion

Use of computers and the latest gadgetry are on the suggested shopping list of Fakorellis who has helped design the *Dori Winery* will make it the preferred choice for many a student interested in wine making.

The 45000 sq ft winery has burnt a hole worth Rs.12 crores in the pockets of partners who are from the family only. Another 4 crores will be spent by the time the whole equipment sets in, adds Dhuru. 'We have installed the best possible, imported equipment from Italy and France- only the tanks are from here only.

'We are using the imported bottles from Piramals, Srilanka.' The top two wines are bottled in St. Gobin 'Bordeaux Emotion'- dark and taller bottles which I later found being referred to as Bordeaux Europe bottles in Italy.

Our Own Style

Ranjit believes in doing things in his own style. 'We want to expand our import portfolio too. We are looking at Burgundy and Loire Valley too. I would also like to add Champagne. But I want to make sure it can sell for under Rs. 1200-1300 in India.

Selling in India -yes, but it is highly unlikely that he would be able to do so in Maharashtra with the 200% excise duty imposed on the imported wines. He is very much against this imposition. Unless they encourage imported wines how can our Indian wines compete and compare the quality. I wish they would withdraw this ridiculous duty and let us compete against the imported wines.

'In the end we shall evolve and will come out with our own style keeping Indian conditions in mind,' he adds.

Wines of Chateau d'Ori



Guest House-Temporary Tasting Room

Wine bottles of all the current 5 labels that were released a month ago were ready for tasting when we reached the guest house which Ranjit frequents every Friday to Sunday-other days he co-ordinates the activities of his sales team which occupies a whole floor in the Aftek office in Mumbai.

First thing that impresses is the colour, the shape of the bottles and the labels-very contemporary looking. 'I have had them designed by a Spanish artist Cristina Alba, trained in Italy but living in Bordeaux. In fact she even did our logo.'

Undoubtedly, his bottles have some of the best labels in town, though you may not find them as photogenic on their website. I am also not sure why he decided to use the clear, transparent bottles for both the entry level Viva made from Chenin and the higher ended Sauvignon. Also there does not seem to be a common theme running through the labels, reflecting the individualistic style of all five of them.

Viva, as the name suggests is quite vivacious. Medium bodied, perfumed with tropical aromas, less acidic and pleasantly dry, it is a simple and decent wine, priced reasonably at Rs.380, at even a lower per gm alcohol cost for the 14.5% volume.

Ranjit plans the red version too for the next vintage.

Sauvignon Blanc was fresh and fruity; the fruit layered with too much of oak which Ranjit told me would be reduced in the next vintage. It really reminded me of California Fume Blanc and I did suggest to him that perhaps he should have two labels- one Sauvignon without any wood and the second Fume for those who love their oak in wine-this way he could kill two with one grape. Otherwise, it is a very pleasant wine.

Merlot was typical-luscious, soft and easy till you realise that there has not been much of merlot produced in India so far. Ranjit says theirs is the biggest plantation of Merlot in India. Like the dental capabilities of numerous tooth pastes, it is difficult to check the veracity of such claim, but he does seem to have succeeded in getting the best out of the fruit.. It is priced the same as the Sauvignon-at Rs. 460.

Cabernet Merlot (Rs. 550) and **Cabernet Shiraz** (Rs.650) are the two blends which have an aging potential and once he replaces the oak chips he has used (where else would you find such honest admissions?) this year. With oak barrels he has planned for the future vintages, Ranjit should be all set to sell some real fine premium wine which might even help him replace his Touareg SUV in a few years! My only advice and hope would be that he keeps the alcohol levels as low as he can- certainly not more than 14%. He would need to keep the pressure



Grapes of Dindori- d'Ori vineyards Of Dhuru

on the winemaker to try out and bring the alcohol down without sacrificing the flavours. His nephew Kailash Dhuru, the resident winemaker who accompanied us on the trip, will certainly have this variable to worry about.

Both these wines were a great match for the kebabs we had picked up from the Taj, on our way to the guest house, though I personally felt that the Cab-Shiraz needed a couple of months more in the bottle before being let loose on the wine drinkers.

Production and Exports

At only 90,000 bottles produced, the first vintage 2007 can be truly described as an experimental vintage for Dhuru of D'Ori in Dindori (the name of the village he suspects, has been named after the 'hill' Ori). Next year with 2008 planned production of 360,000 bottles (adding 30,000 cases to the expected production of over 900,000 cases of Indian wines), the numbers may still be small in the whole scenario, but Ranjit is not a man in hurry.

Would he be looking at exports? 'Eventually, yes- when we can still raise a bar or two in our quality. But we first want to enter the Delhi market and Goa where we should be very soon. We are already spreading in Maharashtra with 60% being in Mumbai alone,' says Dhuru.

Riding back to Mumbai, giving about 4.5 hours of 'flying' time including some time saved on this beautiful newly constructed 'bypass' of the *Ghats*, Ranjit makes it to the suburb Powai with more than an hour to spare. 'We are lucky there has not been much of traffic on Mumbai-Nashik road which can be terrible on some days.'

Perhaps, Ranjit said it too soon. It took us an hour and fifty minutes from Powai to the Airport-exactly the time it takes to fly from Mumbai to Delhi!

Did I mention... that I missed my flight! And that the stock market had crashed the second day too!