

## Besotted by Bordeaux

Ranjit Dhuru is passionate about the great wines of Bordeaux which is the style he produces exclusively at Château D'Ori, his winery in Nashik. **Brinda Gill** finds out how his wine passion developed

**V**ineyards in other countries may be interesting and exciting, but Bordeaux exudes a completely different romance. Lush vineyards stretch as far as the horizon, charming châteaux dot the countryside and the terroir is tangible," says Ranjit Dhuru, chairman and CEO, D'Ori Winery Pvt Ltd.

A lawyer by education and technocrat by profession, Dhuru's work took him to the US, Europe and Japan in the 1980s where he found business dinners invariably focused on wine more than software. "My first experience of the wine culture was at Napa Valley. I was absolutely fascinated by the vineyards and the art of wine making," he says.

But it was Bordeaux that impressed him most. Dhuru was charmed by the wines and ethos of Bordeaux. "Bordeaux is the single largest fine wine producing region in the world and it is truly outstanding. I guess I am a Bordeaux-centric person!" he says. And so it was that in the 90s when Dhuru thought of producing wine grapes, he quite naturally turned to Bordeaux for inspiration. "If vineyards in California seek consultants from Bordeaux when they wish to enhance their quality, then what better option could there be?"

Dhuru set up Château d'Ori on the same business principles as his software firm, Aftak Ltd. while incorporating the best viticultural and winery practices of Bordeaux.

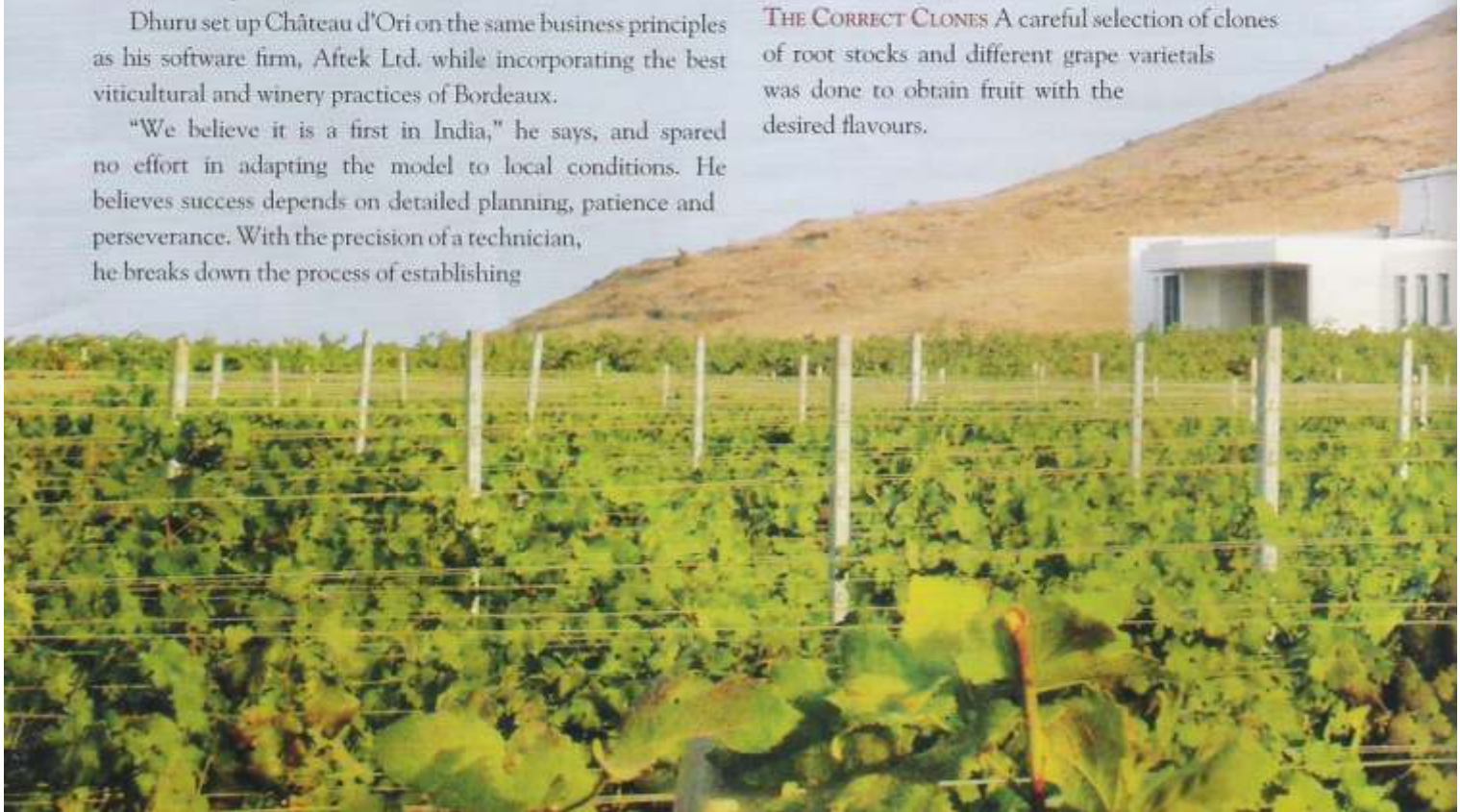
"We believe it is a first in India," he says, and spared no effort in adapting the model to local conditions. He believes success depends on detailed planning, patience and perseverance. With the precision of a technician, he breaks down the process of establishing

a successful wine estate into specific factors: selecting the right terroir; selecting the right clones of grape saplings, the best nursery and wine maker; adapting the most suitable style of planting; designing a world-class winery; and getting the marketing in place well in time.

**ADVANTAGE TERROIR** Familiar with Nashik since his childhood, Dhuru studied the terroir and aspects of different sites before procuring 100 acres in 1998 at the base of the twin hills of Nhera-Ori in Dindori. The top soil of the chosen site was very good and it had never been cultivated. The soil was loosened by mechanical means and the boulders removed, but not the fine stones. Dhuru believes in the Bordeaux philosophy of poor soil producing good vines by forcing the roots to go deep into the ground in search of nutrients and moisture, resulting in a smaller crop but one with concentrated flavours.

"As the wine is only as good as the grape, which in turn is as good as the soil in which it grows, the character of the soil must be suited to the vines," he emphasizes. Château d'Ori is now undertaking the development of another 300 acres of vineyards across the twin hills, which will be ready by 2010.

**THE CORRECT CLONES** A careful selection of clones of root stocks and different grape varieties was done to obtain fruit with the desired flavours.



"Cabernet Sauvignon has almost 300 clones so it is important to get the right clone for the best quality of fruit and hardy plants. With inexpensive plants," Dhuru notes, "the mortality rate can be very high." The clones procured for the estate were grafted on Bangalore dog ridge and other root stock depending on the soil structure. The root stock was allowed one year to grow before grafting and another two years for the plants to flourish before pruning.

Traditionally vines in India grow in a Y-shape. Each vine grows straight to a height of 1.5 m (5 ft) and then branches out another 1.5 m. An acre or a 4,000 sq m plot can only support 970 plants. This method of planting is better suited for table grapes as farmers look for size and pulp rather than juice which is the requirement of wine grapes. There tends to be a trade off between economic and viticultural benefits.

**C**hâteau d'Ori follows the double cordon or curtain style of planting where the stem is pruned at about 60 to 80 cms (about 2 ft to 2.6 ft). The trellises are allowed to grow vertically and are locked into a wire arrangement giving the appearance of a hedge. The vines are healthier, easier to spray with pesticides (if required), there is uniform maturing of fruit and about 2,200 plants can be grown in a four square metre plot but only two kilograms per plant or about five tons of grapes per acre are obtained. Says Dhuru, "Inducing the plant to produce a higher yield affects the health

of the plant as well as the quality of the fruit in terms of flavour, sugar and acidity, all of which are essential for good wine."

The vines are planted in a north-south direction exposing them to optimum sunlight which makes for better tannins in red wine grapes. Canopy management with about 15 to 18 leaves for each bunch of grapes prevents damage from excessive sunlight. With this method the vines can last about 50 years. Further, as the yield is low the vines are not stressed and with no additives there is a balance between viticultural and economic concerns. The first crop of Château d'Ori's newly planted saplings were prematurely pruned to strengthen the vines and get a better quality harvest the following year.

The vines are pruned twice each year. The first pruning is carried out soon after the annual harvest, and the second in September/October. Leaves start sprouting within days of the pruning. Pruning determines the quantity and quality of yield. New grafts are generally planted between November and February. The grapes mature and are ready for harvesting about 120 days after the second pruning.

**STATE-OF-THE-ART WINERY** The grapes are processed and wine produced at a state-of-the-art 4,200 sq m (45,000 sq ft) circular winery cut into the hillside. There is an adjoining basement cellar that has a north-south direction so that the temperatures stay low. The winery has a fully automated bottling plant. The winery presently has 36 stainless steel tanks (on completion there will be 72 tanks) that are placed in clusters of four. The



Chateau d'Ori wine estate with its circular winery and cellar cut into the hillside



Château d' Ori produces five different wines each with its own distinctive label

took place six years later when Dhuru felt the grapes were right for winemaking. Château d' Ori entered the market with its own wines in 2007 with a production of 85,000 litres. The 2008 production is pegged at 300,000 litres.

Though oak chips were used in 2007 during maturation for some wines, from the current vintage select wines will be matured in oak barrels. Inspired by the famous Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc wines of Bordeaux, Château d' Ori produces Cabernet-Merlot, Viva (from

tanks vary in size between 10,000 and 15,000 litres. Dhuru says this size is good to work with. He feels that smaller tanks offer greater opportunity to experiment.

"Wine is a living organism," he adds, "and should not be stressed. As pumping stresses the wine which makes it lose its character and lead to oxidation, we have minimized pumping during the production process and have instead incorporated gravity flow to move wine."

**W**ith the vineyards and winery taking shape, it was time to find the right wine consultant. Once again, the focus was on employing a winemaker who had worked at vineyards in Bordeaux. Michel Rolland recommended his protégé Athanase Fakorellis, who has over 25 years of experience in wine-making and is a consultant to over 65 wineries in the Bordeaux, Burgundy and Cahors regions. Fakorellis travelled to Nashik, saw the vineyards, said yes, and the Bordeaux style wine-making process was soon underway.

A production engineer by training, Dhuru's nephew, Kailash Dhuru is the resident winemaker and oversees the day-to-day operations of the winery. Kailash learnt wine making the French way in Bordeaux which included harvesting and sorting the right type of berries, pressing, fermentation, maceration, maintaining equipment, hygiene and cleanliness and various other oenology processes which have been implemented at the winery.

**WINE VARIETIES** The grapes from the first harvest in 2000 were sold and not used in the winery. The first crush only

Chenin Blanc grapes), Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet-Syrah wine. It also has a 100% Merlot with soft, rounded tannins that pairs well with all types of Indian tandoori food and, according to Dhuru, is in the best tradition of two famous appellation wineries of St. Emilion and Pomerol in Bordeaux.

"In our Cabernet-Merlot blend, produced in the tapestry style of Bordeaux, the vigour and strong tannins come from cabernet, which gives it strength and backbone. This, combined with the softness, suppleness and elegance of Merlot, gives a succulent and smooth wine with a hint of oak that lingers on the palate. There is a lot of fruit and a bit of dryness that you can taste on the tongue." Dhuru adds that these wines age well up to four years and are best cellared before drinking.

The Cabernet-Syrah with balanced flavours of both grape varieties also bottle-ages well. "The wine is aromatic with intense, spicy notes and high-colour extraction but needs to



Fully automated bottling plant with all the wines Estate bottled

breathe after opening," Dhuru says. And just as the premium dry white wines of Bordeaux are oak-aged, so is Château d'Ori's crisp and refreshing Sauvignon Blanc, also called Fumé Blanc. The Cabernet-Merlot and Cabernet-Syrah are bottled in tall heavy St. Gobain bottles. And corks rather than screw caps are the preferred closure. As Dhuru explains, "It is not a question of whether corks are good or bad; it is simply a matter of experience and liking. I may be old-fashioned, but just like one wouldn't go to a French restaurant and order a hamburger, so I wouldn't want wine served from a screwcap bottle in a fine dining restaurant. Perhaps when it comes to our less expensive wines, I may use screw caps, but not for the best wines."

With a non-negotiable emphasis on quality grapes and a limited yield from the vines, Chateau d'Ori only produces wines from grapes grown in their own vineyards. What's more, as the demand for Château d'Ori wines increases, Dhuru wants to ensure that every bottle of wine produced will continue to be marked "Estate Bottled".

**BENCHMARKING AGAINST THE BEST** Even as the Château d'Ori vineyard and winery were taking shape, Dhuru started importing and marketing eight AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) wines from Bordeaux in 2004. This was to get marketing and sales in place for the time Château d'Ori launched its own wines. These wines included a Bordeaux Superior, a Médoc, a Graves, and three St. Emilion wines including a Grand Cru. They set the benchmark for Château D'Ori.

"A good combination of quality, variety and pricing enabled these wines to carve out their own niche," he says. "Before the taxes went up they cost between Rs. 550 and Rs.1,800 per bottle and took the wine market by storm. They are now priced between Rs. 800 and Rs. 3,000."

**LOOKING AHEAD** Just as in Bordeaux a château symbolizes the ethos of the owner, so also at Château d'Ori. Dhuru stresses the need to have all the wine producing components under his control. With his tech-savvy, progressive, quality-conscious endeavours he aims to produce excellent wines at affordable prices for the ultimate benefit of the wine-loving consumer. •

#### CHATEAU D'ORI WINE LIST WITH MRP PRICES

Viva – Chenin Blanc	Rs 380
Merlot	Rs 460
Sauvignon Blanc	Rs 460
Cabernet Merlot	Rs 550
Cabernet Syrah	Rs 650

#### IMPORTED RANGE

Bellevie red	Rs 735
Bellevie white	Rs 735
Château Laffite laujac	Rs 1550
Château Carillon	Rs 1800
Château Jupille Carillon	Rs 2200
Château Pontac Monplaisir	Rs 2300

VAT @ 20% applicable on all MRP's



Wine bottles waiting to be labelled



**K**een on an evocative label, Dhuru convinced Bordeaux-based Spanish artist Cristina Alba to design the labels and logo for the estate. The result is five artistic labels, each distinct from the other for the five different wines, and an attractive company logo with fluid strokes, featuring two horses symbolising dynamism. With the alphabets C and O representing the estate's name, the logo can also be seen as an aerial view of a fermentation tank!



Ranjit Dhuru, the designer, Cristina Alba and wine consultant Athanase Fakorellis