

Red.. White.. Sultry

Indian wines
get noticed
internationally

When Ranjit Dhuru, the owner of the Chateau d'Oré winery, walked through his gently sloping vineyards some months ago, the harvest was in full swing. "Already sweet," he said, nibbling from tight, healthy bunches of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes.

Eight years ago, Dhuru bought land outside Nasik, a city that has become the centre of India's rapidly expanding wine industry. This year, with the help of a consulting oenologist from Bordeaux, Dhuru expects to produce about 300,000 bottles of white and red wines. By next year, he estimates that a million bottles will bear the Chateau d'Oré label.

Four-fold increase

The aggressive optimism of entrepreneurs like Dhuru is easy to understand. In Maharashtra, more than 40 wineries are in varying stages of development.

Government officials say that investment in wine increased by 74 per cent over the last year.

"In the next 10 years there will be 300 million upwardly mobile Indians who can afford wine and for whom it will be a lifestyle choice," Dhuru said.

"A lot of them will be drinking Indian wines."

Aman Sharma, the corporate food and beverage director for the Taj hotel chain, agreed. "There is already a large population eager for wine," he said. In 2006, the annual per-capita consumption of wine in India was estimated at about a tablespoon, but that droplet represents a four-fold increase since 2000.

Most wine made in India is consumed there. And as wine publications, wine clubs, competitions and tasting dinners have taken hold, gradually, Indian wines with notable finesse are becoming available and appreciated.

Grover Vineyards La Réserve, a Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz blend from one of India's top wineries, in another wine region near Bangalore, is among the country's most sought-after wines.

Working with the best

The 2005 is rich and smoky, with hints of roasted peppers. Its alcohol is listed at only 12 per cent on a label that proudly states: "Made in collaboration with Michel Rolland, Bordeaux, France." Rolland is one of the best-known wine consultants in the world.

Indus wines, which is the name the Terroir India company uses on its labels, are made in a spanking new white stucco California-style boutique winery atop a hillside overlooking Lake Mukni, south of Nasik.

The two-year-old winery has just started planting a

vineyard, and buys its grapes from local farmers who, until recently, grew table grapes, still the biggest crop in the area. The fruit and alcohol of Indus's fresh-tasting Sauvignon Blanc are well integrated, and the 2007 Shiraz exhibits restrained richness.

Indian wineries have to cope with challenges that do not exist in wine regions elsewhere. For starters, the calendar is turned upside down. Even though the region is north of the equator, grapes are pruned in September and picked in February and March to avoid stifling heat and the summer monsoon season.

No surprises

On the plus side, the vintners can plan to harvest according to the ripeness of their grapes, without having to worry about unseasonal cold snaps and rain.

Dhuru poured several of his wines for visitors. His 2007 Chenin Blanc was smooth and nutty, not sweet, with good acidity, but too alcoholic at 14.7 per cent.

"We're in a hot country, and next year we'll have to keep the alcohol in check," he said. His Sauvignon Blanc, in a slightly oaky California Fumé Blanc style, was another big wine.

Bold and earthy

Fresh-tasting Sauvignon Blancs, and Chenin Blancs, sometimes with a slightly sweet finish, are typical of India's whites. They are good complements for seafood and for vegetarian dishes like *bhindi masala* or *saag paneer*.

Many of India's wineries produce Shiraz and Shiraz-Cabernet blends. These often exhibit earthy, vegetal aromas and flavours along with bold fruit. When young, which is the way most of them are sold, they can hold their own against dishes seasoned with cumin, mustard seed, fenugreek and other musky flavours.

Sula Vineyards, established in 1996 on the outskirts of Nasik, is the brand most often on wine lists. Although Nasik has a reputation as the Napa of India, Sula is one of just a handful of wineries designed to receive visitors with a tasting room, tours and a guest house.

Chateau Indage, near Pune, is 25 years old and, with production at 1 million cases, is said to be the biggest winery in the country. It was the first to make a sparkling wine.

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