

The French connection

Nashik's Château d'Ori Winery is aiming for big stakes

Maharashtra's Nashik district is fast developing into the Napa of India, with its bountiful vineyards, akin to those of California's famed Napa Valley, yielding some of the choicest wines being produced in the country.

And preening itself among them is the Château d'Ori Winery Private Limited, located in Nashik region, the grape capital of India. It nestles in the Dindori area from which it draws its name.

Promoter Ranjit Dhuru, a Mumbai-based entrepreneur who also runs the Rs400-crore software firm, Atek Infosys, of which he is the founder chairman and managing director. A contraction of 'affordable technology', Atek was set up in 1986 and now has subsidiaries in Germany, the US and the UK.

It has been a long haul for Dhuru. Seven years ago, he set up the country's first state-of-the-art winery which incorporates features such as gravity flow and a fully-automated bottling plant. His effort had been whetted by the Maharashtra government's Grape Processing Industrial Policy announced in 2001. The policy articulated the state's conviction to transform its position as India's largest producer of grapes to the largest producer of wines.

On his visits to Europe and California to promote his software, Dhuru found the conversation over business dinners often veering to wine. "All this talk on wine prompted me to visit the Napa and Sonoma valleys in California where I was fascinated by the vineyards and the art of wine-making," he recalls. "I soon started visiting France's Bordeaux region as well, home to the finest wines in the world, and what began as a hobby has now developed into serious business."

His keenness to replicate in Nashik a Bordeaux type vineyard and winery led him to locate a 100-acre tract of virgin wasteland cradled by the Nera-Ori hills at Dindori. It was of the



Dhuru: Château d'Ori has found acceptance

appropriate *terroir*, this French word denoting a combination of soil, climatic and other factors conducive for the cultivation of grapes. A *terroir* thus imparts the character to the wine made from grapes grown in it.

Prime estate

Six years of hard work helped transform this land into a prime estate with lush vineyards served by three artificial lakes. He made a detailed evaluation of the business, ferried in hand-picked Bordeaux graftings by air and engaged experts in the field to get his venture off the ground. Château d'Ori now has thriving vines of *Cabernet Sauvignon*, *Merlot*, *Shiraz*, *Sauvignon Blanc*, *Chenin Blanc* and *Chardonnay*.

To prepare the ground for his entry into an untried Indian wine market, Dhuru started out by importing and marketing eight Appellation d'Origine Controlee (aoc) wines under the Château d'Ori brand. Determined to produce 'estate bottled' quality wines, he first developed the vineyards with the selected grafts from Bordeaux, before constructing the winery. An adaptation of the latest concept in winery designs in Bordeaux, the winery is a vast circular building housing 72 large stainless steel tanks for

fermentation and storage.

It also has a laboratory, a 3,000-bottles-an-hour bottling and labelling plant, a testing room and a berries sorting room. It crushed its first vintage in 2007, the produce stored in a temperature-controlled cellar accommodating over 500 French oak barrels for fermentation and maturing of high end wines. The bottles are imported from France and Sri Lanka. There is also a tasting room with a glass frontage that offers a panoramic view of the undulating estate to the visitor.

This year, Château d'Ori is expected to produce about 300,000 bottles of white and red wines, which will be stepped up to a million bottles by next year. "As we are a one-year-old company into our second vintage, we have not closed our books as yet and it is hence premature to hazard any revenue estimates or talk about market share," Dhuru points out. "But considering the company's production capability being 1.5 million bottles and the average price point of our wines being in the region of Rs500, one could imagine the turnover in the next two years to reach Rs75 crore in the domestic wine category."

Château d'Ori now employs over 100 people. Cultivation of the vineyards and the wine making are overseen by Athanase Fakorellis, a renowned oenologist from Bordeaux who was born in Greece. As per his guidance, Château d'Ori cultivated its vineyards using the high-density vertical trellis system, enabling it to plant 2,200 vines per acre compared to the traditional Indian vineyard that plants 970. "This high density single cordon helps improve the quality by uniform maturity of the grape and allows the grower to take low quantity but high quality yield per plant," explains Fakorellis.

To give shape to his ambitions, Dhuru is now developing a further 300 acres across the Nera-Ori twin hills which will be ready by 2010. This effort will not only expand production of Château d'Ori, but also exploit the scenic attribute of the estate by creating a luxury resort with a wine tasting centre, hotel rooms, a restaurant and spa for tourists infatuated with wines.

• SAROSH BANA