



# As French as Bordeaux

**That wine is confirmed as the new phenomenon in India is of little doubt not just for the fact that it is showing up in supermarkets but more because Indian wine brands are emerging with imminently drinkable wine. *Mumbai Touchdown* profiles three of India's newest wine makers in a series over three editions.**

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**Photos:** Vikas Munipalle

**G**iven that technology mostly evinces anxiety within wine circles, it's rare to find a technocrat of all people realise his penchant for owning a wine estate. And if his mantra is affordability and yet the benchmark is Bordeaux, the equation is even more indivisible. But wine isn't about technology and Bordeaux is not unaffordable Chateau D'Ori managing director, also Aftek Infosys chairman Ranjit Dhuru maintains.

**What drove you into the wine business?**

It all began with a social observation some ten years ago — business dinners would invariably become more informal when wine selection was the subject of conversation. Wine was the quintessential icebreaker. This culture was more apparent abroad and gave the idea of alcohol consumption a very different spin. It didn't have to be limited only to spirits and can develop into an interesting tangent of conversation.





My work took me frequently to Europe and the US. I recall spending many delightful weekends at Napa and Sonoma. I was still only a tourist and saw my passion for wine, simply for what it was. Then, a chance meeting with Chateau Indage chairman, Shyam Rao Choughule led to a foray into contract farming and the acquisition of a few acres in Sholapur purely for the purpose of growing table grapes and supplying to Choughule. This small diversification though was significant because I believe, this is what set it off. I had an office in Munich from where Bordeaux was easily accessible and I made several trips, having built up a network of negociants (wine merchants) there.

Now, with a vision of making wine, I was looking for a wine maker who was both contemporary and a name for the future. A French negociant, Ivan Cruse, introduced me to Athanase Fakorellis, a much celebrated wine maker who was solely responsible for wine emerging out of more than 25 wineries worldwide, many of them in Bordeaux. He was hesitant at first but then believed in my conviction to do whatever was necessary. He visited India and after an extensive survey of the Nashik region, he settled on Dindori, calling in earth-moving machinery to loosen up the soil and planted vines in traditional Bordeaux style. The clones were acquired from First Growth producers in Bordeaux. On Fakorellis' insistence, I also took my architect and viticulturist and stayed in Bordeaux for six weeks to experience the wine making and understand the design of the winery respectively. Fakorellis wrote off the first three vintages in Dindori, the harvest being sold to wine makers I will not name. He considered the experience of selling the wine equally important so simultaneously, we began importing and selling a Bordeaux Superior, a Medoc, and a Graves wine, and three St Emillion including a Grand Cru. We looked at the evolution of a wine brand very differently. First the vineyard, then the sales force and then the winery. The typical sequence is quite different.

**Where do you believe the Indians are at this point as wine drinkers and where do you believe you can take them?**

Indians have, from their exposure to Indian wine and mostly new world import, come to be accustomed to a particular set of tastes. Be that as it may, which while incorporating new world styles — oak chips to mature the Sauvignon Blanc — our feet are firmly rooted in Bordeaux. That is our model and with our



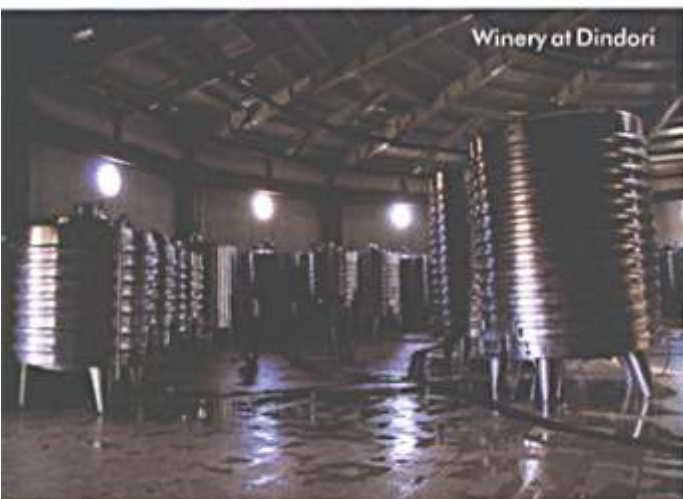
Chateau D'Ori vineyard at Dindori

wine, we'd like to believe we are bringing the iconic region's wine making style, home. Indians are drinking wine, which is in a way, consistent. The French believe wine cannot be consistent — it differs with each vintage and the climate and soil play a vital role — that's what our wine is about. The way the market has responded is testament to the fact that this has been a good decision. Then again, so much has happened on the Indian wine scene in the last few years. There is more choice, more five-star hotels have sprung up with a common emphasis on proliferating the wine culture and lately wine has entered the supermarket, finding its place on family grocery lists.

**Where do you see India's wine phenomenon headed? How much of India's wine market do you aspire to corner?**

Given the abysmal level of per capita consumption of wine as well as the awareness of it, I'd say there will be growth. Will the growth be driven by massive droves of quaff being sold on the cheap or will there be wine across the quality spectrum? So far, the latter seems to be the case. The cost of acquiring grape is rising and for those wine makers relying on contract farmers, it's a tight rope to walk since farmers tend to sell by the amount of grape they harvest, which raises concerns about their yield per acre, which in order to make good wine, needs to be kept to a minimum.

We believe in estate bottled wine — the grape is from our own vineyards. In the future, we would consider contract farming only if the farmers believe in our vision and style of viticulture. Market share is a parallel and not a significant concern. We plan to increase our production, which currently stands at 400,000 and will eventually rise to 1.5 million litres. Spanish varietal Tempranillo is also on the cards. Concentration on a higher end range in the future is a priority — better quality comes at a premium and the Indian wine maker increasingly seems ready.



Winery at Dindori

**CHATEAU D'ORI**

**Chairman:** Ranjit Dhuru  
**Wine Maker:** Athanase Fakorellis  
**Resident Wine Maker:** Kailash Dhuru

**WINES**

Viva Rs 380, Sauvignon Blanc Rs 460, Cabernet Merlot Rs 550, Cabernet Shiraz Rs 650 and Merlot Rs 550.

