



Nicely chilled Nashik is a favorite getaway for Mumbai professionals



Making the cut The soil at Nashik is ideal for grape cultivation

## GRAPEVINE

# Yielding Fruit. India's Nashik region is slowly starting to produce palatable wines

BY JYOTI THOTTAM

DRIVING THROUGH NASHIK, about 60 miles (100 km) east of Mumbai, you could be in any dreary little industrial town in India. A single, two-lane road stretches from one end to the other, and the brightest spot along it is a jewelry store in the middle of a strip mall. But just outside of town it's a different world. Suddenly, there are acres under vine, with grapes on trellises dotting the fields. Welcome to one of the world's newest wine regions.

The first stop on any tour of Nashik wine country should be the tasting room of Sula, India's leading winery. Its founder and CEO, Rajeev Samant, is a Mumbai-based Stanford M.B.A. and frank about how far Nashik has to go. "Let's not pretend that it's going to become Napa overnight," he says. But he also has done more than anyone to move it forward. The Sula tasting room attracts as many as 600 people on a busy weekend. Samant recently added a guesthouse and will soon open an on-site Italian restaurant.

Sula's winemaker, Ajoy Shaw, works with about a dozen different grape varieties, but the label is best known for its Blush Zinfandel—a juicy rosé that meets the local market's preference for fruity, often sweet, light-bodied wine. Elsewhere in Nashik, more complex wines are being produced. The York Winery makes a great Chenin Blanc filled with tropical fruit; Reveilo produces a palatable Shiraz.

But the region's best wine is probably being made at Chateau D'Ori in the nearby Dindori hills. This winery is owned by Ranjit Dhuru, a software entrepreneur from Mumbai whose first love is Bordeaux. He hired a

consulting winemaker from Bordeaux, sent his nephew there for training and uses classic Bordeaux techniques, albeit on a wider range of grapes. Chateau D'Ori's 2007 Cabernet-Syrah blend is rich with blackberry fruit and was complex enough to impress the influential wine critic Gary Vaynerchuk, who said at a recent tasting in Mumbai that the wine "showed the potential of this country."

Capitalizing on that potential is another matter. Because of India's complicated interstate tax laws on wine, many of the wines made in Nashik are not widely available outside the state of Maharashtra. Wineries are thus compelled to develop tourism if they are to bring their products to the attention of Indian and foreign drinkers. By the end of this year, several wineries—not just Sula—will add their own

guesthouses. Samant says that wine tours are the next step, and he's working with a handful of Nashik wineries to put them together. In the meantime, the Taj Residency, tel: (91-253) 560 4499, provides comfortable accommodation in the center of town and helpful staff who can arrange transport within the area.

Dining in Nashik does not, by and large, live up to the area's wines—but that is partly because there isn't really a tradition in India of having wine with meals. Instead, locals usually enjoy it with small, savory bites, like the meltingly tender fish known as Bombay duck, fried at the seafood restaurant Radhakrishna, or the cheese kabobs and spicy prawns at Cellar Door, a wine bar frequented by an increasing number of Europeans who visit Nashik to do business with the city's automobile- and airplane-manufacturing companies. Cellar Door's owner, Sachin Darade, started as a manager at the Sula tasting room and opened his own place in March. It's not quite Napa—but even Napa had to start somewhere. ■



## WINE COUNTRY

Local vintners experiment with many varieties, among them Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc

