

cover story

The whole vineyard

It's the perfect season to head to Nashik, India's largest wine-producing region. Arm yourselves with our guide: the wines to taste, and how to look like a pro while doing it

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As the sun climbs over the vineyards, the greens embrace a golden tinge, making you think of ageing wine. And there's no better time than winter to experience the goodness of citrusy whites and berry-flavoured reds. We are in the hills of Nashik, India's largest wine-producing region.

"The weather is perfect for a trip that can offer you a hedonistic wine experience," says Nikhil Agarwal, sommelier and director, All Things Nice, a city-based wine and spirits consultancy. "Nashik has the perfect climate for growing grapes. The terraced slopes and fertile soil bring out the flavour of the grapes," says Ajoy Shaw, chief winemaker at Sula. And the city's 15 vineyards make for the perfect getaway for weekend warriors from Mumbai.

FOLLOW THE TRAIL

In 2014, India produced a record 14.2 million litres of wine (according to a report in the Hindu Businessline). Maharashtra accounts for two-thirds of the national production, and is home to some of the best-known Indian wineries. Familiar names (you can't miss these on the wine list of restaurants) like Chandon India, Charosa Vineyards and Sula, call this region home.

With the onset of the harvest season, wine tourism kicks off. The segment has grown exponentially. Increased government support coupled with rising interest from patrons has led vineyards to follow the success seen in California's Napa Valley. For instance, Maharashtra provides each winery with a bar and retail license along with its production licence. Mushrooming resorts, spas and restaurants along the trails have added to the attraction.

At Sula, La Plage — a popular restaurant from Goa — has set up a permanent outpost. York Winery, a stone's throw away, offers guided tours. So does Grover Zampa, which offers regular tasting sessions. "In 2004, when we started tours, people were surprised that we were allowing visitors to see the winery. They thought the practice might lead to our methods becoming known," Shaw says. But with the intention of educating nouveau wine drinkers, Shaw was determined to give people a peek into the process.

Now, from music festivals to vineyard tours to grape-stomping events and wine tastings, estates are abuzz through winter.

"Thanks to the rising middle class, a lot more people are interested in wine. People travel more and are acquainted with different kinds of wines, which has spurred the interest in wine in India," says Rajesh Patil, chairman and managing director, Pause Wines, which owns vineyards in Dindori, near Nashik.

SWIRL, SIP, SAVOUR

Countries like France, Spain and Italy have been practising winemaking for centuries, but India took up the art only a couple of decades ago. "For the wine making world, we're still babies," says Agarwal. Most of our wineries make Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon (among varieties of red) and Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc (in white; see box). While the winemaking process here is similar to that in the rest of the world, wineries take care to make wines that suit the Indian palate. So, our wines are fruitier, because that's what Indian consumers want," adds Agarwal.

INDIAN SHOWCASE

It was an interest in India's relatively new wineries that made Peter Csizmadia-Honigh, a Hungarian wine expert, to travel here and write extensively on Indian wines. The book — called The Wines of India — a 451-page encyclopedic guide to the wines of the country — was unveiled at an event in Mumbai last month. Csizmadia-Honigh, a WSET (Wine & Spirit Education Trust) diploma holder and recipient of the Geoffrey Roberts award, travelled through the valleys near Nashik, Pune, Bengaluru, Goa and Ratlam (in Madhya Pradesh).

While Indians seem to have warmed up to the idea of home-grown wine, what does the international community think of them? "The first reaction is normally 'Indian wine'? People do not associate India with wine. Hence, the need for the book," says Csizmadia-Honigh, who picks SDU Winery's Reserve Syrah and the KRMSA Estates' Cabernet Sauvignon among his favourites (see box for other picks).

Internationally, some of our wines have won awards as well. The latest is Grover Zampa, which won 10 medals at the Cathay Pacific Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits competition.

Indian wines have a long way to go when it comes to competing with prestigious labels from traditional winemaking countries. Yet, many believe it is possible to produce nuanced wines here. "The quality has improved tremendously. This is perhaps the most exciting time for Indian wine," says Agarwal.

48 hrs

WINE AND DINE

There's a wine for every meal. Our easy guide to the popular varieties, and what to pair them with



Sauvignon Blanc

Colour: Light green

Nose: Citric

Taste: Crisp with racy acidity, light-bodied with vegetal notes like tropical fruit

Pair it with: Spicy curries, like Goan curry with rice

Chenin Blanc

Colour: Pale gold

Nose: Floral

Taste: Tropical range from peach to peach

Pair it with: Inc desserts

TOP SHELF

An expert's pick of India's finest wines

CHENIN BLANC 2014 AND YORK WINERY CHENIN BLANC

By Nine Hills and York Winery

"Both Chenins are ripe yet showcase freshness and a touch of sweetness; they are perfect with hot food."



DINDORI RESERVE VIONGIER

By Sula Vineyards

"The rose petals, peach and apricot tones make for a charming aromatic nose, while on the palate it is rounded with crisp acids."



RESE CABE SAUV

By Cha

"Charo the cas cherry pine nu and clo the str ished y nins."

RIGHT TEMPERATURE TO SERVE WINE AT

Red wine should be served at 16- to 18-degree C

Pink or rosé wine, as it is cold, should be served slightly chilled, at 8- to 10-degree C

White wine at around 10-degree C

Sparkling wine should be served well-chilled at 6-degree C

— By Stienna Gomes, sommelier, Sula Vineyards

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

Vineyards to visit in Nashik and Pune

SULA VINEYARDS

Tours and tastings are conducted seven days a week throughout the year.

Price: ₹250 (includes tour + tasting of 5 wines) ₹350 (includes exclusive tasting session with the winemaker [6 wines] and tour)

Visit: sulawines.com

GROVER ZAMPA VINEYARDS

A brief vineyard tour is followed by lunch (mostly Biryani). Before going to the vineyard, call up and book a spot.

Price: ₹850 on week days, ₹1,000 weekends (lunch + tasting of five wines)

Visit: groverzampa.in

SOMA W

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Price: ₹150

Visit: soma

