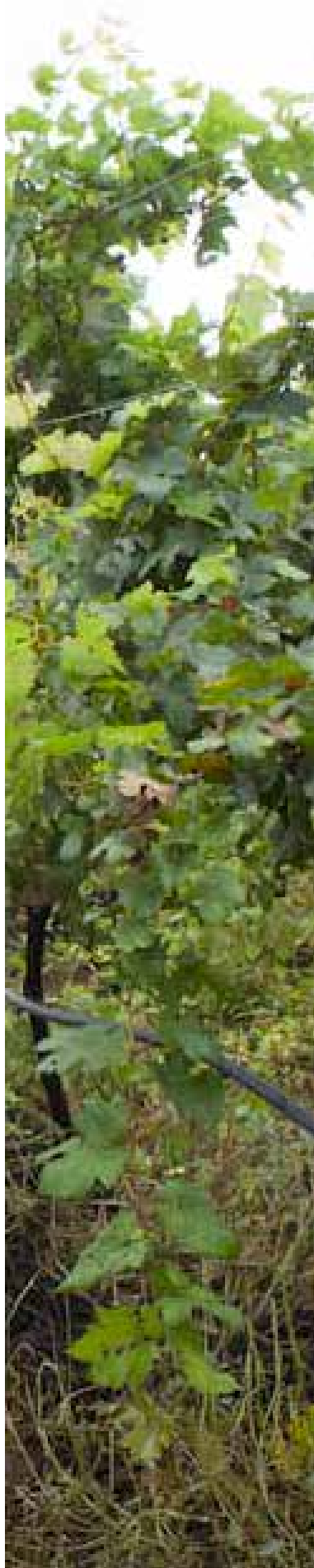


# on a *Wine* trail..





Wine, as a drink, has been associated with a certain sense of elegance and chic. However, a low awareness in our country about the drink has led to its slow penetration and low appreciation. But, sommelier Nikhil Agarwal, who takes us on a wine trail to Nashik, says Indian wines are poised for a bigger global presence in the near future

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PHOTOGRAPHS: PARIZAD D

It's the perfect frame for wine tasting: the sky is spectacularly jay-blue; arcing wisps of white cirrus and some gentle breeze ruffling the vines amidst the fog clad hills. We could be in the Loire Valley, or in the rolling and verdant hills of the very famous Napa. But no, we are thousands of miles away, in India, 110 miles north-east of Mumbai, near the pilgrim town of Nashik.

It's all thanks to Nikhil Agarwal, the CEO of All Things Nice, as he takes us on a wine trail. The Mumbai guy was bitten by the wine bug almost 15 years ago at the young age of 22, when he started working at Sula Vineyards. "Getting into the wine business was pure chance. I was sitting next to someone who got a call from Sula, asking her if she would like to join the sales team. All I heard was 'wine company' from the person besides me, when I grabbed the phone and said, 'I don't know who you are but I would like to join,'" he nostalgically recollects. Luckily, he got the job the very next day and what followed was a spate of vineyard visits, international trade shows and countless tastings. "All of which got me so wrapped up in the world of wine that I could not think of doing anything else at all," he cherishes the thought, as we drive to our first destination.

But before we reach, let me tell you a little more about our sommelier for the day. Post his stint with Sula Vineyards, Nikhil further moved on to Mœt Hennessey and then Diageo, before starting All Things Nice, a wine and spirit consultancy in 2010. Nikhil is probably one of the biggest fans of the Indian wine industry, and he proves it by saying, "The world of wine is fascinating; especially in India, because if you pay attention, you can see the industry and the culture for wine develop right in front of you. To say that the quality of Indian wines has improved dramatically over the past few years would be a gross understatement." He believes that it's not just one or two wineries that have raised the game, instead it's the leading wineries of India that have somehow, through a collective conscience, decided that pushing the levels of quality is the way forward.

Talking of quality, we make our way inside a boutique winery, the very quaint Vallonné Vineyard—a small winery with a mighty heart and an uncompromising stance on quality. In keeping with the belief that the best vineyards are those on south facing slopes, Vallonné was set up in 2009 and stands on sprawling estates that rest on the gentle southern slopes of the Sahyadri ranges which gradually melt into the clear backwaters of the Mukhne Dam. "Owned by one of the most passionate people I know, nestled in a beautiful location, this winery has a lot of potential to become a destination as well. My favourite from the winery would be their Vin de Passerillage, and not to forget their superbly well-balanced dessert wines," says Nikhil. Their wines draw from the unique qualities and flavours of the territory. The building is designed to be ecologically sensitive, with cellars tucked away 20 feet below ground to protect the wines from heat and light.

While we drive through the most spectacular old hills in Maharashtra, towards the Grovers Zampa Vineyard in Sanjegaon, I ask Nikhil what his thoughts about the Indian wine scene are. He points out how India's expanding wine industry is in the midst of a vital transition. "With the exports rising rapidly, and the domestic consumer market expanding, along with the increase in industry support in major wine making states, the Indian wine industry certainly has the potential to be a global market competitor." Last year, the country's wine production hit a record 17 million liters, with export sales rising 40 per cent every year to reach US \$4.4 million in the first seven months.

After asking for directions from some local patrons, we finally get to the place from where the history of Indian wines started. A stalwart of the Indian winery scene that has played its part in laying down the foundation for Indian wine, Grovers since the 1960s is Grovers Zampa now! "They have exciting new projects at the winery that will make it a wonderful place to visit," Nikhil says, referring to the enormous investment the vineyard has received







to set up a hotel in the premise. Encompassing some of the most spectacular old hills in Maharashtra, Grovers certainly has something extraordinarily romantic about the long fields of vineyard and the fine wines it offers. Not to forget, its vintage looking tasting room. "I absolutely love their La Reserve Blanc made from the Viognier grape variety which has been a long-standing quality Indian wine that one can safely bet on," says Nikhil. Apart from that, he also likes their Chene, which means oak in French and gives an exquisite experience every time you roll it in your mouth—a blend of Tempranillo and Shiraz.

A quick tasting and some beautiful pictures later, we further move on to our next destination. As we do so, Nikhil points out how in a span of roughly three decades, the





Indian wine industry has achieved a lot. "It isn't easy to change the habits of a drinking population that can't see beyond spirit. Every wine producer knows it's not only about creating a brand, but also about creating a culture," he firmly states.

The idea was to make it to the York Winery at sunset to be in the Tasting Room overlooking their six-acre vineyard, the Gangapur Dam Lake and the hills beyond. With some bossa nova music and gentle breeze, our evening topic over cheese and crackers at York is on the potential of the wine industry in India which is still very young. Nikhil says, "We're learning every year. We're figuring out which parcels of land have better soils and climates for wine production and understanding which grape can succeed. We have also brought in and developed the right talent and infrastructure to produce world-class wines. The use of oak barrels to add complexity to red wine and also to some whites is now commonplace."

Coming back to York Winery, it is a family owned winery and also one of the youngest wineries that sets very high quality standards, mentions Nikhil. Referring to York's young talented wine maker (and owner), Ravi Gurnani, Nikhil says, "He is out to change the Indian wine world. For example, he introduced a barrel fermented Chenin Blanc which was a game changer and one of my favourites from their portfolio."

Interestingly, there are a number of specific wines, the finest examples of quality, being produced in India and which are being appreciated not only here, but are gaining recognition at wine competitions in India and across the globe too. Confirms Nikhil, "Yes, Indian wines are winning awards in competitions held in London, the US and in Asia. Indian wines are also exported all over the world, even to those countries that produce a large number of high-quality wines themselves."

While talking about representing Indian wines internationally, Sula deserves a mention. The country's leading winemakers, perfectly formed with a fan-base of the world's leading grape gurus and well-known personalities like Liz Hurley, who recently abstained from champagne for Sula Brut on her 40th birthday, and Ken Livingstone. Sula's experience was very distinct in itself. It certainly looked way more evolved from all the other wineries we were coming from. Their winery is an experience centre, with tasting rooms, restaurants and rooms. Nikhil says, "Sula is the most forward thinking winery that has created a fantastic range of wines catering to everyone, from the new enthusiast to the connoisseur. My favourite from their portfolio would have to be their Riesling."

As we make our way to Sula's boutique hotel, The Sula Beyond, after our wine tasting, I ask Nikhil to mention the major players in the Indian wine scene. "Indian wine is dominated in terms of volume by two to three wineries, with the rest of the wineries combined taking the rest of the pie." Though he further adds that in terms of quality, the scenario is not













so polarised. “There are smaller brands that are producing exceptional quality wine but have not been around long enough or don’t have the marketing muscle or the marketing brilliance that the more established wine brands have.” What’s also interesting is that exceptional quality is being achieved in all wine styles as well—it’s not just the use of barrel, there is more depth to wine-making now than ever before.

After its first crush of grapes just five years ago, the Reveilo by Vintage Wines is a darling of the expat community that yearns for good Indian wine, and this one pretty much dominates the premium segment of wine. Talking of Reveilo, Nikhil says, “Reveilo is a winery that understands the Indian palate quite well. They seem to have crafted wines to fit their preferences. A wine from their portfolio that I find very interesting is the Grillo, a grape variety native to Sicily.” Sadly, Reveilo is an important vineyard, often overlooked, but the very fact that they’re the only Indian wine producer to sell more to hotels than through retail is an endorsement in itself. Having invested in French oak barrels, air-conditioned warehousing and trucks, they’re the first producers to introduce India’s first vintage of Italian grape varieties—Nero D’Avola, Sangiovese and Grillo—and India’s first barrel-aged white wine, under the supervision of Reveilo’s Italian wine maker, Andrea Valentinuzzi, shares Nikhil.

While the industry pioneers look north with an eye to opening up other regions of India for wine making, our trail comes to an end. But Nashik, India’s traditional grape growing region, is poised to become the country’s first true wine trail experience. Moreover, the wine certainly looks promising. **S**