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DWC: Celebrating 10th Year in Nashik Vineyards

Feb 07 : Although Delhi Wine Club has taken members to Vinexpo and Wine for Asia- Singapore in the past, this was the first time that it organised a visit to Nasik as a part of celebrating 10th year of its existence (2002-2012) and visited five wineries-Zampa, Sula, Mercury, York and Reveilo over three days, writes Subhash Arora who planned the culmination at SulaFest- the 'Indian Woodstock in the making', an annual destination for wine and music lovers..

Photos By:: Adil Arora

A suggestion and invitation from Rajeev Samant about 3 years ago to get members of the Delhi Wine Club to visit Sula prompted me to organise the trip two years ago with the objective of taking about 14-15 members to a few vineyards including Sula as the anchor. While the response was good, the trip did not materialize, due to an error of judgment on my part- I gave the option of two weekends. There was a split down the middle on the preferred dates. A visit to SulaFest last year left no doubt in my mind that the time to be in Nasik is around this festival of wine, music and food. With the club entering its 10th year, the visit to Nasik was finalized for February 3-5, months in advance and with registrations, cancellations, affirmations and negotiations, the group of 12 was on board the trip that would take us to Zampa, Sula, Mercury, York and Vintage Wines (Reveilo).



Zampa- The first natural stop for any wine visitor to Nashik is Zampa, about 25 kms before Nashik- its . located 7 kms on the road turning left on Wadivarhe Phata (crossing), about 18 kms before reaching Nashik on Mumbai Nashik Road. Neeraj Deorah, one of the Directors had driven especially from Mumbai to welcome the members, show them the winery and the vineyard and taste a range of wines . The location of this small, 5-year old winery is so pristine and picturesque that the members instantly felt relaxed after the 3-hour drive from Mumbai airport. It was a first visit to any vineyard for many and definitely the first for most of them to Nashik so they were quite absorbed with Aveek Narula showing them around and telling them it was one of the few vineyards with both black and red soil giving them a wider choice of flavours. They equally enjoyed tasting the Cabernet, Shiraz, Tempranillo, Grenache and Viognier and other

grapes as they kept on ascending the slopy vineyard that takes one to a breathtaking view of the valley around and a lake in the yonder.

Viognier was not ready yet at 19 Brix and they were waiting for it to reach 23 before harvesting, said Neeraj. While taking members around the winery before tasting, he confirmed crossing the 5-digit mark as the number of cases sold annually. It was also a revelation that the company which sells almost half of the production in Maharashtra has exported about 25%, mainly to UK and Japan.

The air-conditioned sparkling wine fermentation and storage room which also doubles up as storage for grapes after the harvest is one of the reasons, their Rose Brut was an excellent pairing for the palate, with zingy and floral flavours- clearly ahead of the Brut from Chenin Blanc the still version of which was dry but fruity. Sauvignon Blanc 2011 was herbaceous with grassy and asparagus flavours. Rose with 100% Shiraz did not impress much but Shiraz with excellent typicity and ripe, juicy and spicy flavours was appreciated. The Cab Syrah 2010 was a good example of Zampa coming a long way after Nic Van Aarde from South Africa had joined them as a consultant. With his replacement by Julian Mori after Nic had to stay back in South Africa for personal reasons, Neeraj feels that the quality will continue to improve, especially as the vines grow older. Members took fond memories of the visit with Rose Brut and the beauty of their vineyards and the scenery around.

BEYOND Tasting @Sula

One of the highlights of the trip was tasting with Rajeev Samant and Ajoy Shaw the senior winemaker, at 'Beyond'- the vineyard resort 3 kms from Sula winery, to be followed by a 5-course dinner with 5- wines paired by Cecilia Oldne, Head of international Business who is also a qualified Sommelier from Sweden. Despite his busy schedule- he is a hands- on person who likes to oversee the arrangements for SulaFest despite the whole of western region behind the event, he had agreed to come for a while to welcome and meet our members- the G-12

Quite upbeat about the wine industry with 2011 as a strong year he shared with members that 15-20% annual growth for the next few years and possibly a decade were quite likely for the industry. Some of the mess has been cleared with a few wineries shutting shop in the recent past. 'I am very sad but at least some stability will come to the industry through this natural process of attrition,' he opined. He also conceded that he had actively opposed any duty cuts for the low cost imported wines in order to say the fledgling Indian industry in the proposed FTA with EU but 'we are quite ok with the reduction for wines costing even €10 or even €5 in the supermarkets abroad.'

Cecilia had gone to great lengths not only in getting the tables organised with all the frills, in the lawn facing the swimming pool, making it the perfect setting for a classy and elegant dinner, she had also paired the wines very well with the Indian food she had selected. Button mushrooms wrapped in coriander sauce were well married to the Sula Brut Rose which when taken with the Koliwada fish, made you instantly hum *Kolaveri Di!*



Murgi Mulligatawny- a thick spicy lentil soup with chicken tempered with fennel and mustard seeds and curry leaves had aromas and flavours that were only accentuated with the spicy, medium bodied Dindori Viognier Reserve 2011, a blend of 97.5% Viognier and Roussanne, the other minority white grape of Rhone. Satori 2011 has come a long way from the lighter bodied Chilean import that used to be in the bottle a decade ago. A blend of Malbec, Merlot and a small portion of Tempranillo, it has become fuller bodied wine with ripe berry fruits, that uplifted the flavours of Sheesh kabab.

But the best was reserved for Rogan Josh, lamb chunks cooked in mildly spiced thick gravy. Just as one started to miss the tandoori roti or naan, came the cumin fried rice which blended beautifully with Rasa Shiraz 2010 that even the vegetarians having the kidney beans loved. Though the Shiraz was still young and the tannins roared over the fruit, lamb proteins tamed them to perfection. It would be a good idea for anyone with a proper cellar to have a few bottles laid down for 3-4 years and watch the wine get more rounded and smoother.

The evening was rounded off with Chenin Blanc Late harvest which was introduced by Sula many years ago and has become a staple dessert wine with practically all the producers. A perfumed wine with tropical fruits exploding in your mouth and balanced acidity made it a fine match with gulab jamun.

Mercury Wines



A last minute add-on, Mercury is a small winery owned by Viral Pancholia and set up in Ozhar, about 30 kms from Nashik, seemingly a never ending stretch on the Mumbai Agra Road, primarily because of the long bridge coming up, causing a slow down. Viral owns about 4.5 acres of land, 3 acres of which have been devoted to grow Cabernet and 1.5 acres to Symphony, a relatively unknown grape in India; a cross between Muscat and White Grenache developed at UC Davis, it is a blending grape with tropical and spicy notes and as such may deliver interesting fruity white wines. However, due to late pruning, the fruit is not expected to be ready for harvest for the next couple of months.

Viral has been passionate about making wines and what he lacks in the vineyard ownership he makes it up with passion and zest for quality. He participates often at the international wine shows and regularly sends samples for international competitions. Among many awards, he won four 'Seal of Approval' at the Indian Wine Challenge in 2008. Since the visit to his winery was planned at a very short notice and he had already commitments outside Nashik, we had to quickly visit the vineyards and winery, followed by a tasting.

It was interesting to taste wines- all as tank samples. Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc (Fume style-oaked), Sauvignon Blanc unoaked, Rose (blend of Shiraz, Zinfandel and a dash of Muscat), Shiraz 2007-8, a blend of two vintages of the early years, a fruity Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 and a full bodied Cabernet Shiraz 2010 which had earthy aromas with a hint of mint.

An interesting observation- the winery imports its wine bottles from China in the boxes with the label ArYaa printed on them. The loose boxes with bottles are imported, positioned in front of the bottling machine and inverted at the time of bottling and packed in the empty box.

York

For the 27 year old local lad Ravi Gurnani, wine making was a new family business 4 years ago when he returned from UK, with future in mind. The winery is located midway between Sula and 'Beyond' and is convenient for anyone visiting to make a trip to Sula as one could judge from the full house at lunch time, as Ravi modestly admits. He may be accused of following up on the concepts adopted by the neighbouring Sula, but he does not agree and attributes it more to keeping with the trends. His Tasting Room is designed after Sula's and York Live started last year follows the SulaFest model, both on a much smaller scale, just as his winery.

But unlike Sula, Ravi has no qualms about making wines for anyone who is willing to pay the right conversion price. Besides making wine for Good Earth and Ashwin Deo's Turning Point he also made the sparkling wine for Moet Chandon last year and hopes to make it till they set up their own facility next year. In the meanwhile the project has helped him source equipment and he is ready to launch his own bubbly next year. He has an in-house winemaker - younger brother Kailash has returned from Australia after studying at Adelaide and is in charge of winemaking.



The Tasting Room has a beautiful view of the Gangasagar lake and the pristine lawns in front add to the serene surroundings that were created gradually since 2006 when they first planted the vines which enabled them to crush for the first time in 2008. Ravi took the members through the tasting of a complete range of wines, after a quick tour of the winery.

Ravi said it was very reassuring that on week-ends many families come to enjoy an afternoon at the tasting room; this helps remove the taboo that wine is an alcoholic drink and must not be drunk in front of young children. He provides juices and soft drinks for the younger lot. The whole range of Chenin, Sauvignon, Rose, and the Reserve range of Cabernet, Shiraz and the dessert wine Chenin Late Harvest- the staple portfolio of Nashik were uncorked for the members who were full of bonhomie with scores of young people all around, enjoying the same wines, clicking unlimited pictures of the picturesque spots around.

A quick visit to the close-by 'Beyond' to take a few shots before sun came down, turned out to be a big photographic session with members 'ooing' and 'aahing' about the beautiful place and vowing to return soon as a



DWC group and spend a week-end. The beautifully designed property is truly a 'jungal mein mangal' spot and if there were a remake of the movie made 40 years ago in 1972 with Pran, this would be the perfect spot with the hero and heroine dancing in the vineyards, swimming in the pool and sipping Sula Sauvignon or Shiraz!

SulaFest: Indian Woodstock in the Making

To say that Sulafest brings memories of Woodstock would not be too much out of line- the only difference apart from the size would be that too many young kids were



smoking cigarettes-but unlike Woodstock they were filtered tobacco and not marijuana. Says Cecilia Oldne, 'we are very particular about drugs and have security people all around to ensure it is drug-free. Nowhere in India have I seen an atmosphere charged with music and friendship and clean fun. I must admit I have not had much opportunity to attend such concerts due to lack of company and for me it was a sheer nostalgia bringing memories of my student days at the US.

Around 4-5000 people occupied every inch of the space reserved for the event, be it the Tasting Room, grape stomping drums, food stalls, innumerable bars selling Sula wines, beer and other cocktails made from imports by Sula Selections. Vinoteca by Sula, soon to be opened, latest venture of Sula was busy selling tapas-at prices only Mumbaikkars could perhaps afford- in fact, it felt that the prices were higher by a couple of notches on all the food and wine products, including the entry itself which though higher at 1500 allowed entrance for both days-the single day was at Rs.1000, nominally higher than last year's Rs.800.

The event was even better organised than last year- from parking to the toilets which were there in plenty but perhaps not marked well enough so quite a few were complaining about the inadequacy. Plenty of wine and food so no one could complain (except perhaps the price). The music was absolutely fantastic and it was an endless feast for music and wine lovers. The only unfortunate part was it had to be shut precisely at 10 pm, apparently due to city code. Unfortunate-because despite the 3-figure decibel sounds, the only disturbance might have been for the sleeping birds nearby. One hopes that Sula petitions to the local authorities to extend it till midnight. It is a tremendous achievement that not a single case of rowdy behaviour was observed despite the apparent absence of cops and a lot of wine consumed. Surely, there were a few cases of drowsy vinos here and there but quite harmless to the other visitors. This was a feat that cannot possibly be duplicated in Delhi or the NCR and Sula deserves a standing ovation from all the music and wine lovers of India. I feel we are seeing an Indian Woodstock in the making- from 500 people in the first year in 2008 to 2-3000 last year and possibly 8000 this year- in a small town like Nashik, is a great progression and soon infrastructure shortage will coincide next year with the grape shortage. A special word of commendation for Blue Frog in Mumbai, which handled the music for the event, is due. Thanks to their new lounge, bar and restaurant in Delhi our members and their young offspring may go and let their hair down with different music groups playing every night at the Mehrauli outlet.

Vintage Wines-Reveilo



With three wines using home grown Italian indigenous grape varieties-Nero d'Avola and Grillo from Sicily and Sangiovese from Tuscany, the winery is slowly developing the reputation of being 'Little Italy' in the small ancestral village of Kundewadi in the Niphad district, nearly an hour away from Nashik in the wrong direction. A boutique winery started by the young couple Yatin and Kiran Patil at the family farm with the technical assistance from Andrea Valentinuzzi who was earlier associated with Casa Girelli in Trento, has all Italian equipment and is often written about in the Italian Press.

The couple had driven down from Mumbai to meet the members, show them the winery and have a quick tasting and lunch before heading back for Mumbai. There is perhaps the only finished goods

warehouse that is chilled- at around 12-14°C. Perhaps this could be a factor in making all the wines we tasted being fresh and crisp. Starting from the crisp, fruity and off dry Chenin Blanc to the lighter bodied Grillo with a medium end, a crisp Chardonnay followed by the barrel fermented, perfectly balanced Chardonnay Reserve were all delicious fruit forward wines- Reserve would improve and hold for a few years due to the concentration and oak. Rose Nero d'Avola is a well made wine that was crisp and had good balance. It was young drinking, no frill wine made in stainless steel tank, that wrapped around the seekh kebabs perfectly on the palate.

Sangiovese was dry, fresh and good effort for the first vintage. I feel the winemaker will be experimenting with a small addition of Cabernet, Merlot or hopefully Shiraz to make it more rounded and introduce slightly spicy and fruity notes in the future editions. Cabernet Sauvignon was clean and fruity but the kudos went to the dark cherry red Cabernet Reserve 2009 with good balance which at Rs.1345 may be a tad expensive but with only 500 cases made, it should find ready customers in the discerning wine connoisseurs who appreciate that wine of good international class is being made in India now and in any case needs the encouragement. If served at government functions where foreign dignitaries are present, it would be the best way of sending the right message to the world about India's potential in making good wine.

Back to the groove

Regretting we did not have enough time to drink enough Reveilo wines each of which are potential medal winners, we headed homes with each member ecstatic about the maiden trip to Nashik's premium vineyards to celebrate the 10th year of Delhi Wine Club and mark its commitment to the growth of quality Indian wines. The mood was summed up by a member with a corporate memberships and who has not attended any DWC event so far. Her comments sum up the mood and reaction of the G-12 when she writes, 'You Nashik trip was surprise package for me. It has got registered in my mind as one of my unforgettable trips. I enjoyed it so much. Thanks to you for all arrangements and for all the caring. Your Delhi Wine Club family is lovely. Hats off to you.' Yet another member of G-12 writes, 'special profound thanks to Mr. Arora for arranging this trip. Your hard work in organizing and coordinating this trip has given us such a delightful perspective on the local wine industry and also brought many of us together and sincerely thank you on behalf of all of us.'

I will drink to that!

Subhash Arora