



Tourists get a feel of India as they ride in bullock carts through the Reveilo vineyards

# Wine Tours take off in Nashik

**Vikram Achanta** sees a bright future for wine tourism as more and more wineries open their tasting rooms to visitors

It's a measure of the evolution of the Indian wine industry that the tasting room, hitherto the preserve of only one or two wineries, is now becoming a standard part of architectural drawings. The Indian wine industry is increasingly trying to forge direct links with the consumer. This is because in Maharashtra, and particularly in Mumbai, the retail trade often imposes extortionate terms on beverage brands. Given that it's Maharashtra which is host to a large number of India's wineries, it's no surprise that they are choosing a direct-to-consumer strategy via their cellar door.

The tasting room is now merely the starting point for most companies' consumer-facing initiatives. Several of the leading wine companies have taken the next step, and now organize day-long festivals at their wineries, which they position as fun-filled events. This is logical because if wine is to become a truly 'everyman' drink, and break the hold which dark spirits have on the Indian consumer, then it must come out of the society pages, and be more closely associated with the urban consumer's everyday pursuits and interests.

Take for example, the Sula Fest in February, a day-long

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event with 2000 plus visitors, all drawn not only by the wine, but also by the opportunity to bask in the sun at the amphitheatre, and listen to some of India's hottest bands perform. Not into music? There's also the usual Saturday night market, spish-splosh, flea market, tarot reading, and what have you. At the York vineyard, you have York Live, in February which is also a day-long festival, with Shair & Func, and Jalebee Cartel, amongst others, performing. Vallée de Vin, makers of Zampa wine, also hosts a party to celebrate their Annual Crush.

Sula, as the oldest winery, has upped the ante, and runs two restaurants, Little Italy and Soma at its vineyard, in addition to Beyond, its 20-room resort. York has just added a restaurant, while Vallée de Vin and Reveilo offer to arrange catering for guests according to their meal preferences. Nashik, of course, is home to several hotels, with enough stay options outside the wineries. Says Nilesh Kale, founder of Black Grape Holidays (see box), most wineries are grossly underestimating the potential of wine tourism to add to their top line.

A 10% to 20% increase in revenue, is what Nilesh estimates could accrue from cellar door wine sales, F&B revenue, wine tours and merchandise sale. Plus, of course, the intangibles. In 2002 when Tulleeho visited Grover Vineyards and persuaded them to open up their vineyards to tours, the visitors, all young professionals, in the 25-35 age group, were amazed at the quality effort which went into making the wine, and went back as Grover's brand advocates.

Nashik's distance from Mumbai is a potential deterrent, and a visit to a Nashik vineyard is not for the casual day-tripper. You should allow for at least eight to nine hours of transit time, to and from Nashik, if you are travelling by road. Several parts of the Mumbai-Nashik highway are now four lanes however, and soon the entire stretch is expected to be four laned. A weekend in Nashik makes a lot of sense as it allows the guest to visit two or three vineyards. Nashik is the main hub for wine tourism, with Fratelli, another vineyard in the neighbourhood, situated at Aklug, 170 km from Pune, also offering vineyard excursions. Nashik has an airport, with a scheduled daily flight from Mumbai. Another option, of course, is the train.

Wine tourism in India is, however, not just about trips to



Tourists walk through the vineyards of Reveilo



The tasting room at Sula vineyards. Sula also has two restaurants - Little Italy and Soma



Women picking grapes at Sula vineyards



A view of the winery at Vallée de Vin which sells under the Zampa label

wineries or festivals at the vineyards, but has now extended to several, excellent, consumer-focused wine festivals, in cities such as Pune, Mumbai (the Bandra Wine Festival), Bangalore and Goa (Grape Escapade). I visited Goa this year, specifically to visit the Grape Escapade, held over a five-day period at Panjim's Inox complex, as I'd heard good things about it, and it didn't disappoint. Goa Tourism is the prime mover of the festival. For five days, Inox rocks to the beat of bands – some local, some foreign – and dance performances, as both local Goans and tourists, Indians and foreigners, gather there, buying bottles of wine from the various winery stalls and picking up bites to eat.

Earlier, Nashik's vineyards were a stop-over for many while on their way to parts further afield, including pilgrimages to Shirdi. Increasingly, however, they have now become a destination in themselves, compelling the vineyards to put in not just tasting rooms, but also clean toilets! As more wineries enter the scene, infrastructure will only improve. Also, other wine circuits are expected to open up, with Four Seasons Wines in Baramati expected to launch into wine tourism in a big way. Given that wine tourism is also agri-tourism, benefiting the economy in semi urban and rural areas, as also benefiting the grape growers, any impetus the government could give would be welcome. Internationally, of course, wine tourism is big business, with the government playing a critical role in ensuring local connectivity, well mapped tourist routes and adequate information for tourists. That day is not far away for us in India. ❖

## WINERY FACILITIES

### SULA VINEYARDS

Tours and tastings are conducted seven days a week throughout the year. The harvest and crushing season runs from January to March. Winery tours and wine tastings take place daily between 11.30 am – 5.30 pm. (One tour every hour). Tastings and tours cost Rs 150/- which includes six wines. A winery tour followed by a wine tasting will take approximately 40 to 45 minutes. [www.sulavineyards.com](http://www.sulavineyards.com)

### YORK WINERY

The Tasting Room is usually open seven days a week from 12 noon to 9 pm. Visitors are taken on tours of the vineyard and winery up to 6 pm. Charges for tastings are Rs 100 for any four wines and Rs 150 for all the wines in their portfolio. The wines retail at a 10% discount. The winery also has a restaurant. [www.yorkwinery.com](http://www.yorkwinery.com)

### VALLEÉ DE VIN

Once in the winery at Vallée de Vin, guests relax in the lounge before they are taken to the vineyards, where they are informed about the *terroir*, the grape varieties under plantation, and the basic elements of viticulture. After that, there is a guided tour of the winery. The tasting sessions take place next and cost Rs 125 for five still wines plus two sparkling wines for an additional Rs 75. [www.vallee-de-vin.com](http://www.vallee-de-vin.com)

### REVEILO

Vintage Wines, makers of Reveilo, organize regular trips to their vineyards. Reveilo caters to groups from between 10-30 people. They prefer it if groups inform in advance, so that meals can be arranged. Food is served on a chargeable basis, while the wine tastings are complimentary. [www.reveilo.com](http://www.reveilo.com)

### FRATELLI WINES

Fratelli can organize a day trip from Pune for Rs 1500 per person, inclusive of transport, lunch at the winery and tastings. Minimum group size of 10. Overnight stay is also possible at the residence of the vineyard. Price on request. [www.fratelliwines.in](http://www.fratelliwines.in)

### BLACK GRAPE HOLIDAYS

Interestingly-named, these Pune based tour operators are pioneers in Wine Tourism, taking groups, small and large to wine country in Nashik, and even further afield. Despite having taken over 300 people this season to Nashik, founder Nilesh Kale believes that wine tourism is very much in its infancy at the moment, with the future promising much more. [www.blackgrapeholidays.com](http://www.blackgrapeholidays.com)