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their pedigree may not scream Bordeaux – the Nashik-native Gurnani family is in the construction supplies business, with dealings in Sierra Leone and Liberia – their wines reflect a dedication to craft and taste. The full-bodied Shiraz Reserve and Cabernet Sauvignon are the stand-outs – and were recently awarded gold and bronze medals, respectively, at the Sommelier India Wine Competition 2009. Indulge in a tasting, as motley-sari-clad village women pass by, bundles of leaves and fronds balanced precariously on their heads. For a more personal experience, request a tour of the small vineyard with the owner's brother, Mr Prakash, a shy old fellow with a bulbous nose, who looks after the fields and dresses like he's ready for a day of golf in the English countryside (except for the slippers).

Highlight: Either of the award winners, or Mr Prakash, no question.

www.yorkwinery.com; tour and tasting session: 4 wines, Rs 100; 7 wines, Rs 150

5.30pm

Head back to Sula's Tasting Room for a few drinks: the outdoor balconied bar is the best in Nashik, and gets packed as evening approaches.

8pm

Dinner at Panchratna at the Gateway, where Chef Jose cooks up Maharashtrian, Konkan and Chinese fare. →

3.30pm

Head up the road a mere five minutes and you arrive at **York**, after honking your way past the bullock-cart traffic jam. York is an upstart mom-and-pop shop that's the polar opposite of Sula: no frills, but all spectacular wine. No corporate branding, no plans for an extravagant resort – just a sincere dedication to their product. While



1. The view from a hill above Château d'Or, of the beautiful Dindori region 2. The locals during harvest time at Sula's vineyards 3. Trimming grapes at Sula 4. York's wonderful Mr Prakash (be sure to ask him for a tour) 5. The hurried bottling process at Sula in full swing 6. The Little Italy restaurant at Sula 7. The tasteful tasting room at York Wineries, just down the road from Sula



WHERE TO STAY: The Gateway Hotel, Nashik

Don't let the name fool you. This recently rebranded Taj property lives up to its regal pedigree, with spacious rooms, gourmet cuisine and attentive service. Built 14 years ago, the massive, palace-style hotel was originally intended for the thousands of pilgrims who flock to Nashik each year, but now also caters to businessmen year-round and plays host to wine tourists

from December until March. Its central location makes it ideal, giving the novice wino the opportunity to sample India's wine country far and wide.

The Gateway Hotel, Nashik

0253-660 3344; www.thegatewayhotels.com; double rooms, from Rs 7,000 a night; suites, Rs 15,000 a night



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1. The vines stretching out into the distance at Château d'Ori 2. Pouring a glass of red at Château Indage 3. Enjoying a glass of Syrah Reserve at Zampa's tasting room 4. The barrel room at Zampa 5. Checking the colour at Château Indage 6. The breathtaking vista from Zampa's vineyard



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DAY 2

8.30am

Wake up. Shower. Eat a quick breakfast and get on the road: beautiful Dindori awaits. Along the way you'll pass water buffalo submerged in shallow ponds, the humps of their backs and snouts the only things visible. This is India's answer to Tuscany – hilly, vast, rural and calm compared to cluttered Nashik.

10.30am

Arrive at **Château d'Ori**, which, despite its Francophile name (why some winemakers insist on French-style names for Indian wines is beyond us), crafts some proper, complex reds. The Dhuru family is in the software business, but owner Ranjit and his nephew, Bordeaux-trained assistant winemaker Kailash, have clearly learnt something from their trips to vineyards across the globe. Set on 85 acres against the edge of the hulking Western Ghats, d'Ori's 16-sided behemoth winery remains under construction. Inside, the tank room resembles the industrial equivalent of the Parthenon – domed, with porthole windows shooting beams of light towards the centre. Track along the spine of the ridge behind the vineyard (venture further

to an impressive mountaintop mandir, if you like), where trees are silhouetted in the haze out east and vineyards stretch to the west. Again, the reds rule the roost – and you won't be disappointed with any of them. In another two years, when construction is supposed to be complete, Château d'Ori will be the best vineyard visit in the region. As it stands, it's a welcome respite from the commercial buzz of Nashik.

Highlight: Château d'Ori Cabernet Syrah – juicy, fruity and a little spicy.

www.chateaudori.com; tour and tasting session: Rs 125-150, depending on wines

12.30pm

Leave for the hotel, grab a quick lunch and a short nap.

2:30pm

Head to **Zampa**, a diamond in the rough located on Nashik's periphery, through winding rural roads, boasting one of the only vineyards in the region situated on the slopes of a hill. The vista from the top is almost savannah, sort of jungle-through-the-haze. Zampa's owners have made a lateral move from the low-brow whisky (Officer's Choice) and beer (Haywards 5000) game, and have somehow come up with a completely palatable product. They've also managed, just barely, to avoid the concrete-block aesthetic common to Nashik wineries. But you're not there for the looks, you're there for the wine – and Zampa delivers in a way bigger vineyards simply can't, with complex whites, full-bodied reds and a satisfying rosé. (Stay away from the embarrassingly named Zampagne – which tastes as bad as its name suggests.) Ten years from now, if Sula transforms into the Kingfisher of Indian wine, Zampa, York and d'Ori will compete for Nashik quality supremacy. **Highlight:** Zampa Rosé – the first good-quality, fruity rosé wine in India.

www.vallee-de-vin.com; tour and tasting: Rs 125 for six wines

4.30pm

Head back to the Gateway. Get your stuff and hop into a train or car (don't forget the designated driver) for the journey home. ©



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Wine in India A decanted history

Hard to believe given the youth of the wines being made in India today, but our country's association with winemaking is said to date back to the Indus Valley civilization a few thousand years ago. In the 4th century BC, Chanakya bemoaned the consumption of Madhu, a grape-based alcohol, in the court of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya. Later came the Portuguese and the British, both of whom helped put acreage under grapes so they could pour themselves a glass of the good stuff over dinner without having to wait for the next clipper to get around the Cape of Good Hope. Sadly, the French, although firmly ensconced on the sub-continent, did not see fit to follow suit. Let's face it: it's not like the

world today is drinking English wine either.

The global grapevine pest phylloxera put paid to Indian wine finding its place in the sun, and a post-Independence intolerance of alcohol made winemaking financially unviable. In the early Eighties, the only local wines available were from vintners like Bosca and Golconda. They were made from grape, were red or white and came in a bottle. That, sadly, was their only resemblance to wine.

But by the mid-Eighties, new winemakers took a bad product and made it drinkable. Chateau Indage was one of the first and, along with Grover Vineyards – another pioneer – they started putting out labels more familiar to the wine-drinking community. Generic

names like “White” and “Ruby Red” gave way to varietals like Chenin Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Since the Nineties, Indian wine has become both fashionable and financially sound. There are now dozens of vineyards, some of which make a drinkable product, although for most the pursuit of money seems more compelling than that of excellence.

Discount the medals Indian winemakers claim to have won at international competitions; Indian wine could be better. But, with more winemakers willing to invest in inventory and not just profits, it can only improve. Enough to give the French reason to wish they had conquered the rest of the country? Unlikely. But we can live in hope.

INDIAN WINES TO WATCH OUT FOR

You don't have to break your wallet on imported stuff to be a bon vivant – here's five homegrown bottles on which to test your wine-tasting skills

Indus Moksh Reserve Shiraz 2007

Rs 840

Rich, robust fruit with eucalyptus, blackberry and spice, velvety tannins and smoky oak characters. A balanced structure with a long finish.



Grover La Réserve 2006

Rs 672

A fine example of a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz grapes, with good structure and a pleasing balance between the fruit and tannins.



Revello Reserve Chardonnay 2005

Rs 1,145

A wonderful fruit bowl of flavour with floral notes, elegant texture, excellent depth and very impressive structure. One of the better Indian Chardonnays.



Sula Riesling 2009

Rs 660

This latest offering from Sula proffers a nose of citrus and floral perfumes, followed by a juicy mouthful of flavour and a fresh, zesty finish.



Zampa Rosé 2008

Rs 606

The first good-quality rosé in India – crisp, fresh and fruity, with a hint of effervescence. Perfect for lunch or a lazy afternoon with friends.

