

Ravi Viswanathan: The man behind India's new wine story

The Singapore-based wine investor is amping things up with big plans for Grover Zampa Vineyards — including a new winery, a wine spa and a premium import portfolio that is open for pre-orders

By Ruma Singh

Grover Zampa Vineyards, in the outskirts of Bengaluru's Doddaballapur, is a hive of activity. Workers are busy with a massive overhaul of the winery and the construction of the swish new La Reserve Lounge. In the office, its director (and VisVires Capital's) Ravi Viswanathan is tasting cheese with the concentration only a Frenchman can bring to such a task — the Singapore-resident is a French citizen.

I am here to discuss his latest acquisitions at the world-renowned, centuries-old wine auction, Burgundy's Hospice de Beaune, which famously sells the best of Burgundies annually to raise funds for charity. Viswanathan has picked up three barrels of wine, a historic first big-ticket buy by an Indian wine producer. But this is just one part of his ambitious plans for Grover Zampa.

The changes

The reclusive Viswanathan, 56, who was a low-key investor in Grover Zampa in 2012, during its merger with Vallée de Vin, has taken centre stage with a recent additional investment of ₹60 crore — becoming the major shareholder in the hitherto family-run wine business. This change will turn India's second largest wine producer (after Sula Vineyards, in which he had a stake that he subsequently sold) into a multi-brand, professionally-managed wine company with a wide-ranging portfolio.

Each existing brand will retain its exclusive identity and have dedicated winemaking teams — the Grover Zampa premium range will stay true to its French-style profile, while the newly-acquired Charosa Vineyards in Nashik will focus on New World-style varietals. In addition, another recent acquisition, Karnataka's Myra Vineyards, will be re-branded to make ready-to-drink wine spritzers and carbonated wines in cans to appeal to early drinkers. Viswanathan is also in advanced talks to acquire a winery in Maharashtra's Baramati region

to fuel his wine tourism aspirations, which includes a wine spa along the lines of Bordeaux's Caudalie.

That's not all. The old Grover winery at Doddaballapur near the Bengaluru airport, a nostalgia-laden landmark for Indian wine lovers, is being converted into a high-end wine tourism project that includes a lounge, restaurants and sales outlets, while the main focus will shift to the 60-acre winery in Nandi Hills, a short drive away. This will mark the beginning of a brand new saga for Indian wine, upping the competition for customer attention and brand loyalty.

New winery

Viswanathan opens his laptop to show me the plans for the eco-friendly winery in Nandi Hills, scheduled to be operational in 2021. It is impressive: solar-powered, it will have a sweeping curved roof, state-of-the-art winemaking equipment, effluent treatment plants and recycling apparatus, besides a production capacity of four million litres. Winemaking will see no cost or technology spared: concrete 'egg' tanks will be used to enhance fermentation and will replace the current stainless steel tanks. Less intervention and gentler winemaking processes, including a gravity-flow design, will boost overall wine quality. Each aspect has been carefully designed to enhance the final product. "I'm not a big fan of the 20 million litres winery concept. The optimal size should be about two to five million litres. I'd rather have multiple wineries in various locations rather than one giant one," he explains.

In addition to this, Viswanathan is also planning, in the long-term, to set up multiple wineries in Nashik, and is keen to explore new regions and terroirs as well. "Most Indian wine producers favour one state or other, and interests are skewed. But with the new winery in Karnataka plus the Charosa and the Grover Zampa wineries in Maharashtra (both 1.5 million litres each), we will be evenly balanced."

Incidentally, Grover Zampa has racked up an impressive 129 international awards in competitions for



By SUDHAKARA JAIN

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Bordeaux vs Burgundy

To understand Viswanathan's compelling love for wine, one need only to look into his background. His father graduated from Burgundy's University of Dijon, and the family had a holiday home in Jura, near the Swiss border. He recalls his first taste of wine as a teenager: a glass of Champagne on New Year's Eve. "Very early on I decided that instead of trying every wine on Earth, I'd focus on what I liked," he recalls. After an early interest in Bordeaux, he discovered his true love: Burgundy, where the superlative wines of Vosne-Romanée remain closest to his heart.

The India wine connection began in the 1990s when, as a banker, he would travel to the country on work. "I noticed that Indian wines weren't too bad," he says. Grover was among the first he tasted, and here he noted "a substantial potential for growth". After quitting his job, he turned investor, running a fund management company, VisVires Capital. Around the same time, Grover Vineyards was looking for investment, and he, along with others, put in "a small stake".

Viswanathan brought in a French consultant to improve viticulture and winemaking. But things remained tough. The only solution: another massive infusion of funds. And thereby hangs a tale. Today, Viswanathan's VisVires Capital is the majority shareholder, with 50% of Grover Zampa Vineyards, and the Grover family has stepped back. "My own involvement is at the board level, but if I'm asked to give advice on wine making or technology, I will," he says.



(From top) French writer Erik Orsenna (right) and actress Nathalie Baye at the Hospices de Beaune 2018; Grover Zampa vineyards, and Viswanathan's home cellar

Maximising footfalls

With the prime location advantage of their existing and new wineries, Viswanathan is wagering on a wine tourism boom — already showing a growth spurt in Nashik, where thousands of visitors throng local wineries for tastings, weekend stays, even weddings. The Grover Zampa winery is 2.5 hours from Mumbai airport, and once completely ready later this year, will boast 70 villas, cafés, bistros and fine dining options for residential guests. The new Nandi Hills winery will offer rooms for overnight visitors, several restaurants including two branded ones, and fine dining on the terrace. Viswanathan also plans to build rustic cottages in Doddaballapur.



its wines since 2013, "more than all the other India wine producers put together", he points out.

New-age wine drinkers

While Viswanathan is certain his money will be well spent, I play devil's advocate, pointing out that the Indian wine growth story is slower than it should be for a variety of reasons, including exorbitant taxation rates, red tape and cultural divergences. He agrees, but he is betting big on the burgeoning interest and spending power of India's growing affluent middle class, a segment he describes as "a natural market for wine, being more westernised and evolved than their Chinese counterparts".

Millennials, too, are an exciting segment. "For them, wine is not about alcohol, but a whole universe to discover; it's an agricultural product where the chemical process is complex and intriguing. Wine isn't beer or whisky where you want the same taste every day. It is more than just a drink — it has social qualities, and is about lifestyle and experiences. The changes in mindset are happening faster than we think."

The biggest challenges for all Indian wine producers, he adds, is to increase geographical distribution to Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, and to increase per capita consumption, both low in India at present. One of the ideas he is considering to help demystify wine is a sommelier-at-home programme. "Indians, especially women, may be reluctant to ask questions about wines in a restaurant. So the idea is for a sommelier to come to your place, with a selection of wines, high-end cheeses, glasses, for a tasting session."

Import portfolio

Meanwhile, his recent acquisitions at the Hospice de Beaune will pave the way for the launch of Grover Zam-

The Indian wine industry is estimated to grow at 15-20% CAGR. Meanwhile, Grover Zampa's projected growth is over 50% this year.

pa's new premium wine import portfolio. The barrels (each holding 300 bottles of wine) include the white Premier Cru Meursault Les Charmes ("comparable to a Bâtard-Montrachet") and two of the red Beaune Premier Cru Cuvée Guigone de Salins. The wines, currently stored in France, will be bottled in 2020, and high rollers can pre-order bottles — even magnums or jero-boams — ahead of bottling. These will be sold ex-winery on request.

Viswanathan, ever the maverick, intends to set benchmarks for imports into India with Burgundy wines under the La Reserve brand, using the advantage of his existing stake in Chateau d'E-troyes in Mercurey, Burgundy. "These will be the best available in India, and for much less than in French retail," he says. Two exclusive La Reserve branded wines — a French Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the ₹3,000 range — are currently slated for export to India.

This isn't his only French connection; the well-known Labruyere winemaking family of France has been on board at Grover Zampa since 2012, lending their considerable expertise to his enterprises, and will play an advisory role in his new projects, from winemaking to winery design. This French know-how will weigh in Grover Zampa's favour.

As he prepares the brand for the giant leap it is poised to take, I am reminded that this is the man who created a world record by bidding €30,000 (approximately ₹23 lakh) for a bottle of vintage Yeuve Clicquot Champagne discovered in a shipwreck in Finland in 2011 — a gift for his wife on their 10th wedding anniversary. His 10,000-bottle personal cellar in Singapore brimful of rare old vintages, is any wine collector's envy. Wine, you might say, is in his blood. It makes it easy to believe that Viswanathan's vision for wine in India might not be long in coming.