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SULA VINEYARDS を5ページにわたり大特集！
「シリコン・ヴァレーからボンベイ近郊のブドウ畑へ」

『ワイン・スペクテーター／2002年11月号』より

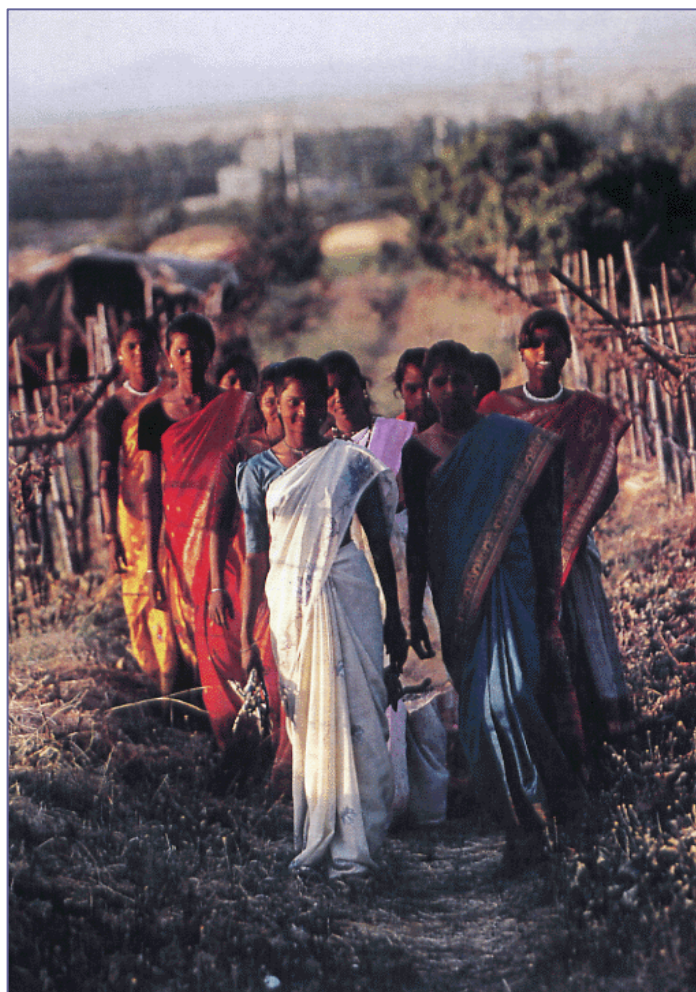


FROM SILICON VALLEY TO VINEYARDS NEAR BOMBAY



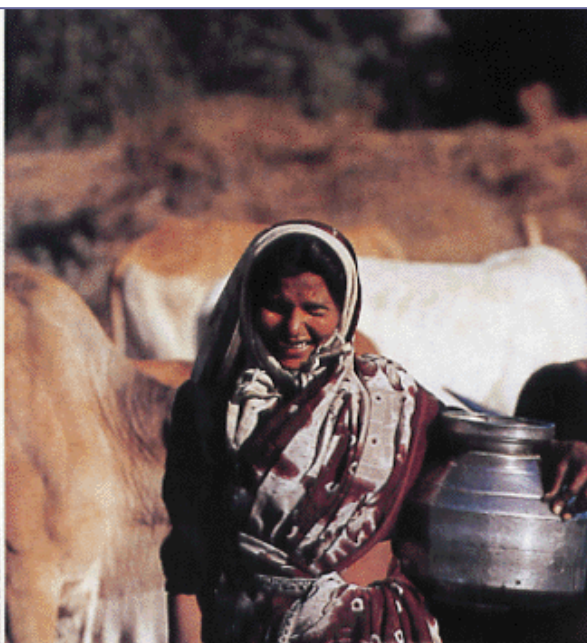
Rajeev Samant wants to make great wine in India
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK GRAHAM

Above: A world away from the California high life, Rajeev Samant now pursues fine wine at Sula. Opposite: Vineyard workers in their incandescent saris.



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at Stanford University in California, he cruised through life in the comfort zone, getting invitations to the trendiest parties and landing top jobs, the most recent of them with Oracle in Silicon Valley during the dot-com boom years of the mid-1990s. Back then, he was a bon vivant with a penchant for snazzy shirts, pretty



girls and exclusive night clubs. Friends looked at him askance when he announced grand plans to start a vineyard from scratch.

What Samant knew about the world of Indian farming—a realm of shocking poverty where lumbering oxen still pull the plow—could comfortably have been written on the back of a computer chip. Rural India is a world of early nights, arranged marriages, centuries-old traditions and fervent religious customs, a place where cows wander freely on the main highways and through food markets, women clad in brightly colored saris balance large loads on their heads, and half-naked sadhus (wandering holy men) with waist-length beards pad around barefoot in a daze of incense.

Samant knew even less about wine than he did about life in his homeland's agricultural provinces. He was a thoroughgoing amateur whose only foreknowledge of wine was that imparted by a wine-buff former girlfriend who hailed from Modesto, Calif., home of E. & J. Gallo. The technical side of winemaking, not to mention the actual physical process of planting, growing and tending grapes, had never entered Samant's mind during his time at Oracle.



Hardship is common in rural India, a hot, dusty landscape where any color brightens the scene. Clockwise, from far left: Spices and vegetables at the town market; Locals share the roads with wandering cows; Women washing the laundry in Godavari River.

Nevertheless, Samant decided to give winemaking a try. "It was a leap into the unknown," he now concedes. In the end, however, he has created one of India's first truly international-class wines, as well as a showcase facility that can hold its own aesthetically and viticulturally with those of California and Australia.

The whimsical, back-of-an-envelope plan progressed into serious research and detailed spread sheets. One early piece of excellent news—that the climate in this northern part of Maharashtra state, some 120 miles northeast of Bombay, is suited for growing wine grapes—spurred Samant on. He staked a claim to his family's land near the city of Nashik, cobbled together \$1 million from family, friends and banks, and went to work.

"Basically, people invested their faith in me. That gives you complete freedom, but it also puts all the responsibility on you. Nobody had really tried before in India the way I tried—by analyzing it scientifically and doing the homework. I looked at the

climate data and realized it was similar to parts of Sonoma from a grapegrowing point of view."

But Sonoma was a world away, and Samant needed specialized knowledge that was not available locally. Enter California-based winemaker Kerry Damskey, whose consultancy, Terroirs, has been involved with Sula since the early days. During three decades in the business, Damskey has overseen start-ups and designed production systems that can crank out millions of cases of wine.

Damskey first visited the site in 1995. "When I was first approached, my initial reaction was 'I didn't know they had wine in India,'" Damskey says. Now he knows better. "It was very exciting, a real adventure. My role here is in defining the vision and creating a road map."

He adds that Sula's product showcases serious winemaking. "The Sauvignon Blanc has a floral intensity. It also has the character of New Zealand or South Africa, with both mineral content and structure."

The peculiarities of the climate—year-round dusty heat and dryness, alleviated by a monsoon dousing between June and September—prevents the vines from undergoing their usual winter shut-down. To deal with this, Sula's staff prunes after harvest

and saves new shoots, which become fruiting canes for the following year's crop.

Water, the most precious commodity of all in the bone-dry summers in rural India, comes from an expansive lake, located a short stroll from the scenic 35-acre Sula Vineyards. All the main winery buildings were constructed from scratch, as was a ranch-style, four-bedroom house designed by top architect Rahul Mehrotra, who has studied at the Harvard Design School and whose résumé includes corporate offices, private homes, museums and an orphanage.

Another common hidden cost appears to have been avoided, or at least minimized. In a country where *bakshesh* ("bribery") is a way of life, the winery boss claims to have had no trouble with shake-downs.

"It is routine, but there have been no major demands," Samant says. "Authorities have all sorts of discretionary powers. They can shut down your plant and there is nothing you can do about it. Before we started, it took us 18 months to get a total of 200 signatures. The village head man also had to give his assent."

Not exactly the perfect situation into which a winemaking neophyte could plunge. But Samant foresees fewer problems for start-ups in the future.

"Things are changing," he maintains. "A total of 10 new wineries have now applied for licenses."

This is just one of the many ways in which a club-crawling city kid has taken the nascent Indian wine business by

Summers in India are extremely dry, but Samant (right) and his winemaker, Kerry Damskey (left), draw from a nearby lake for Sula Vineyard's water needs (below).



storm. Far from being the white elephant venture predicted by the head-shakers and naysayers, Sula is garnering positive reviews, and its bottlings are now found at top restaurants and hotel bars in India. Samant's marketing is simple and effective: Sula pitches itself as the first Indian



With the economic upturn improving, Sula is trying to figure out wine into throughout the country. Leading wines are white but Sula also has planted Cabernet Sauvignon.



space through the hotels in the far gourmet restaurants, the commercial part of the sunny south.

Samant unashamedly. The goateed editor of the magazine regularly in magazines.

"He is a very entertainment editor of the Bombay newspaper *Times of India* and Samant's longtime pal. "People here don't know that much about wine, but they do know the image. I think Rajeev is cultivating a wine culture in India."

Two other people heavily involved in the wine boom are also friends of Samant. Importer Sanjay Menon and American-trained restaurateur Rahul Akerkar see it as their mission to educate people about wine, not just make a quick buck from selling it.

"Some people are knowledgeable and others drink wine because it is the thing to do," says Akerkar, who stocks Sula and other India-made wines at his fashionable Indigo restaurant, along with bottlings from Bordeaux, California and Australia.

"I would say that, by and large, aromatic New World wines are more popular here than the big French wines. It has to do with the climate and the food. I think Sula is producing very good and very drinkable wine. We have it on our wine list—it would be criminal not to, because it is a fledgling industry which we want to support."

Wine tastings and winery visits by suppliers are all part of the long-range program, designed to put Sula firmly on the map. Internationally, distributors are being sought in the United States and the United Kingdom with the aim of making Sula an option on Indian restaurant wine lists, the hope being that an association will form in much the same way Tsingtao beer resonates with Chinese restaurant diners.

In the face of all this aggressive expansion, Samant's skeptical friends have had to eat humble pie—accompanied, of course, by a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. The winemaker is now a regular host to Bombayites keen to leave their elite clubs, bars and restaurants to see the winery firsthand; venturing into rural India is often as novel for them as it was originally for Samant.

"Almost all my friends are in banking, consultancy or the media," says Samant. "Originally, they wondered why I wanted to head out to this godforsaken place. They looked at me as if I had gone mad—they thought I would lose my shirt."

"I love coming up to the winery now. There are not many professions where you can get a life like this. There is great karma wherever you go. Doors open for you."

Mark Graham is a freelance writer and photographer based in Hong Kong.

wine of true quality, a homegrown product made with international techniques.

Interest has been such that Sula can barely meet the demand for its three main wines—Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and a *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine made from local table grapes and Chenin Blanc. Recent additions to the small stable are a blush Zinfandel, made from grapes grown on the estate, and an imported Chilean Merlot, the latter labeled under the name Satori. Before long, Sula will introduce its first red wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon fleshed out with a small amount of Shiraz, again made from locally grown grapes.

"We are pretty much selling everything we are producing," Samant says. "We have started getting inquiries from abroad. This year we will do 8,000 cases, compared to last year's 4,000. Next year, I think we could go up to 12,000."

Better than good, business looks to be on the verge of booming. "This year we will make an operating profit and a small profit after depreciation costs," Samant says. "In another two years, we should be able to pay off our loans. It is a very capital-intensive business, especially for a startup like ours. And all our supplies have to be brought in. We import corks from Portugal, foil from Spain, yeast from Australia and barrels from France."

There are other obstacles to surmount. Drinking alcohol, for a multitude of economic, religious and cultural reasons, is not a major part of Indian culture. Only the bigger cities have the bars and nightclubs common in the West. But Sula's timing has coincided nicely with India's awakening from an extended period of economic slumber. Current government policy is to relax previ-