



American Winemaker Helps

By LEA TERHUNE

Dutcher Crossing Winery overlooks the verdant panorama of Dry Creek Valley, a subdistrict of California's famed Sonoma Valley. An azure sky over green and yellow vineyards and a fragrant, cooling breeze promise a perfect day. Seated on the shaded wooden picnic bench outside the wine

tasting room, Kerry Damsky talks about his grand passion. Damsky, 51, is a master winemaker. He has received gold medals for his expertise in growing, harvesting and fermenting grapes and blending fine wines. His passion for this complex art has made an impact in India, where Damsky helps guide the development of Sula Vineyards in Nasik,

Courtesy Samant Soma Wines

Sula Vineyards, under the energetic leadership of Rajeev Samant, has put Indian wine on the map in a new way. A major contributor to Sula's success is California winemaker Kerry Damsky.



Right: Award-winning winemaker Kerry Damsky checks a bottle of wine at Stuhlmuller Winery in Sonoma, where he is a wine making consultant. He is also consulting partner at Sula Vineyards in Nasik, Maharashtra (above).

LEA TERHUNE

Build Brand India

Maharashtra. Sula is owned and operated by Rajeev Samant, who holds degrees in economics and industrial engineering from Stanford University and worked at software giant Oracle before his interest in wine culture led him back to India and into the wine business.

Damsky, from the San Francisco Bay area, was about to study anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, when his father brought home a technical book on wine making. There Damsky found his calling. He moved to Sonoma, where he took the requisite science courses, later finishing his studies in viticulture and enology, i.e., grape cultivation and wine making, at the University of California at Davis.

“It was an exciting time,” he recalls. The California wine industry was just starting to hit its stride. In 1973 Stag’s Leap wine cellars won a blind tasting in France. A California Cabernet beat top flight first growth Cabernets. “It was like, *sacre bleu!*” He earned his stripes by running “a million gallon winery” near Lodi in the Central Valley. Then, at the age of 24, he became winemaker at a 25,000-case winery, San Pasqual, near San Diego, where he could indulge in innovation. He married Daisy, gained recognition and eventually moved back to Sonoma where he continued to build his wine making reputation. He formed a consulting firm, Terroirs. *Terroir* is a French term for the sum of factors that affect growth in a vineyard: soil, elevation, climate, geographical features, orientation to the sun and so forth. The name conveys Damsky’s dedication to

“the entire ecology of fine wines” in his custom growing, wine making and executive consulting services. Winery startups and vineyard development are his specialty. He now consults for 13 wineries and is a partner in Dutcher Crossing and in his own label, Palmieri, besides being consulting partner in Sula.

India first entered Damsky’s portfolio in 1995, when Mumbai businessman Sunil Patel and Nasik-based Hambir Phatadri asked him to come to India. By that time, Damsky says he had become “a corporate guy” involved in the business side of wines. “I was bored with my job. I wasn’t making wine anymore, and I thought, ‘I want to go to India!’” He visited some vineyards in Nasik, known for its grapes, but saw only table grapes. In a nursery set up by the French, he found some Sauvignon blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot noir grapes with fruit still on the vine. “The Pinot and Chardonnay were horrible,” he says, “but the Sauvignon blanc looked really good. So that gave me an idea.” It was clear to Damsky that “the goal here was to figure out two things: what grapes would grow well in India and what wines would be appropriate for Indians.” After considering several ways to start the winery, he sent a partner, a viticulturalist, to assess the *terroir*. They agreed that “if Sauvignon blanc would work, then Chenin blanc would work.” He thought, “These are new customers, new clients, new consumers of wine, so we need to make it pretty easy.”

California, along with Australia and South Africa, ushered in what is called

New World wine making. This borrows some things, including grapes, from Old World winemakers, chiefly France, Italy and Germany, but uses technology to make bold new statements. It is the New World style that Damsky exemplifies. He explains, “We were looking at the American model. If that was a model that made sense then we should do friendly wines to start off with. We imported Muscat canelli, Symphony—which is a University of California, Davis, hybrid that is half Muscat and is Riesling-like, that grows well in warm climates—and Chenin blanc.” Both Patel and Phatadri had lived in the United States and grasped the potential of the wine business in India. Phatadri planted a vineyard, but circumstances curtailed their original winery plans.

When, two years later, Damsky was introduced to Rajeev Samant by a mutual friend over lunch at Glen Ellen, Sonoma, it was a match made in heaven. Samant was looking for a winemaker to develop vineyards and make wine on his land in Nasik, and Damsky, by this time, knew the Nasik *terroir* well. Samant wanted to



COURTESY SAMANT SOMA WINES

plant Zinfandel, a variety abundant in California. He took the cuttings back to India in a suitcase. Phadri's vineyard provided the Chenin blanc. Damsky started going to India regularly to nurture the new enterprise. "We did Chenin blanc for the domestic market. We wanted to get to the next level, so we started to do Syrah—or Shiraz as it's called in Australia—Cabernet, Zinfandel and Sauvignon blanc," Damsky says. He sent a California winemaker, Tyler Peterson, to work Sula's first vintage from start to finish in 1998. It was chaotic, Damsky says, but "they did a great job. We bottled our first Sauvignon blanc and Chenin blanc and the wines were amazingly good. They were sound. And they were clean wines, they had lots of acidity, they were bright. We sort of astounded the market." Another California winemaker, Scott Sizemore, was sent to oversee Sula's second vintage. In 2000 Sula hired Ajoy Shaw, who is now the lead winemaker. Shaw did a training stint working a harvest in Sonoma.

After Sula wines hit the market, the challenge became keeping up with the demand. "The biggest problem we had at Sula was growth for the first years," says Damsky. "We sold out of everything. We could sell three times what we made." Samant suggested they import some wine to meet the demand while the Nasik vines matured. That is how Sula's Satori brand was created. "We don't have any Merlot planted, and this was when Merlot from Chile was cheap. And it was a vehicle for many years," says Damsky. Sula also imported a Coastal Chardonnay from California. Meanwhile, "they were planting as fast as they could."

Damsky explains that because of the Indian climate, special techniques for growing grapes in tropical latitudes are employed. "The vines never go dormant, so you have to prune twice. You have to do this in any tropical latitude. Brazil does the same." Harvest time is late January for early white varieties and mid-March for red. A heavy pruning is done to force the grapes into dormancy. A second pruning is

done at the end of the monsoon and the remaining buds produce the fruit 150 days later. "The combination of growing grapes in the Indian latitude plus the 500- to 600-meter elevation allows you to grow premium grapes," he says.

Intense sun is a factor to consider in both Indian and Californian viticulture. "You have to be very careful in India because of the sun, while here in California 80 percent of the time you don't have burning heat. If you have searing heat, it just bakes the fruit. So in California we are going back to more canopy shading. In India, you don't want huge canopies so that it's fully shaded, but you want filtered sunlight."

Besides steering the wine making for Sula in India, Damsky also teaches at the Grape Processing & Research Institute in Palus, near Sangli, Maharashtra, which is jointly sponsored by Pune's Bharati Vidyapeeth and the government. He is helping them design a curriculum that will train farmers to grow wine grapes and make wine, and convert at least some table grape growers to wine grape growers. There is some resistance, but Damsky has answers: "People say, 'How am I going to make any money at three to four tons per acre when I am used to getting 12 tons per acre?' Your inputs are going to be less, you're not going to be spraying all the time. We don't want disease, but we aren't concerned cosmetically. We want smaller berries. You don't have to water as often. If the quality is high, you are going to be getting more money for the fruit. Therein lies the difference. You are going to be paid a much higher rate."

Such education is the key to success, he says. "Is it possible for India to make world-class wine? My answer is yes. It takes time. And what do we need so we can do that? The answer is trained technicians. You can't be sending consultants all the time, you need training." A positive upshot of Sula's success is more work and better income for local farmers who supply wine grapes. Sula has also entered into an agreement with Nasik's ND Wines. Sula now operates the winery and produces the ND brand from a portion of the

"Is it possible for India to make world-class wine? My answer is yes."

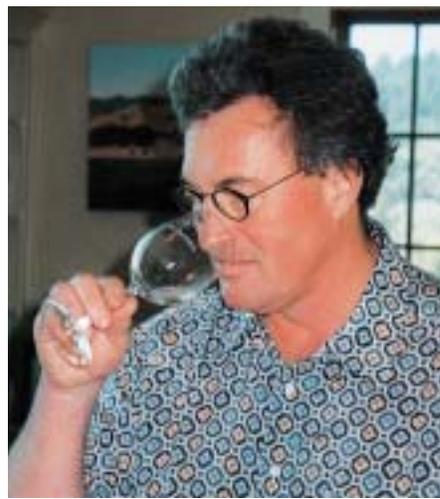
—KERRY DAMSKY

Left: Rajeev Samant, founder and owner of Sula Vineyards. Sula offers a range of varietal wines made from Indian-grown grapes.

Below: The proof of a good wine is in the "nose," the complexity of taste and the color. Kerry Damsky assesses a Dutcher Crossing Sauvignon blanc.



Courtesy Samant, Soma Wines



LEA TERHUNE

California Wine Country



Hope-Merrill House in Geyserville, Sonoma, California, is a cozy bed-and-breakfast in the heart of the wine country.

Courtesy RON and COSETTE SCHEIBER

If there is a place where business converges seamlessly with pleasure, the California wine country is that place. Many other businesses happily exist in the orbit of the vineyards. It is hard to find a more amiable, easygoing crowd than the vineyard owners and business people of the counties north of San Francisco. Gentle hills planted with picturesque vineyards, pine and redwood forests near the Pacific Coast and pleasant weather help.

Sleepy rural towns settled in the mid-19th-century preserve the look and feel of Old California. Large old homes have been conserved and turned into charming lodgings. Geyserville, in Sonoma's Alexander Valley, is where Cosette Scheiber and her husband, Ron, run a bed-and-breakfast in two stately Victorian mansions called the Hope Merrill and Hope Bosworth Houses. Scheiber says, "Just being in the wine country is fabulous, but living and working here, you find everybody is extremely supportive." While the vineyards, lodgings, restaurants and shops are hospitality businesses, she says, "We are hospitable to each other. Although there is competition, we don't feel like competitors." And tourists are warmly received guests. Each year the Schiebers welcome three small groups of aspiring amateur winemakers for a unique, on site program they call "Winemaking 101." During several days at harvest time in the autumn, participants pick their own grapes at Hope-Merrill and nearby vineyards. They are then guided through the "crush" by wine expert Graham Parnell at a small winery in the back garden. They return six months later, when fermentation is complete, to blend and bottle their wine, each person taking a case of their vintage back home.

Wine grapes are cultivated in several states, including Washington, Oregon and New York, but California has the best overall conditions in the United States for producing top wines. It all began when the 17th-century Spanish missionaries planted vineyards for sacramental wine next to their Missions up and down the state. But the fine European varietals were not planted in earnest until the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, as immigrant families from Italy, France and Germany planted vineyards. Today California wines rival the best European wines, and have the verve of New World style. The Napa Valley is perhaps the best known and most visited. Beringer, Franciscan, Robert Mondavi, Mumm and Sutter Home are a few of the better-known names among the many wineries in Napa. To the west is the Sonoma Valley, home to such wineries as Clos Du Bois, Gallo, Kendall-Jackson, Korbelt and Sebastiani. Further up the coast, Mendocino and Lake counties are as famous for scenery as for wine. Fetzer and Parducci are among the wineries located there.

Other wine regions of renown include the Livermore Valley south of San Francisco, Lodi and Woodbridge in the Central Valley, the Sierra Foothills and the Central Coast, which includes Santa Clara Valley, Santa Cruz, Carmel Valley, Monterey, Salinas, Hollister down to Paso Robles and Santa Barbara. The Central Coast was the setting of the 2005 Oscar-nominated film *Sideways*, which may not have conveyed much real information about wine but certainly promoted the wine industry. The film also gave Pinot noir a boost and Merlot an unwarranted black eye, something that had a marked effect on wine sales.

Once-bountiful agricultural land south of Santa Barbara has been

largely covered by commercial and residential development, although there are still a few wineries in the back country east of San Diego. California wine regions such as Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino or the Central Coast are loosely equivalent to what the French call appellations, which identify the geographical origins of any given wine, but in California they are not as strictly defined or legislated.

In recent years the California wine industry has changed. It is no longer necessary to build a winery or have a vineyard to make wine. Grapes may be purchased from growers and production facilities rented, thereby keeping down overhead. Winemaker Kerry Damsky explains, "You can make wine just as well at a place where you rent a facility or you work with a wine making team." Most of the wineries in California are small concerns, some producing only 2,000 to 5,000 cases of hand-crafted wines annually. Yet if they can do it, winemakers like the whole deal. "Here at Dutcher Crossing we built our own facility because part of our model is that we really wanted to create a site and a tasting room to draw people, where we could sell 95 percent of our wines at full retail," says Damsky.

Another change is that the traditional family winery is giving way to big business as more wineries are acquired by huge beverage conglomerates. Constellation Brands, which owns dozens of wineries worldwide, bought out market leader Robert Mondavi in December 2004 for \$1.3 billion. Allied Domecq, which may soon be acquired by Pernod-Ricard, owns some prime wineries, as does Foster's Group. The big companies distribute their own wines, making it hard for small, independent wineries. Unlike in India where there is little competition, California is the land of a thousand wineries, and competition is fierce. That's why a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow wineries to ship directly to the consumer in several states has small vintners raising a glass to toast future sales, made easier today by the Internet.

—L.T.

Avtar S. Sandhu

Winning Over India with Wine



Photographs courtesy AVTAR S. SANDHU

Avtar S. Sandhu's home faces the rolling acres of the Gallo vineyards, and he admittedly enjoys the view. "Every evening I watch the sun set over that hill from my deck. It's great." Delhi-bred Sandhu, 67, first came to California in 1962 as a student in structural engineering at the University of California, Berkeley. After completing his master's degree, he embarked upon a successful engineering career, working for Stone Webster and Bechtel in India and America, where he ultimately settled and became a citizen.

Enchanted by the wine country, in the 1970s he bought 23 hectares in Geyserville, and planted 12 hectares of vineyards. His first vintage was produced in 1985 with the help of winemaker Kerry Damsky. His label, Mushal, was named after Sandhu Vineyard in Geyserville.

grapes while gaining a 30 to 40 percent access to all the ND grapes, which include Sauvignon blanc, Cabernet and Syrah.

Sula, in six years, has become a sizable winery, producing 100,000 cases a year. And they are selling everything. Damsky: "You've got Rajeev and I putting together a winning style that works, in terms of New World styles—really handcrafted wines based on technology—and each year the wines get better and better." He adds, laughing, "But there's no competition. There will be competition. Everyone knows that." He says that Seagrams, now a subsidiary of Pernod Ricard, is building a winery. In recent years these companies have bought out some important Napa and Sonoma wineries and know their wine business. "Five years from now there will be five Sulas, maybe 10 Sulas. So now is the time for growth," Damsky says. And

the Indian consumer has woken up to wine. Even if only the affluent one percent of the Indian population buys wine, that is still 10 million people. Also, Sula wines are affordable. The bottom of the line red and white wine brand, Madera, sells for less than Rs. 300.

Growing the business means exploring new technology, such as a French technique called micro-oxygenation to enhance wines fermented in stainless steel tanks, fine-tuning the oak casks used for the reserve wines, or adjusting picking times. "Now we pick ripe, as I pick here, and this year we have very supple tannins, ripe flavors. The wines that we made this year—while they don't exactly taste like they are from Sonoma or Napa—they almost have a Washington State brightness. It's just slightly different, because they are from India."

Most important, they are good enough, Damsky maintains, to be sent to influential wine critic Robert Parker or *Wine Spectator* for review. Sula wines are served at a growing number of upmarket restaurants in the United States, where sommeliers like the idea of having a reliable Indian wine on their lists. More recognition will come when Sula achieves ISO certification, the stamp of a world-class operation.

Challenges remain. "Storage is still a problem," Damsky says. "We keep wines cool and refrigerated at the winery, but once it leaves the winery it's out of Sula's control." Improper storage in India's high temperatures will quickly spoil a good wine. Samant agrees. Besides educating distributors about the importance of proper handling of wines, he says, "we are working with our dis-

his family's ancestral village near Amritsar. Today Sandhu's vineyard has a 10,000-case annual capacity. He is primarily a grower, and sells his Cabernet Sauvignon, Fume blanc, Sauvignon blanc and Chardonnay grapes to nearby Pedroncelli, Acorn and Dry Creek wineries. He does occasional custom crushes under his own label. Now that he is retired, Sandhu Vineyard is his home, although he frequently returns to India to visit his family and to look after Ark Hospital, a charitable hospital that he funds in New Delhi.

Sandhu is a community activist who served three years on the Geyserville planning committee and also spent five years lobbying for legislation allowing farmers to shoot wild turkeys. Why? In the absence of natural predators, the wild turkey population in Sonoma had soared. Mobs of ravenous turkeys freely feasted on Sonoma produce, Sandhu's grapes included. His attempts to scare them off by blasting clay pigeons with a

shotgun hardly fazed them. But Sandhu's many trips to the state capital, Sacramento, paid off. He was successful in getting permission to curb the turkeys.

Now Sandhu has shifted his activism to promotion of California wine in India. Winning over New Delhi's Hotel Imperial was his first coup. In 2004 he began bottling Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon blanc wines for them under the Imperial's own house label. "The best French wines stay in France, or go to Europe and America. The rest go to South Asia, and that's not very good wine," Sandhu says. That's why he sees a good market in South Asia for California wines. Anyway, he adds, "We need people buying our wine to sell grapes."

Last year was a difficult year for grape growers in California. "We had to sell our grapes for 50 percent of the average price," Sandhu says. The reasons were overproduction coupled with slow wine turnover in the poor economic cli-



Avtar S. Sandhu in his California vineyard.

mate. "Wineries can store wine, but growers can't store grapes, so we have to sell."

Nevertheless, 2004 was a good year for the California wine industry generally. According to the San Francisco-based Wine Institute, U.S. wine exports increased an unprecedented 28 percent over the previous year, bringing a total \$794 million in wine revenues, \$173 million more than in 2003. California produces 95 percent of U.S. wine exports. Wine institute International Director Joseph O. Rollo explains, "The weaker dollar has allowed California wineries to better compete at key price points in the world export market." That, coupled with the current Government of India policy that allows duty-free import of wines by established hotels earning foreign exchange, could spell success for Sandhu and others who want to step up California exports to emerging markets such as India.

—L.T.



Sula wines are served at U.S. restaurants, where wine lovers look for a reliable Indian product.

Wine stored in barrels at Stuhlmuller Winery in Sonoma. Wine must be kept at low, controlled temperatures both in the winery and at retail outlets to preserve quality and prevent spoilage.

tributors to air-condition a part of their warehouses, as that's really the only way to deal with the heat." He points out that Sula was the first winery in India to refrigerate all storage tanks, crucial for protecting the wine. Damsky feels that the uneven or inferior quality registered by some Indian wines at tastings may be attributable, in part, to poor storage.

While there is more work to do, India is undeniably on the global wine list, and Damsky is having a good time doing his part to keep it there. "Wine making comes naturally. It's a passion that works well for me." It seems to work well for Sula, too. □

About the Author: *Lea Terhune is a freelance writer based in California and a former editor of SPAN.*