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From California to Nashik

+ Global wine-maker Kerry Damskey talks about all things wine

BY BRINDA SRIDHAR

Be it parties, weddings, farewells or get-togethers, any occasion is a moment to celebrate. And what better way to do that than to pop a bottle of wine and raise a toast to happy times. However, while the drink is a customary practice for us on occasions, for some people like Kerry Damskey, the fermented spirit is his occupation.

Flying across the globe from Costa Rica to Israel, the wine consultant, maker and connoisseur is on a mission to lead, teach and design the style of making wine. Damskey, who is the Master Winemaker at Sula Vineyards based in Nashik, was in the city recently to promote their new winery.

How it all began

One of the many countries the California-based Damskey frequents is India. He recalls that his connection with the country began when he met Rajeev Samant, who is now the CEO of Sula Vineyards, through a mutual friend. Damskey had worked with many wineries and was looking to take his knowledge to the international level. "Rajeev had just quit his job and wanted to open a winery. He got in touch with me and I agreed. We'd plant different kinds of grapes and pair wines with Indian cuisine to figure out which wine suits the country best. In 1999, we had our first production of Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc and that was the start of Sula."

He sticks to his California principles when making wine in a new area. "Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't." Kerry, however, points out that while Californian wines usually have a fruity flavour due to their concentrated extract and alcohol, the wines in India are less in terms of alcohol content due to difference in climate and temperature. "High alcohol wines don't



The finer things Kerry Damskey **BY** KRISHNA KARTHIK

taste good in a warm climate which means I pick them a little less mature and bring down the alcohol. The wines in India need to be more fruit-driven and not oak-driven. Wines are slightly different here but they aren't a whole different bottle."

His goal is to bring in wines that go well with Indian food. Unfortunately, with the tropical climate come certain drawbacks. "I make a lot of Chardonnay but it doesn't work with this climate. Pinot Noir is my favourite after a long day but that too doesn't grow well here. Those are some wines that you'll just have to buy from the market."

The science of it

In his opinion, it is good to find

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wines that go well with spice. "When you are eating, the wine should not be the dominant part of the experience, but rather in the background. There is less importance on pairing it with food here. I believe that wine goes well with anything. If you are a first-time taster, it is better to have something spicy so that the taste is amplified."

While enology (wine chemistry) was the focus of Kerry's degree, he

has knowledge of picking grapes and processing. "Changes with respect to India are mainly eco-driven rather than wine-flavoured. For example, to remove excess potassium from a wine, traditionally it is chilled to near zero, which consumes energy. Electro-dialysis is a process that takes out the excess charged particles with the help of its membranes. This allows me to be more hands-off but I've always got my eyes on the chemistry."

Complexity may be involved in the machinery but simplicity sticks true to the taste of the wine. "Less is better in the process of wine-making. Lesser the handling you do to a wine, the richer and thicker it'll be," Kerry sums up.