



A family visit to Grover Zampa Vineyards, Nandi Hills

Description

If you are a wine person and you happen to be in Bangalore, India then a visit to Grover Zampa Vineyards (GZV) becomes a foregone conclusion. Unlock 3.0 provided one such opportunity which I utilised to put together a family sojourn to this renowned winery and its vineyards. Here I endeavour to record some of my experiences during this trip.

The winery is located at Doddaballapur which is at a distance of about 40 kms from Bangalore and it takes about an hour to reach there. After driving through the hustle and bustle of the busy city, the serenity surrounding the Grover Zampa Vineyards instantly switches the mood to calmer mode.



Grover Zampa Vineyards are located around 40km from Bangalore

Best wine comes from the best vineyards

Since planting of its first vines in 1988, GZV vineyards have steadily grown in size and stature and its wines are now counted amongst best not only in India but worldwide and the numerous international wine awards are a testimony to this. The philosophy of its founders that *“best wine comes from best vineyards”* still guides the company’s winemaking efforts.

Sourcing French expertise

Being aware of the challenges of tropical viticulture and the lack of best oenological practices in the country at that time, the pioneers of the group collaborated with French wine experts right from the beginning. The site selection and planting of the very first vineyards with pre selected international grape varieties was done in consulting advice from George Velasse aka the Pope of Champagne. After a few years the company was joined by another famous French oenologist Michel Rolland who in turn handed the reigns to Mathias Pellissard who continues till date to advise and guide the winemaking at GZV.

The Vineyards

I visited the vineyards in company of Mr Manjunath VG who is the Vice President Vineyards at GZV. He is an an expert viticulturist and a repository of vineyard knowledge. I was indeed impressed by seeing him carry a vine secateur (see picture below) which shows an appreciable hands down approach in the vineyards.



Secateur is a tool to prune the vines. It is used for selective removal of previous season's vine growth so as to prepare the vines for the upcoming next season. (Pic credit - GZV)

The gradually sloping vineyards against the backdrop of the Nandi Hills present a majestic view and it didn't take much time for me to appreciate the immense natural beauty of the place. The whole vineyard area is sub divided into a number of individual plots, each dedicated to a specific grape varietal and as Manjunath brought out, the grapes from these different plots are vinified separately (a technique often adopted by reputed international wine houses), to ensure that the micro terroir of each land parcel gets its unique expression in the wine.

The vines supported over wires attached to vertical natural granite posts, provide a neat look to the vineyards. The rows are aligned to face south direction which is necessitated to avoid a long exposure to Sun which can harm the vines - welcome to the tropics !!



GZV Vineyards with Nandi Hills in the backdrop

Favourable micro climate

Bangalore and its surrounding are located at the heart of the Mysore Plateau and the average elevation is about 3020 feet. Nandi Hills, near which the vineyards are located are one of highest features in the area. All these natural conditions provide a favourable micro climate for the vines to grow. The warm daytime temperatures ensure that the grapes ripen well and at same time the cool winds flowing down the Nandi Hills provide the coolness which helps the grapes to develop the requisite acidity. A reasonable degree of diurnal temperature difference between the warm days and cooler nights facilitate a healthy phenolic development of the grapes which result in quality wines.

Out of the total requirement of grapes for making wines, about 30% grapes comes from vineyards owned by GZV (these are used exclusively to make reserve wines). Balance 70% or so are sourced from other growers in nearby locations where a strict quality control is exercised in terms of controlling yields etc and only the best produce is procured.

Red Soil

Many areas around Bangalore have a typical light red soil and the same catches your eye in the vineyards too. The soil varies from Sandy clay loam / Sandy loam for whites, sparkling and late harvest plots to more gravelly loamy soils for the super premium wines.

Embracing technology

The tropical viticulture in India demands a precise and controlled provision of water in the vineyards. This is being done in GZV vineyards by means of drip irrigation. Towards this, sap sensors are also being inducted which measure the vine transpiration and forward the data to the servers, which in turn ensure provision of the exact amount of water for the vines. (Technology is the buzz word at GZV and such sensors are a part of the bigger holistic plan to apply latest technology measures both in the winery and the vineyards).



Drip irrigation is done by means of horizontal flexible water pipes running along the bottom of the vines

The company is also actively looking to acquire vineyard drones. These would fly over the vines and monitor the grapes in terms of their size, colour, ripeness, vigour etc and would also look out for symptoms of disease. Such information will then be sent to the lab for analysis.



Vineyard Drone (representative picture courtesy [daily.seventyfive.com](https://www.daily.seventyfive.com))

Happy bees mean healthy vineyards



Bee culture in GZV vineyards

Manjunath also believes that the best indicator of the condition of any vineyard is the state of its bees and that happy bees mean all is well. The bees' action leads to cross-pollination which allows growth of other fruits and flowers thereby facilitating bio diversity which allows grape vines to grow well. Bee culture is a well adopted practice in best vineyards and GZV follows it too.

Pond in the vineyard

Just adjacent to the bee homes is a reasonably big man made pond which meets the water need in the vineyards. But having a pond doesn't mean unlimited water for the vines. On the contrary the vines are made to stress by giving just about the adequate water to meet their hydric stress. Those conversant with vine growing know the importance of strict water management in vineyards and same is followed at GZV also.



Pond provides self sufficiency in the vineyards water needs (Pic credit to GZV)

The Winery

Winery visit was conducted by Mr Yathindhar who's a young sommelier with GZV. He has studied wines at Bordeaux in France which is considered as the Mecca for wine lovers. While at Bordeaux he

also got an opportunity to train at a Michelin Star Restaurant â?? Le Grand Maison (2 stars).

Optical Sorting of grapes



Optical sorter selects only the best grapes for making wine. Here itâ??s seen covered and preserved for the next harvest season

Yathin started by showing us some of the most useful winemaking equipment namely the de-stemmer, pneumatic press and the crusher. Besides this he also explained about another hi tech machine called as the optical sorter which has recently been inducted into the winery. After de-stemming the grapes are made to go through the optical sorter which is designed to optically analyse the grapes for pre decided parameters like color, size, damage etc with an aim of selecting only the best grapes for making wine.



Pneumatic press used in making of white wines

Fermentation cellar

The must coming out from the pneumatic press/crusher is fed to the fermentation tanks which are housed in a temperature controlled cellar. The moment you enter this cellar, the first thing which strikes you is the enormous size of the stainless steel tanks which leaves you feeling dwarfed, overawed and fascinated. It is quite cold in the cellar and the tanks are even cooler.

It is my personal belief that the magic, if any, in making of wines happens in such fermentation tanks. It is here that the added yeast converts the grape juice must into wine and if that's not a *voilà* moment then nothing else can be...!! (Well not counting conversation of water into wine by Lord himself).

The advantages of using temperature controlled stainless steel tanks for fermentation are largely two folds. One is the fermentation generates a lot of heat which if not controlled can lead to damage and accidents, here this is avoided. And secondly, stainless steel preserves the original freshness and character of the wine which is much sought after by consumers.



Temperature controlled stainless steel fermentation tanks help retain freshness of the wines

The cellar also houses a egg shaped cement concrete tank. Such tanks are finding much favour in wineries internationally and has been specially procured by GZV too. The main advantage here is that due to its peculiar shape and material it ensures a natural cooling during fermentation. Micro porous surface of the tank also results in a micro oxygenation during fermentation which some believe is good for the wine.



Concrete tank is becoming a preferred choice for fermentation by many wineries

The Barrel Room

Next we entered the barrel room which is one of major attractions in the winery. Winemaker Mr Abhijit Shendage is in complete charge here. He let us move around in this cold room which houses wine barrels of different sizes.

After the wine is produced in the fermentation tanks, it is transferred to these barrels for maturation and ageing. Not all wines see the barrels though – the light, fresh, ready to drink white/rose and even some light red wines are not put through barrels. The big reds – meaning the red wines with rough tannins, good acidity, sugar and high alcohol levels are the perfect customers for barrel ageing.



Only French oak barrels are used in the winery

Abhijit told us that only French oak barrels are used in the winery which impart the notable vanilla flavour to the wines. He also explained how the wooden barrels soften the harsh tannins in the wine to make it more palatable on one hand and on the other they also add own flavours to the wine.

In the spirit of innovation the winery is also experimenting with ageing wines in clay amphorae. Though this trend is fast getting prevalent in wineries world over however the concept is seemingly as old as

wine itself. Clay amphorae are known to have been used for ageing wines in Georgia region way back about 6000 years. These amphorae are less porous than oak barrels so they do allow minimal oxygenation of wines being aged, but unlike barrels these do not add any additional aroma or flavour to the wine.



Clay amphorae are now widely used for ageing wines world over

Tasting wines from the barrel

Tasting wines direct from the barrel while they are being aged, is an experience which all wine lovers crave for. My request for same was graciously accepted by Abhijit and it lead to one tick less in my bucket wish list. The first wine we tasted from the barrel was the Cabernet Shiraz which I found to be fresh with already rounded tannins and a good mouth feel. The other one was the Viognier where I could feel some aromas and flavours imparted by oak. Internationally Viognier is a tough grape to grow but Abhijit brought out that this varietal has best adapted to Indian vineyards.



Barrel wine tasting is one of best experiences

Curated Wine tasting session

After visiting the vineyards and the winery now was the time for a curated wine tasting session where Yathin lead us through a flight of GZV wines starting from the Sparkling Brut to Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Rose, Cabernet Shiraz and finally the La Reserve. Interspersed with nibbling on cheese and crackers it turned out to be an enjoyable experience with both wine and wine knowledge flowing.



Curated wine tasting session

Family lunch

The befitting finale to our wondrous visit to Grover Zampa Vineyards was the family lunch we had at the winery precinct. While the dishes were being served I sneaked away to the in-house wine shop and bought the Grover Art Reserve Viognier which proved to be a perfect pairing with the scrumptious dishes by the winery chef and even went well with the desert.



Grand finale to a wonderful visit

Epilogues : Locals love GZV wines

Wines is a luxury product and consumed maximum in Tier 1 cities. Wine marketers dream is to make it popular in Tier 2/3 cities as well which represents huge market. So as a product wine marketing follows a top down approach â?? from metros to cities to towns. At GZV I learnt that local populace residing in rural areas near the winery love GZV wines. They consider it as an healthy alternative to hard liquor. Itâ??s certainly surprising, but if wines are preferred by our rural folks then itâ??s a huge market, maybe a bottom up marketing strategy is needed. Hope the wine marketers make a note of this .. !!