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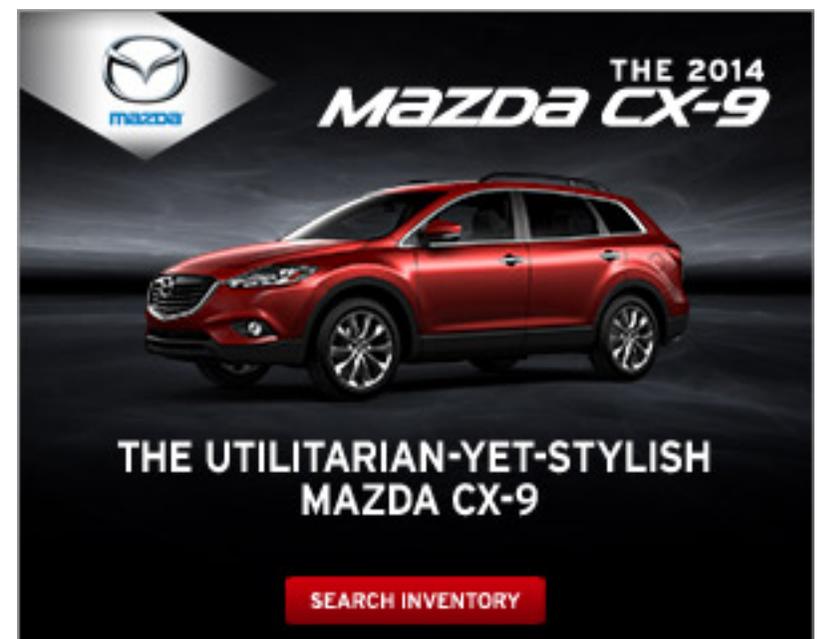
We love this French affair

By Moeena Halim | Posted 09-Feb-2014

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The French have reached our backyard, with wines and cheese in tow. Well, not really. A couple of Mumbaiites are now striving to give us the French connection.

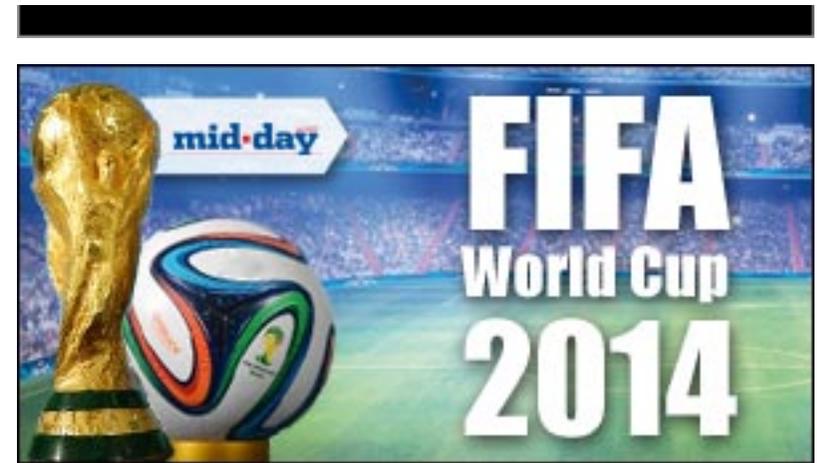


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THE UTILITARIAN-YET-STYLISH MAZDA CX-9

SEARCH INVENTORY

Moeena Halim visits the Igatpuri-based boutique winery Vallonné, where wine is made the French way by winemaker Sanket Gawand and then chats with Prateeksh and Agnay Mehra at Dahisar, whose venture Spotted Cow Fromagerie makes decadent cheese



Taking the turn towards Wadiwarhe village, just off the Mumbai-Nasik highway, we are in for a violently bumpy ride. Barely eight to 10 kilometres from the highway, the bad roads ensure the ride lasts at least half an hour. But as soon as we pass Sanjegaon village, the view of the Mukhne Dam with the ghats in the backdrop has us ignoring our travel travails.

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The reds — the Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon and the Merlot — are aged appropriately in their French oak barrels, toasted to the choice of the winemakers. The sweet and tart Chenin Blanc and the more complex, green-flavoured Sauvignon Blanc are Vallonné's two whites

Apparently, there are over 40 wineries in the Nasik area; but what sets Vallonné apart is its determination to remain a boutique winery. The first-of-its-kind winery was set up in 2009, and has chosen to stay exclusive despite being appreciated for its French-styled wines.

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Vallonné, a first-of-its-kind winery, was set up in 2009, and has chosen to stay exclusive despite being appreciated for its French-styled wines. It overlooks the Mukhne Dam near Nasik

This year the winery, which has always been keen on hosting wine enthusiasts for tastings, has decided to offer food and accommodation as well. As we enter the premises with its perfectly manicured lawns dotted with pretty little purple and white flowers, we catch sight of what is expected to be the tasting room. The building, which will also house

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rooms for guests who would like to stay overnight, is far from complete and is likely to take at least another month until it is ready. “But we have a tent that adventurous visitors can use. We also have a cook on the premises, who will cook anything you’d like with your wine. We only need a few days’ notice,” says assistant winemaker Ashmita Pol, who we catch up with along with winemaker Sanket Gawand at what they call the ‘laboratory’ in the winery’s basement. With all the tubes, beakers and chemicals, it’s a fitting moniker indeed.

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Winemaker Sanket Gawand and assistant winemaker Ashmita Pol

If you ask them nicely, the resident winemakers will take you on a tour of the winery with its impressive tankers and oak barrels, accompanied by a quick tutorial on winemaking as well as a tasting session. Their reds, the Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon and the much-appreciated Merlot, are aged appropriately in their French oak barrels, toasted to



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the choice of the winemakers. The sweet and tarty Chenin Blanc and the more complex, green-flavoured Sauvignon Blanc are Vallonné's two whites. "Our full-bodied rose, also made from the Cabernet Sauvignon grape, is one of the biggest hits in the market," claims Pol, holding up one of the last bottles of the 2013 batch.

In 2011, unfortunately, Vallonné's vineyards at the periphery of the winery were infected by a virus. While a new batch of saplings will be sowed in a couple of weeks, the grapes from these vineyards will be ready to use for making the wine only after two years. "Currently we are dependent on contract farming. The same farmers have been associated with us since we set up in 2009 and they know exactly what we want," says Gawand, who learnt the ropes from Bordeaux-based Marie Barbé, now a consulting winemaker for Vallonné.

A batch of grapes has just arrived from a vineyard in Baramati, and the winemakers are to decide whether or not it is time for the grapes to be harvested. So while I don't get the much-wanted tour of the vineyards, my gracious



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winemaker hosts do give me a taste of the deliciously sweet grape juice they have extracted before it is made into wine.

Price: R999 (A one day tour, which includes tasting)

Address: GAT 504, Kavnai Slopes, Near Sanjegaon, Tal: Igatpuri, Nashik 422402

Contact: +919272227773

Say cheese

Walk into their ‘cave-like’ temperature-controlled basement, and you will find Prateeksh and Agnay Mehra checking on their artisanal cheeses — salting, flipping, looking out for infections, and ensuring a highly sanitised environment.



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The buttery camembert has a soft white rind on the outside, and is decadent and creamy on the inside

Prateeksh, also a food photographer, began his experiments with making cheese about a year ago. “I had several failures but the only way for me to learn was by trial and error,” says Prateeksh, who has read a number of books and studied several websites for information. “It’s bizarre how the little but important details are left out in these write-ups. Even when I followed their advice to the T, I failed miserably. Besides, nothing can prepare you for the kind of climate we have in Mumbai. And more often than not, the milk delivered to you is severely adulterated,” he adds.

Overcoming these initial challenges, and getting hold of a tabelawala who brings them the freshest unadulterated cow’s milk, the Mehras have managed to produce four varieties of bloomy cheeses — the buttery camembert and brie, and the tartier saint marcellin and Italian robiola. With a soft white rind on the outside, these cheeses are decadent and creamy on the inside. “I love their versatility - they can be used for baking, desserts, and can be deep fried as well,”

says Prateeksh.

The entire cheese-making process — from pasteurising the milk (following very strict temperature control) to adding the culture and rennet — is handled by the Mehra brothers. “It is a delicate process and contamination can happen very easily,” explains Prateeksh, who also brews his own beer. “I realised there was a shortage of good, locally made cheese when I wanted to pair my beer with cheese. Although wine and cheese is the traditional French pairing that is now so popular worldwide, beer and cheese go really well together too,” he adds, hoping to popularise the trend in the city soon.

The Spotted Cow Fromagerie is slated to begin retailing in mid-March. “We will introduce two sizes. While cheese fiends can opt for the regular size, we’ve also got a smaller petite version for those looking for an introduction to these cheeses,” says Prateeksh.

Log onto: www.thespottedcow.in; Email: prateeksh.mehra@gmail.com

The perfect pairing

Prateeksh Mehra tells us which wines to serve with his four cheeses.

Camembert: *Pale yellow, creamy, soft and crumbly, this cheese tastes best with fruits and nuts and can be served with a baguette.*

Wine: *Beaujolais, Chenin Blanc, St Emilion, St Estephe or Normandy cider, Cabernet Sauvignon*

Brie: *Slightly greyish under the rind, this pale cheese is traditionally dipped in coffee and savoured.*

Wine: *Shiraz, pinot gris, sauvignon blanc, champagne and sparkling wines (more acidic and dry whites)*

Saint Marcellin: *This cheese has a mushroomy and nutty flavour, with a delicate rind and runny interior texture.*

Wine: *Cabernet and Chardonnay*

Robiola: *This tangy, almost sour cheese, is an Italian soft ripened cheese.*

Wine: *Pinot gris and Prosecco*

Tags: #French wine makers #Vallone #Igatpuri-based boutiques
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