

THE WINE CLUB



ALOK CHANDRA

Wine policies in India

With the Modi juggernaut powering back to a thumping majority in the recent Lok Sabha elections, what does this presage for the wine industry in India?

As everybody knows, alcoholic beverages are a state subject in India — which means that every state (and Union Territory) has its own rules and regulations and duties and taxes on the stuff. Imports come under the purview of central customs and excise, which since 2009 levies a basic customs duty on all alcoholic beverages @ 150 per cent of assessable value (which is the CIF cost plus one per cent). Star hotels and restaurants earning foreign exchange can get a “duty-free” licence, which enables them to buy spirits/beer/wine free of customs duty — a huge saving, enabling them to charge mark-ups of 250 per cent to 300 per cent (which is partly why prices are so high in these establishments).

There was an initiative by the UPA government to support the wine industry in India: after two years of deliberation the “Indian Grape Processing Board” (note the aversion to the word “wine”) was set up in 2009 under the Ministry of Food Processing Industries with a set of lofty if woolly objectives (“to formulate a vision and action plan for the growth of Indian wine sector...”).

However, this body was wound up in 2016, having gone through its corpus of ₹75 crore in five years with little significant achievements to its credit: a few seminars, participation in some wine fairs overseas, an industry study farmed out to consulting company Deloitte, an aborted attempt to register India with the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV), and subsidies of up to ₹50 lakh for wineries being set up (gleefully taken up by many new and not-so-new wine companies).

In Europe, one can get a glass of fairly decent wine at a bar for as little as €2 (₹150); here the starting price would be at least twice that. Retail prices of wines here are about two to three times that of the same wines overseas; retail prices of even entry-level domestic wines are now ₹700 plus per bottle.

The basic problems with the wine industry in India are (a) decent wines are far too expensive; (b) producing decent wines is costly; and (c) taxes and controls both conspire to keep prices high.

Let’s face it: wine is not on anybody’s list of priorities — rather the reverse, what with more states jumping on the prohibition bandwagon. And no state is willing to differentiate wine (and beer, which is also a “fermented” alcoholic beverage) from spirits — these products are seen as being “elitist”, never mind that both are relatively low-alcohol and as such not harmful to one’s health.

There’s no other reason why wine sales here are less than one per cent of the total alcoholic beverages market in value, and why only three companies (Sula, Grover-Zampa and Fratelli) account for the vast majority of domestic wine sales. Or why per capita consumption of wine is a measly 30 ml, against a world average of 3.35 litres — even China at 240 ml per capita has the fifth-highest total wine consumption worldwide.

Time for policy-makers to realise that India needs to catch up with the rest of the world not just in economic terms but also in the softer side of governance: wine is an indicator of the quality of life, and both our citizens as well as visitors deserve a better deal here, rather than being ripped off in the guise of non-elitism.

Wines I’ve been drinking: The Tenuta Sant’Antonio Familia Castagnedi Amareone 2013 is a lip-smacking red made mainly from Corvina and Rondinella grapes in the Veneto region of north-east Italy. Amareone wines are also called “straw” wines because the grapes are allowed to wither on straw mats for three-four months, losing 40 to 45 per cent of their weight before processing, so the wine becomes richer and higher in alcohol. A tad expensive at ₹6,825 in Bengaluru (and only \$35 plus tax overseas), but still one of the better-value Amareone wines available.

Saluti, as the Italians say.

Alok Chandra is a Bengaluru-based wine consultant



Night at the gallery

Mumbai’s art spaces are collectively agreeing to extend hours on certain days so that patrons can walk in late. **Ranjita Ganesan on the city’s gallery-hopping culture**

Every few Thursdays, small groups of stylishly dressed people pile into the Apollo Bunder region of Colaba after work and, unprompted, the men selling *shawarma* and curios there know to point them upstairs. On these select nights, the ascent in the century-old Grants Building and Kamal Mansion is marked by headiness and chatter, the sources of which are the clusters of contemporary art galleries they are home to. Novices and experts sip wine, scan the works, and make observations before dashing off to shows next door. It is all much less stuffy and more convivial than the typical art show opening.

Seven years after it began, the relationship between “Art Night Thursday” and the art-loving public has yet to develop an itch. Back in 2012 several young galleries of Colaba joined hands with the existing cluster of spaces in Kala Ghoda to form what is now known as the “Mumbai Art District”. They started a few events, hoping to build a sense of community. Among them the “Mumbai Gallery Weekend” — a long weekend packed with exhibitions and talks — to engage with collectors, and the monthly “Art Night Thursday” which allowed working people to drop by as galleries remained open till 9.30 pm rather than the usual 6 pm, and which often featured new show launches. Their example was based on New York’s gallery scene which has had monthly late-night openings for long.

The scene has been made further interesting in recent years by the emergence of independent groups like Carpe Art and Art Walks, which conduct tours for the uninitiated. Art school students as well as lawyers and bankers in their 60s are signing up. “There is no gallery-going culture in Mumbai. It can seem new and intimidating and mostly people don’t know where to go,” says Viraj Mithani, who leads walkthroughs for Carpe Arte.

Rather than individual meditation on the works, the

Art Night Thursday experience is about a sense of collegiality. “Often, this means that the social aspects of gallery-going take precedence over quiet and reflective engagement with the art on view,” says Mortimer Chatterjee, member of the Mumbai Art District and co-founder of the gallery Chatterjee & Lal. “It is usual for our regular visitors to first come with friends during an Art Night Thursday, and then revisit alone sometime later.”

Taking a cue from the South Mumbai galleries, their counterparts in Central Mumbai areas recently formed the Midtown Mumbai Arts Collective (MMAC). So art spaces in Worli, Lower Parel and Byculla, which include Volte, Saffronart and Tao, are keeping their doors open longer during their own bi-monthly fixture, “Art Night Friday”. Located in a commercial quarter of the city, the spaces are scattered, and a hop-on hop-off bus service is used to connect them. “The events are not about the commerce as much as about community outreach,” says Anupa Mehta, a Lower Parel-based art consultant who co-founded the event together with Rashmi Dhanwani of Art X Company.

Noting that offices in the city worked longer hours than 9 to 5, Ashvin Rajagopalan of the Piramal Museum of Art decided to keep his space open until 8 pm. Rather than the older crowd that frequents any South Mumbai cultural event, he says the midtown district typically attracts families and young professionals. The galleries there plan to bring performance art and food venues into the fold, too. Whereas Art Night Thursdays are free, attending Art Night Friday costs about ₹350 for access to the bus and a complimentary drink at the end of the night in a nearby café.

A faint frisson of the underground envelops the activity. Even if it always falls on the second Thursday of each month, notices

do not appear online until a few days before the event so that one needs to keep checking pages in the newspaper. It is not for the absent-minded. Still, people are making an effort and the nights remain well-attended. “It has become an event, particularly for younger people, and some even plan their Mumbai visit to coincide,” says Geetha Mehra, director of Sakshi Gallery. The Mumbai Art District plans to create a website for more timely updates.

For enthusiasts like Supriya Menon, a museum consultant who works in South Mumbai and lives in the north-eastern suburb of Mulund, being able to stay back in South Mumbai and enjoy art after work is amply more appealing than having to make that journey separately on a weekend. Most galleries time their previews and openings to match with extended-

‘OUR REGULAR VISITORS OFTEN FIRST COME WITH FRIENDS DURING AN ART NIGHT THURSDAY, AND THEN REVISIT ALONE SOMETIME LATER’

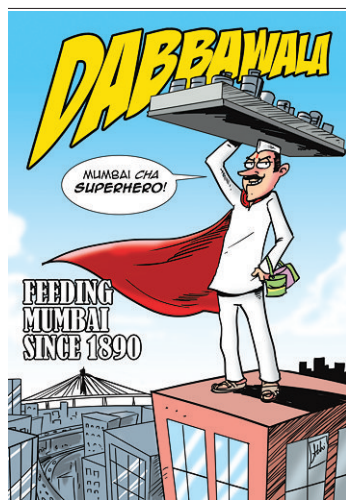
MORTIMER CHATTERJEE
Chatterjee & Lal



(Top) A scene from Worli’s Gallery Art & Soul during the last ‘Art Night Friday’ gallery-hop hosted by the Midtown Mumbai Arts Collective in April; (above) a café at the end of the walk; families and young professionals at a walkthrough and discussion

hours days. Over the years, this has helped Menon become familiar with the works of promising artists like Parag Tandel and Sumakshi Singh. It is a mixed bag, she observes, as is often the case with contemporary art. “But the good thing is you can gallery-hop and find something interesting.”

New exhibitions are expected to open at Mumbai Art Room, Galerie Isa and TARQ on the forthcoming Art Night Thursday (June 13)



City in profile

A new exhibition pays tribute to the working-class emblem that is the city of Mumbai, writes Ritwik Sharma

It took Valay Shende a year and a half to install a life-size truck with tens of workmen, all composed of thousands of shiny stainless steel disks. *Transit (Truck)*, which stands like a sombre ornament, is his ode to the labour force that struggles to make a living as it continues to build the megapolis of Mumbai.

The 2010 sculpture has been displayed in

cities around the world. Now, it is one of Shende’s sculptures dedicated to the city that will be part of an exhibition titled “Spirit of Mumbai”.

Shende feels a connect with the teeming millions, including many from the working class who, like him, have migrated to Mumbai. Migration is a running family theme as well. Shende’s father had moved from a village in Bhandara to Nagpur, while he in turn came to Mumbai and honed his craft at the JJ School of Art.

Shende is a multimedia artist whose work blends sculpture, photography, video and installation. In *Transit*, he placed two screens in the truck’s rear-view mirrors that play videos he’d shot on the city. As the footage unfolds, from the driver’s seat the screens would give an impression of the truck moving, as if past under-construction buildings. It’s the artist’s way of suggesting that the development of the city or the country, by extension, is visible. “But

As it seeks to celebrate the indomitable spirit of the ‘maximum city’, the exhibition places the dabbawala at the forefront

there is no development in the lives of labourers. I wanted to portray that contrast in this work.”

Among other artworks of his that will be on display are portrayals of commuters in the frenetic Virar Fast local train (Shende used to live in the suburb) and that of the famous dabbawalas — those reliable purveyors of tiffin to the hard-working people of Mumbai. In the train sculpture, he shows commuters hanging by the doors, a striking image of daily survival and the fight for a better life.

In the other, Shende opts to create a life-size figure out of ticking wristwatches — apt symbolism for the clockwork precision of the dabbawala — with gilded stomachs in his hands, in place of lunchboxes.

As it seeks to celebrate the indomitable spirit of the “maximum city”, the exhibition places the dabbawala at the forefront. Besides showcasing Shende’s work, it will also launch *Dabbawala Superhero*, an English and Marathi comic by city-based cartoonist Abhijeet Kini and his wife Diksha who were commissioned by Parsi restaurant chain SodaBottleOpenerWala.

The comic tells the story of a child who identifies the dabbawala, when asked to name a superhero in school. “It tells how the dabbawalas came into existence and how they became what they are, which is nothing short of a superpower. Mumbai is known for its people, and dabbawalas are very much a part of it,” says Kini.

The ‘Spirit of Mumbai’ exhibition will be open to the public at Palladium, Mumbai, from June 15 to August 18, 2019



(Left) Valay Shende with his installation *Transit (Truck)*; and the cover of *Dabbawala Superhero*, a comic that will be launched at the exhibition