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Climate Change and Indian Harvest Report 2016

Jan 15: Thanks to the climate change, Maharashtra seems to be experiencing a unique grape growing season with warmer December resulting in advancing the harvest generally by a couple of weeks earlier than usual and the unseasonal post-monsoon rains causing lower yields with a resulting increase in grape prices to as high as Rs. 50 a kg., writes Subhash Arora who collected data from 5 wineries and feels that the Karnataka-based KRSMA Winery has been the only exception out of the information collated

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SULA VINEYARDS

Affected by the climate change like the other Maharashtra producers, Sula Vineyards, India's largest wine producer started the wine grape harvest on December 16. 'This year the effects of climate change and global warming are highly apparent with our harvest starting fully two weeks earlier than ever before,' says **Rajeev Samant**, Founder CEO of Sula. He adds that the industry as well as wine growers are bearing the brunt of climate change and now have to rapidly adapt their practices to cope with the often adverse effects.'

Continuing with its annual production growth of 20% which he feels will be the industry average this year despite lower yields, Sula will crush around 13,000 tons of grapes, 20% higher than the 2015 vintage. Working with over 400 grape growers in Maharashtra and Karnataka with 10-year assured buyback contracts for its three wineries in Maharashtra and the one in Karnataka respectively, total payments to the farmers are expected to cross Rs. 500 million this year, he says.

'The last three harvests were of excellent quality and quantity but 2016 looks to be much more challenging with lower yields due to unseasonal post-monsoon rains. Wine grape prices have again increased this year with red grape prices going to as high as Rs. 50/kg for premium quality,' says Samant who takes pride in sharing that in the sixteen years since Sula began operations the company has built very strong relations with their growers whose ranks are growing every day. There has not been a single contract dispute since beginning, he adds.

Giving an overall picture, an optimistic Rajeev estimates that the industry will crush over 27,000 tons of grapes in 2016 and will set an ambitious target of 100,000 tons within 5 years.

GROVER ZAMPA VINEYARDS

Their vineyards are mainly spread across three major locations of India-mainly Bangalore, Solapur and Nashik regions for the supply of their grape requirement under own/ leased vineyards and through contract farming.

Bangalore region 'normally meets majority of grape requirement every year for our Super premium and premium brands. This year will be challenging due to bad weather and record rains (up to 230 mm) received during the month of November 2015 because of low pressure belt created around Chennai', says **Sumedh Singh Mandla**, CEO of GroverZ. 'This was challenging as the vineyards were in pre-bloom to bloom stage and it rained continuously for several days without much sunshine. We had to take swift measures to control any damages due to downy mildew and other infection. We expect slightly less yield but good concentration in fruits. Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier from some of our top vineyards are looking outstanding', he adds.

Solapur Region: This region covers Solapur and Osmanabad districts in Maharashtra and Bijapur district in Karnataka and provides them around 30% of grapes from contract farmers for premium and classic segment wines every year. 'This year would be unique for the quality of grapes because of controlled yield and reduced bunch weight due to very low rainfall received during last rainy season. We are expecting compensation of some premium quantity loss from Bangalore region and also hope that the region receives good pre monsoon rains for the vineyard for next year,' according to Sumedh.

Nashik Region also contributes same as Solapur and is in risk of uncertainty since last two vintages we have been receiving heavy rains and hailstorms just before harvest. This year the rains were short and water reservoirs are filled less than usual and look dry as of now.

'We are expecting good quality grapes with consistent tonnage provided there is no uncertainty or drastic changes in the weather till harvest. We need 4000 tons of grapes this year- 50% higher than last year.'

Sumedh also stresses their need for super premium quality grapes as he says, 'our business plan is heavily dependent not only on the quantity but also the quality of grapes as we mainly focus on growing super premium and premium range in our portfolio for both domestic and international markets.'

FRATELLI

'First time in their history Sauvignon Blanc was harvested in December, on 28th this year', says **Alessio Secci**, Directory- Fratelli. The grape was healthy and of high quality with high acidity and very fruit forward. It has already undergone fermentation and has been racked too.

Chardonnay from **Plot G and H** of their **Garwar** vineyards was fermented on January 5 and 6 for their varietal. The grapes were very healthy with prominent acidity and true-to-varietal characteristics. Fermentation is already over for this varietal.

Chardonnay grapes from **Motewadi Plot C** were picked next day to make VITAE barrel fermented single vineyard varietal and transferred in French oak barrels to ferment. These grapes have been monitored and checked to make the VITAE Chardonnay.

Next to be harvested were Gewürztraminer-Chenin Blanc-Müller-Thurgau on January 8 from **Plot I** in the **Motewadi** vineyards to produce VITAE Tre blend. Müller harvested on 12 January is very aromatic, fresh, and clean.

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About 100 tons of grapes have been harvested as of yesterday.

Akluj has also seen the climate change suggested by Samant. Alessio says, 'a much warmer climate was seen in December which was also dry, making it faster ripening for white grapes. However, the first week of January saw lowering of temperature but it has been still dry and windy with a very good day-night temperature difference of 12°C with day-time temperature arising to as high as 30 °C.'

'We will continue to harvest Müller in the next 2 days, followed by Chenin Blanc. Beginning next week Merlot will be the first red grape to be harvested, followed by Syrah to be used to make Rosé and then Sangiovese for making Sangiovese Bianco.'

'A very promising harvest both in quality and yield but it is still too early to judge,' adds **Kapil Sekhri**, Director. He feels 'this is surely a unique harvest this year: last year we started the harvest Jan 10. This year we started two weeks earlier, on 28 December.'

YORK WINERY

It seems to be generally business as usual at York though. 'Today we have been crushing Sauvignon Blanc, normally the first grape to ripen and the others following very soon', said yesterday Kailash Gurnani, Chief Winemaker and Director.

'We are expecting some Zinfandel for Rose & Shiraz also by the end of the month from some early pruned plots. Most of the Chenin Blanc will be harvested in the first or second week of February with grapes for sparkling to be harvested before those for still wine. The reds are lined up to come in second half of February with a small spill-over to March,' says Kailash keeping his fingers crossed about weather.

He explains though that 'the combination of pruning regime and weather conditions has made the harvest 2-3 weeks earlier than usual. Many companies & grape growers pruned their vineyards in the first half of September- some even in end- August! In the past it has predominantly been second half in September till early October.'

He agrees that this year the weather in December has been warmer than last year. 'The night time temperature on average in December 2015 has been 1-2 degrees warmer; day- time temperatures have been even 4-5 degrees higher than December 2014,' he says. 'The weather has been consistently warm with only a few peaks & troughs. Sunshine has been good with some but not too many cloudy days. The acidity in whites is pretty good and hopefully the reds should be able to attain phenolic ripeness easily with good tannins and acid retention,' he concludes.

KRSMA

Located in Hampi Hills in Karnataka, about 12 hours away from Bangalore and 6 hours from Hyderabad, KRSMA is known to start the harvest on January 1 since they started their business. This year does not seem to be any different. Krishna Kumar, the aficionado and passionate wine producer who with his wife Uma Chigurupati is a hands-on boutique producer has already finished the harvest.

Krishna called to say, 'our harvest is over. We started harvesting on January 1 and finished on January 10. Even the fermentation of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay is over. There are now resting on lees. The Cabernet and Sangiovese are in different stages of fermentation while some are already undergoing malo-lactic fermentation.'

KRSMA has also harvested a small quantity of Syrah this year. 'We have had a small maiden harvest weighing about 1.4 tons. We had no rain during the flowering period and little during the growth period. The temperature during the last month of ripening was between 14°C and 28°C. The reds look great so far and it looks like we will use 60% new oak and may age this vintage longer for 24 months. Overall, this vintage of Cab looks outstanding. The Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay also look more complex than in the past.' His immediate worry is that New York will be out of Sauvignon Blanc which he shipped in February last year. It will soon be sold out and the next vintage will not be available till May.' He is not happy with a gap in the supplies in the US market.

The challenges as pointed out by Rajeev Samant notwithstanding, the Indian producers are generally quite upbeat partially because they have made good sales in 2015-16 and are optimistic about the next 5 years although the rising prices of grapes might be a dampener on their bottom line.

Subhash Arora

Sula, Grover, Fratelli and York are part of the 'Wines of India' group formed by a group of producers while KRSMA is ensconced in a unique spot with unique micro-climate-editor

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