



Wine Experience in Villa d'Este

Villa d'Este is a dream destination on Lake Como in Italy where you may indulge yourself like kings, queens and movie stars but at the *World Wine Symposium* held there every November, you may enjoy plenty of top quality wines, pay a lot less and rub shoulders with the wine kings, queens and stars too, writes **Subhash Arora** who is a regular visitor to the event

“Which wine did you like the most, Mr Antonio Galloni?” asks the bearded man sitting next to Aubert de Villaine at the dais facing 50 people with 8 glasses on the table containing red wine. They have been sipping and spitting wine for half an hour as if sitting in an examination hall with pin drop silence. The iconic winemaker and co-owner of Domaine Romanée Conti (DRC), a highly respected producer of Burgundy, listens intently as Galloni says, “I think as we go back to the old vintages, I find it is not as much *terroir* as the vintage that is playing the role here.”

Galloni is the former associate for Robert Parker, the world famous wine critic whose 100-point rating system could catapult or trash the wine sales graph of a producer by his score. The bearded man is Francois Mauss, organiser of the event of which the premium tasting is a part. These people have paid €900 (₹75,000) each to taste four vintages of Grand Cru vineyard estates in Echézeaux and St. Vivant in Burgundy.

I can't help reflecting on what some people have told me during one of my visits to Burgundy; the late Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi was a wine connoisseur who was very fond of wines from this region and travelled the Burgundy roads often to taste her favourite wines, especially from Echézeaux. Earlier, Aubert de Villaine had introduced the iconic wines from two of their top Grand Cru vineyards in Echézeaux and St. Vivant.

Welcome to the third and final prestige tasting at the *World Wine Symposium*. Welcome to Villa d'Este – one of the top five hotels of Italy, rated as the Best Hotel by different rating agencies and recently as the fourth Top Honeymoon Hotel in the world in a *TLC* episode on TV in India. The grandeur of the hotel and the two similar



Prestigious tasting with senior Supreme Court lawyer C S Vaidyanathan

tastings on previous days by Pierre Lurton, CEO and Chief Winemaker of Cheval Blanc, the top red wine producer in Saint Emilion in Bordeaux, and a tasting of Rieslings by Egon Mueller, the leading winemaker of Mosel in Germany complete the trilogy that would make any connoisseur salivate even if he could not afford the additional cost of €2600 for these optional prestige tastings. Reason: It is highly improbable that you could find such an event with wines as old as *1967 Cheval Blanc*, or *Scharzhofberger Auslese 1959 Egon Mueller*, or the pair of *DRC 1979* from the two Grand Cru vineyards – Echézeaux and St. Vivant, anywhere else under the same roof; and that too in the presence of these wine celebrities who compare with

the likes of Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan in Bollywood.

World Wine Symposium

Conceptualised by the wine expert, journalist and wine judge Francois Mauss of Luxembourg, this international event has been organised every year since 2009; this was the fifth in the series. Supported by wine producers like Gaja and Antinori, the event is a congregation of wine producers, winemakers and other stakeholders, journalists and affluent connoisseurs at the majestic Villa d'Este. The 3-day extravaganza debates issues facing the wine industry and discusses the possible solutions.

I had met a group of registrants from Malaysia last year at this venue. They would mostly hang around together at meal times and the pre-dinner wine tastings, but were not to be seen much at the seminars. I asked them why they had spent so much money if they were not keen to attend the seminars. "Where else could we get an opportunity to taste so many excellent wines with fabulously delicious meals for this kind of money and meet dozens of wine celebrities during our stay at a dream hotel by the beautiful lake?" they reasoned.

Tasting with top producers

Registration for the event is not cheap. At €3850 a couple without including the air-

fare, most Indians would balk at the idea of burning such a big hole in the pocket for three days of fun and excitement. But the few affluent wine aficionados, who want a bigger bang for their buck, would find it a true value-for-money option. The biggest attraction is the wines – their quality, variety and the possibility of tasting with the winemakers many of whom pour the wines for you during the open tastings. Otherwise it's not a common sight to see the likes of the cult wine producer Bill Harlan of Napa Valley pour his iconic wines that retail for over US \$1000 a bottle (*Harlan Estate 2001* sells for over \$1100, if available). One could taste over 100 wines from around 20 producers including India during this event.

Seeing producers present the wines gave me an idea last year to encourage a couple of Indian producers to showcase wines as well. With the support of Francois Mauss,

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I had Four Seasons and Fratelli partake last year with Abhay Kewadkar and Alessio Secci pouring their wines. This year it was KRSMA wines of Karnataka that were represented by its owners, Krishna Prasad Chigurupati and his wife Uma. The Hyderabad-based couple runs marathons together and holds the *Guinness World Record* for being the only couple on the planet with a grand slam, finishing the marathon in seven continents and the North Pole. Their Cabernet Sauvignon has not even been released yet in India but was tasted and appreciated by several experts at the symposium. Interestingly, Uma has also crafted a slightly sweet wine made from Moscato grapes, that is exclusively for her friends and has already become quite popular.

Villa d'Este

Located at the foot of the Italian Alps in Cernobbio, on the banks of Lake Como, one of the most romantic lakes in the world that has enticed several visiting artists, writers and philosophers over centuries to come and live here, Hotel Villa d'Este (VDE) is a destination – an embodiment of a legend. Many of the legendary romances are said to have begun in this hotel – Elizabeth Taylor and Nick Hilton, Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner, The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Ari Onassis and Maria Callas, Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles being just a few of them.

Built in 1568 by a rich Cardinal with a passion for art and converted into a hotel in 1873, it quickly became the destination of choice for European aristocracy. The list of its clients includes King Albert of Belgium, Queen Beatrix of Holland, Queen Sonia of Norway, Woody Allen, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones, Bruce Springsteen, Madonna and fashion icons like Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein and of course, George Clooney, who has a property nearby.

The normal cost of a room during the low season as this, is €600 going up to €1430 a night for the lake-facing suite which would set you back by €2400 a night in summer, only if you booked well in advance. Vikas Singh, the former Solicitor General of India and his wife Meenu, who were a part of the group, managed to get the lake-facing suite only because it was initially allocated to the senior Supreme Court lawyer K.K. Venugopal who could not make it, but his son Krishnan and wife Sue who came instead, had to leave a night earlier. C S Vaidyanathan, another senior Supreme Court lawyer on his second consecutive visit to the symposium, was assigned a lake-facing room that would normally cost a more affordable €660 a night. Staying in any of these rooms, it's a great experience at VDE for anyone.

It is often said that fine wine tastes better in the company of friends and a conducive ambience. *La Veranda* restaurant with 3-sided roll-up glass windows providing a fabulous all-around view, offers a gastronomical delight. One may sit with friends at the same table or with 'marked' people for networking during the event. Not only is the food sublime but the serving staff exemplary, as we witnessed a ballet of *maitre-ds* and sommeliers in their finest suits, attending to the minutest details. Not only do they know the dishes and the menus in advance, they also know the guests very well. Neelima Tripathi, a lawyer from Delhi and wife of former Solicitor General Parag Tripathi, who were a part of our contingent, is a vegetarian. Once the staff knew her food preference, she was always served a vegetarian option wherever she was seated. I ordered a *macchiato* the first night after dinner and sure



The privileged, eager ladies with their master chefs for the day

enough, I would be asked after every meal if I cared for a *macchiato* – and this when 250 persons are served pre-plated food in unison! I loved the *Eggs Benedict* prepared with ham and shavings of white truffles on top and was offered the same every morning – a memorable experience, that.

Not only food and wines

The sumptuous endless meals with diverse wines from various countries in a dream ambience are a major attraction even for those who focus on the seminars throughout the day. But most accompanying wives are not interested in attending them. The close-by shopping heaven across the border in Switzerland is Fox Town that has famous international brands available at genuine discounts of 60-70% (a few of our group went for a repeat visit!) The boat cruise around Lake Como is a must. The 10-hectare area of gardens, a magnificent example of Italian renaissance landscaping, entice you for leisurely walks. The Mosaic is yet another work of art in the garden – an Italian national monument to wow you.

Take a walk through the manicured gardens, go for a swim in the indoor heated and covered swimming pool or rejuvenate yourself at the spa. There are a couple of 300-500-year-old trees including a magnolia that leave you wonder-struck. If you are an F1 lover, you might even get to test-drive a Maserati, which I found exciting. There were classical music performances as interludes for the musically inclined. An art exhibition inaugurated over a flute of champagne was an interesting add-on.

VDE also organised cookery classes by the Executive Chef Michele Zambanini for a limited number of ladies. The programme was so popular and useful that the two Indian participants, Arvinda Arora and Meenu Singh, wanted to repeat it since different dishes would be taught; however, an accommodation could not be made. These classes are run regularly for the guests at VDE.

Those of us who participated at the *World Wine Symposium* were picked up at the Milano Malpensa Airport 83 kms away

in a Maserati and dropped back as well, but my wife and I chose to take a cab to the nearby Como train station from where we conveniently continued by train to Milano station without any glitch, as we were planning to visit Verona, Valpolicella and Venice before returning home.

Villa d'Este is a destination with classic elegance, where grandeur and tradition meet seamlessly with modern facilities, providing a timeless luxury. You can indulge yourself in this place of ultimate comfort with an aura of a bygone era. You feel like a king, queen or a movie star. But at the *World Wine Symposium* in VDE you can do much more; every meal is a gastronomical journey with excellent and often unique wines. For instance, we tasted the famous Hungarian dessert wine *Tokaji* from 'king' Szepsy after a presentation by the genius winemaker at the seminar earlier in the afternoon. Here, one can rub shoulders with the kings, queens and rock stars of the wine world and have a three-day crash course on fine wines on the side. Hence, an experience unparalleled!



Gala Dinner with all
12 Indian participants
Photo courtesy: Borlant Armand