

Saffron Fields Forever

ART AND WINEMAKING CREATE A RARE BLEND AT THE SAFFRON FIELDS VINEYARD LOCATED IN THE YAMHILL-CARLTON AVA, HOME TO WORLD-CLASS PINOT NOIR.

BY SHOBHAA DE

HAD THE BEATLES visited this jewel of a winery, tucked away on a 90 acre farm near the town of Yamhill, an hour's drive from Portland (Oregon), perhaps their immortal song would have been titled 'Saffron Fields Forever', and strawberries would have taken a backseat in our imagination. Of course, co-owners Sanjeev Lahoti and Angela Summers are both a little crazy (given their impressive academic degrees and achievements—both

are chemical engineers running independent engineering businesses). They have to be. Wine making requires craziness to succeed as they were helpfully told by legendary winemaker David Lett, who had planted the first Pinot Noir in Oregon in 1965, and recommended a "great deal of psychological counselling" to anybody entering the wine business. Well, their 'craziness' has certainly yielded very rich dividends; with 24 acres of vines planted and 2,200

cases offered per year to loyal customers on their exclusive mailing list, and to those booking cases on their website. The best way to sample what they lovingly and meticulously produce is, of course, to visit the hospitality centre at the winery (as we did) and enjoy a glorious afternoon sampling culinary expert Ashley Bowers' exquisitely presented cuisine (being a passionate certified Master Gardner, Bowers prefers to serve food cooked from produce available within a 50 kilometre radius). We loved the radicchio salad with goat cheese from the Rogue Creamery nearby, served with home-made

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maple vinaigrette. This was followed by risotto topped with foraged chanterelle mushrooms (native to Oregon) and slow cooked local pork from a neighbouring farm. The risotto was paired with the 2012

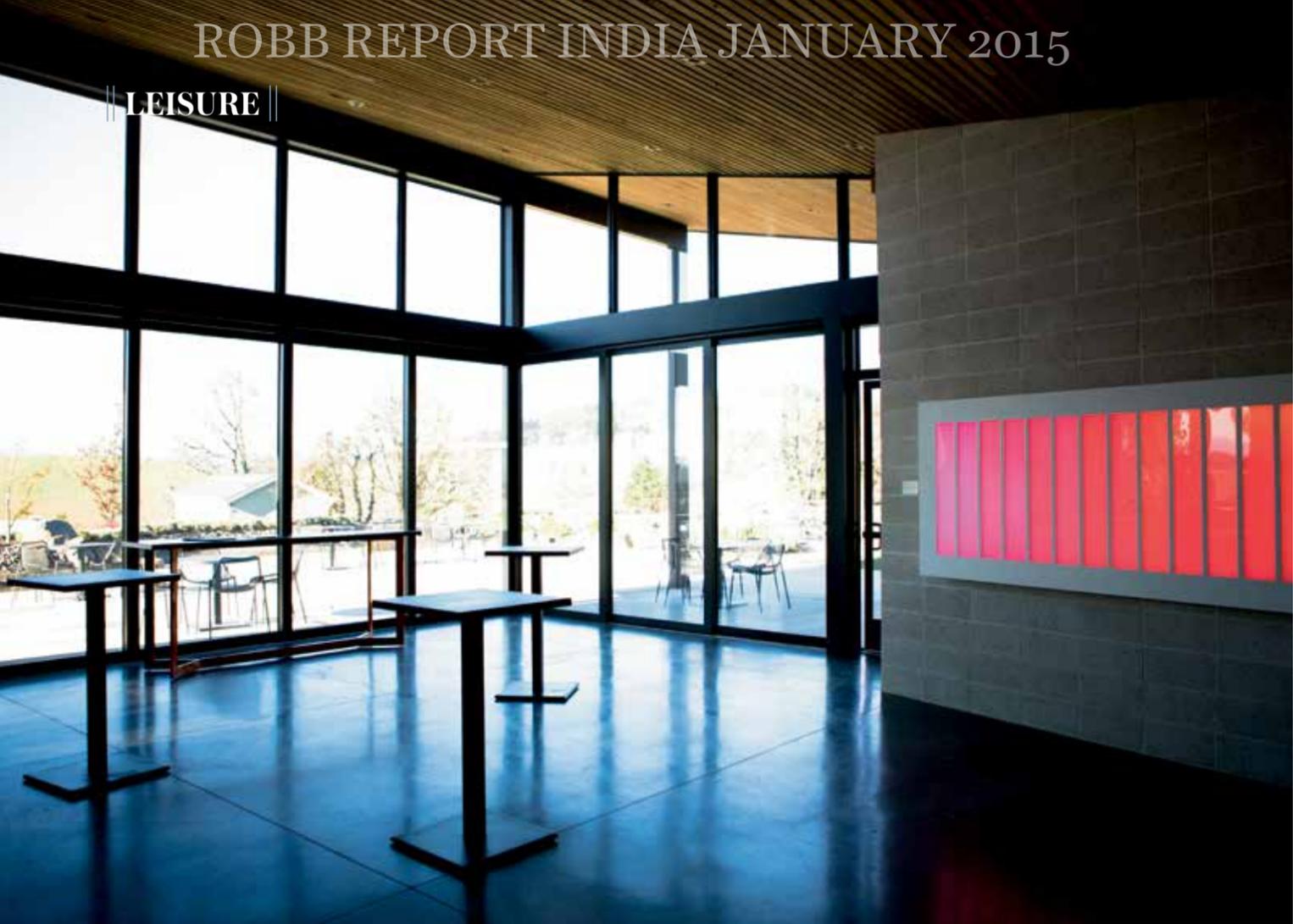
Saffron Fields Vineyard Yamhill-Carlton Pinot Noir. Since several fruit trees have been planted on the property, if you decide to visit any time soon, the vast garden will be pollinated by on-site bee hives that will yield seasonal honey.

The history of this award winning region is fascinating indeed. The first winery in Oregon was established in 1933 shortly after prohibition was repealed. It is still around. The Yamhill-Carlton AVA where Saffron Fields Vineyard is located boasts some of the finest Pinot Noir vineyards in the world. Yes sir—the world. Even though the State of Oregon ranks third in



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Angela has an impressive collection of contemporary art and some of these works are on display at Saffron Fields.



Above: Sanjeev and Angela's love for contemporary art is evident all over the estate. Right: Shobhaa De along with her husband, Dilip.

the number of wineries in the US (905 vineyards, 545 wineries), it took a pioneer like David Lett to plant the first Pinot Noir in 1965 and establish the Eyrie Vineyards. But it was only in 1979 at the Wine Olympics in Paris, when a blind tasting with French judges won Eyrie the first place in the Pinot Noir competition, that the world acknowledged the quality of Oregon Pinots. There was no looking back after that. Today, the most expensive Pinot Noir from the region is the incomparable Domaine Serene Monogram at \$275 per bottle.

Sanjeev and Angela's picturesque vineyard is more than just an expensive indulgence or a pricey hobby. When they decided to invest

in a farm and grow vines, they also made sure they'd make a success of the venture. Sanjeev acquired a certificate in winemaking from the University of California, Davis. He continues to update his knowledge and skills by gaining experience in oenology and viticulture. Sanjeev, a true blue Mumbai boy, moved to the US for studies in 1987. He met Angela at the University of Alabama. Angela is recognised as a thought leader, and is the author of technical books dealing with industrial controls in safety applications and related subjects. But what is immediately evident at the beautiful estate nurtured by the couple is their love for contemporary art. Angela's impressive collection has grown

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significantly over time, and today, some of the works on display at Saffron Fields are museum-quality pieces. "Ideally, art is an active experience," says Angela as she shows us around the spaces, pointing out an imposing Jaume Plensa sculpture, or internationally recognised digital media artist Jennifer Steinkamp's *Daisy Bell*, amongst many other major works studding the bright, airy hospitality centre. Angela has curated a collection of contemporary work by eminent artists from around the world. No wonder, when it was time to pick an architect for their dream project in this undulating, pastoral region of Yamhill, Sanjeev and Angela chose renowned landscape artist and architect Hoichi Kurisu, whose contemplative style is reflected in the Japanese gardens that surround the centre—Koi ponds, cascading waterfalls, sprawling patios—which encourage a meditative mood, that allows visitors to make their own unhurried personal discoveries. Sanjeev says the structure was built to "slowly reveal itself".

It is this serene approach to fine winemaking that is building up such a loyal following for Saffron Fields. Tony Rynders, one of the most reputed Pinot Noir makers in America, was the first grape customer at Saffron Fields in 2009. He bought up the entire grape crop after recognising the quality of the vineyard. Mind you, this was after Tony

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had won 90+ scores from the *Wine Spectator* magazine when he was with Domaine Serene; that in turn had won 'Winery of the Year' for five consecutive years from *Wine and Spirits* magazine. Tony states, "Saffron Fields is one of the most exciting vineyard sites I have had the opportunity to work with." With an endorsement like that, Sanjeev and Angela have a pretty good reason to glow with pride. This year, they plan to add another 11 acres of vines which will take Saffron Fields to 35 acres. They also feature in an important, soon-to-be launched

book, *The Spectacular Wineries of Oregon*. As for me, I can still taste the sweet wood smoke of the alluring, supple 2012 Eieio Saffron Fields Vineyard Pinot Noir that I sipped and savoured in the warm, golden light of the early winter sun recently. Oh yes, this one featured distinct notes of chai spice. Did I imagine the desi touch or...? Let's leave it there—memorable wines are about mystique and magic. I experienced both at Saffron Fields. ☑

Saffron Fields Vineyard,
www.saffronfields.com

Clockwise from top: Guests enjoy wine at the Saffron Fields Vineyard; Ashley Bower's radicchio salad with goat's cheese; author Shobhaa De along with co-owners Sanjeev and Angela.