

Move over Scotch snobs. Indian single malt is now 'the good stuff'

Made in Rampur, sold in Manhattan. UK might dismiss our quick-maturing 'spirits' but desi craft whiskies are barreling down in both the domestic and international market

Himanshi.Dhawan@timesgroup.com

In December last year when India kick-started its presidency of the G20 summit at Udaipur, delegates were welcomed to a dinner on an island in the middle of Lake Pichola to discuss global challenges. India also used the opportunity to do a soft power flex on the international stage. This included generous doses of Rajasthani culture—colourful safas (traditional headgear) for delegates, local food like dal-baati churma, a millet station and a made-in-India artisanal single malt called Godawan.

PREM DEWAN, MD OF DEVANS MODERN BREWERIES



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This, however, wasn't Godawan's first global outing. Distilled in Rajasthan and named after the Great Indian Bustard, the whisky was served at the India Pavilion of the Cannes Film Festival last year. And it's not the only one. Amrut, made in a distillery in Bengaluru, went from a blind tasting at a Glasgow pub to stores in the EU and the US. Long dismissed as mere molasses or blends, Indian whiskies are making even desi Scotch snobs (you know the kind who brag about how they paid a bomb for a bottle from some obscure or mothballed distillery) wake up and smell the Patiala peg.



DESI DRAM: Besides the temperature and humidity, six-row Indian barley and botanicals give Indian malts a distinctive flavour profile

It didn't happen overnight, but Indian craft whisky has been making steady strides, with Amrut and Paul John being pioneers. Prem Dewan, MD of Devans Modern Breweries that entered the single malt segment with GianChand last year, admits that there are many hurdles along the way, including the Scotch-is-best attitude. "For years, we were made to believe that there is nothing equivalent to Scotch in the whole world and that no other country could make anything which could even touch Scotch as far as quality was concerned. And we believed it!"

In fact, even now the India-UK free trade

agreement (FTA) is stuck because the UK is asking for lower duties and a maturity age of three years for a spirit to be categorised as whisky. However, Indian manufacturers point out that the hot climate here results in a shorter production cycle of nine months and keeping it longer in the barrel would only increase losses from evaporation and heat (such losses are described as angel's share by distillers).

Besides the quicker maturing, there are other factors that lend distinctiveness to Indian single malts. The main raw material used in India is six-row barley, which uses less water and results in a more complex flavour. This is ideal for a water-scarce state like Rajasthan where Diageo's Godawan is created by a process of slow-trickle distillation from locally sourced six-row barley, matured at temperatures reaching 38°C and finished in special casks curated with Indian botanicals.

Hemanth Rao, founder of the Single Malt Amateur Club, says that Indian single malts have seen significant growth. "About 15 years ago Indian whisky was shunned as molasses. In 2013-2014, there were just two or three brands. Now, there are over 30," he says.

And it's not just about quantity. In March wine-searcher.com, the biggest wine and spirits website that measures global demand of alcohol based on searches, listed two Indian single malts—Amrut and Rampur Vintage Select—in top 10 list, edging out brands like Macallan, Yamazaki and Glenfiddich.

Whisky distilleries are sprouting up across state. GianChand, with a delicate nose of brandy snaps, apricots and honeycomb toffee, is bottled in Jammu, while Rampur is produced in Uttar Pradesh's Rampur district where Radico Khaitan has its distillery. Indri-Trini by Piccadilly distillery took

its name from the Haryana village where it's bottled using the indigenous six-row barley of Rajasthan and matured in three different casks. Though Godawan is made in water-stressed Alwar; Diageo has received a water certification for sustainable use.

Recent data shows that Indian single malts have grown at a CAGR of about 53% annually for the last five years and the pandemic has encouraged growth of premium products, says Vikram Damodaran, Diageo India's chief innovation officer. One of the reasons for this is an affluent middle class with a growing disposable income and appreciation for homegrown products. "As people become more affluent, they are willing to spend more on high-quality alcohol and are looking for unique experiences," says Amar Sinha, COO at Radico Khaitan that produces Rampur malts.

He points out how the Rampur Signature Reserve, a limited edition priced at Rs 1 lakh and introduced in 2021, was snapped up. "The first bottle sold within an hour of its launch and the entire batch of 400 bottles sold out within months, not just in India but globally." In fact, most desi single malts have held launches in the US, UK, Dubai and bagged international awards before finding acceptance amongst the image-conscious Indian consumer.

Pritam Sawhney, a businessman and frequent flyer, picked up a bottle of Amrut at Delhi airport's duty free recently. "I thought I would try it and it was a wonderful surprise that it tasted better than many ordinary Scotch whiskeys," he says.

Yet the sector is not without its challenges. Indian manufacturers continue to face problems related to manufacturing capacity, distribution and advertising restrictions. State liquor laws are notoriously fickle and inconsistent, Delhi being a case in point. "Some states update excise policies every year, while others may not revise for many years," states an ICRIER study. The latter means that there are no variations in prices approved for manufacturing companies or suppliers.

The recent FTA negotiations between India-UK over import duties and angel share are also a challenge for domestic manufacturers. SMAC's Rao says that if the terms proposed by the UK are accepted, it would "decimate" Indian brands.

