BUSINESS OF LEISURE

TASTE TO TOAST

Tasting sessions is the new avenue for savouring experimental whiskeys

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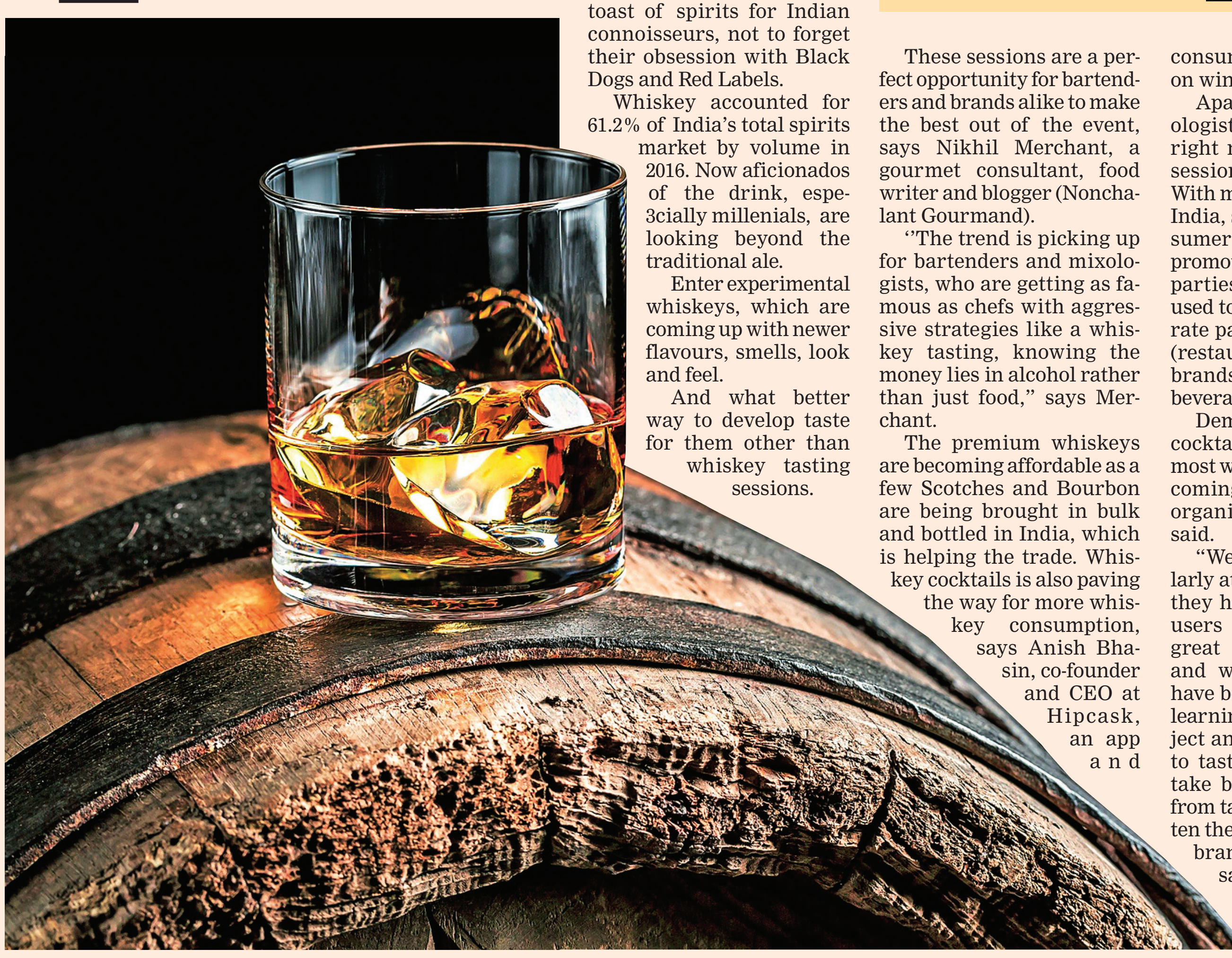

IN HIGH SPIRITS

- Apart from helping mixologist come up with the right mix, whiskey-tasting sessions have a lot to give
- **With more brands coming to India, such events keep consumers excited and act as a promotional feast for the two parties**

"A beverage of leisure is a serious business" Jeff Phillips in his book Whiskey Pike: A Bedtime Story for the Drinking Mankind. And whiskey is a serious leisure and big business in India.

Historically, the supposedly hard drink has been the toast of spirits for Indian connoisseurs, not to forget their obsession with Black Dogs and Red Labels.

Whiskey accounted for 61.2% of India's total spirits market by volume in 2016. Now aficionados of the drink, especially millenials, are looking beyond the traditional ale.

Enter experimental whiskeys, which are coming up with newer flavours, smells, look and feel.

And what better way to develop taste for them other than whiskey tasting sessions.

These sessions are a perfect opportunity for bartenders and brands alike to make the best out of the event, says Nikhil Merchant, a gourmet consultant, food writer and blogger (Nonchalant Gourmand).

"The trend is picking up for bartenders and mixologists, who are getting as famous as chefs with aggressive strategies like a whiskey tasting, knowing the money lies in alcohol rather than just food," says Merchant.

The premium whiskeys are becoming affordable as a few Scotches and Bourbon are being brought in bulk and bottled in India, which is helping the trade. Whiskey cocktails is also paving the way for more whiskey consumption, says Anish Bhasin, co-founder and CEO at Hipcask, an app and consumer platform focused on wines and spirits.

Apart from helping mixologist come up with the right mix, whiskey tasting sessions have a lot to give. With more brands coming to India, such events keep consumers excited and act as a promotional feast for the two parties. It is occasionally used to add flavour to corporate parties and organisers (restaurants as well as brands) take pride in their beverages, Merchant said.

Demand for interesting cocktails is increasing and most whiskey companies are coming actively forward to organise such events, he said.

"We host sessions regularly at different venues and they help in engaging with users by offering them a great experience. Whisky and wine tastings for me have been a very big way of learning more about the subject and training my palate to taste better. You always take back a few memories from tasting sessions and often these are what also build brand loyalty," Bhasin said.

Like everything comes with a cost, so does a whiskey session. "This totally depends on the format, whether it's a free tasting, or is it hosted along with a brand or is just a marketing activity for us," he said.

From just being a men's drink, whiskey is increasingly shattering the glass ceiling.

Unlike the usual sweet, floral cocktails made with gins, vodkas or even sangrias, women are blending into the mood.

Hospitality consultant Pooja Vir says, "For me, food and drink have always been about much more than the taste. It is almost always been about the feelings it inspires." This is dependent on the mood, the setting you are in, and largely with what is happening in your life, she said.

Bowmore Maltmen's Collection (only 3000 bottles produced) marks one among her three favourites. "A lot of malt and treacle on the nose, this one tastes of toffee apples. However, each time I drink it what I enjoy most is the friendship I share with the person who gifted me this."

Vir, who is a part of Whiskey Ladies, a bunch of women who explore newer tastes every month, credits the availability to be the biggest factor driving the consumption.

"We can disrupt how people discover drinks, offers and the overall drinking experience, especially at restaurants. Hipcask App is also intelligent and with our proprietary algorithms and artificial intelligence, we can really change the way people decide which brand to drink," Bhasin said.

THE GADFLY

SHIRA OVIDE

Control the OS, control the future

My thoughts tend to go to dark places these days. And so when I watched Google on Wednesday trot out one after another of its homegrown computing devices for every task and every nook of our homes, I went straight to dystopia: R.I.P. digital competition.

Today most people experience computing through devices controlled by a handful of companies: principally Microsoft and Apple for traditional computers and Google and Apple (and increasingly Chinese companies with customised versions of Google's Android) for smartphones.

Feel free to throw in Amazon.com Inc, too, for tablets and TV sets. The companies that have owned the software foundation of those devices benefited from the proliferation of PCs and smartphones and other internet-connected hardware, but so did many others. Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Uber, WeChat in China and many more were able to flourish even though other companies owned the gateways people use to arrive at those internet hangouts. The internet-connected world has been more or less open to business for everyone.

I'm not sure that will continue to be true. Amazon, Google parent company Alphabet Inc and others are trying to establish a future of computers everywhere, without screens and perhaps controlled primarily by voices. It's easy to imagine this mode of computing will deliver disproportionate power to the owners of the digital gateways.

> A Google Home speaker or an army of Amazon-powered access points can be self-contained worlds. It is getting harder to imagine this model of computing will produce neutral platforms that offer all comers equal footing

The companies that own the operating system will control the future. Sure, you may be able to tell a Google Home internet-connected speaker or Apple's Siri voice assistant to "send Mom a message with Facebook Messenger" or "play Imagine Dragons on Spotify," but odds are many people will just use whatever Google or Apple Inc options are the default.

And yes, people can order an Uber ride with their Amazon home speakers, but they have to know to ask for Uber.

How will a future Uber or Netflix get discovered in the first place if people get out of the habit of searching or going to a central app store to find new tasks?

It is true that many of today's technology superpowers got that way because they controlled operating systems.

Microsoft's ownership of the software brains for nearly all personal computers gave it a foothold to build one of the world's dominant companies. Apple's ability to re-imagine a pocket supercomputer tied to its operating system made it the most valuable corporation in the world.

It's debatable how much Google has benefited directly from its control of Android, but at the very least Google's internet search dominance has been aided by Android's position as the foundation for more than 85% of the world's smartphones. But it was also true that the owners of the dominant operating systems didn't take all the spoils.

Software programs made for Windows and then the web made personal computers useful. Later, apps made by companies other than Apple or Google made smartphones useful.

An iPhone is not so handy without Google Maps, Snapchat, Pandora and a web browser open to the wide internet.

But a Google Home speaker or an army of Amazon-powered access points in the house can be self-contained worlds.

It is getting harder to imagine this emerging model of computing will produce neutral platforms that offer all comers equal footing. **—Bloomberg**

Even pets are eating quinoa now

Deena Shanker

Tell your dog to get ready for quinoa kibble.

Pet food trends are following their owners' tastes. Even the meat-loving brands are marketing plants, the very ingredients they once sidelined—just not the plants industry has relied on, like soybean and corn-gluten meals.

Instead, Blue Buffalo Co Ltd offers a Chicken & Quinoa Ancient Grains recipe, for example, and a grain-free line from Nestle Purina Petcare Co's Beneful is now "accented with blueberries, pumpkin & spinach." Honest Kitchen Inc, which uses only human-grade ingredients, has been selling its Chicken & Quinoa recipe since 2006 and now offers Beef & Chickpea, Duck & Sweet Potato as well.

Dogs aren't wolves, after all. They're omnivores, said Anna-Kate Shoveller, an assistant professor of animal biosciences at the University of Guelph, in Canada. "They do quite well on a vegetable-based or a lower-protein diet," she said.

Shoveller researches nutrition in animals and has been conducting experiments and publishing on a newly controversial topic: feeding vegetables to domestic dogs.

Consider the nearly $30 billion pet food market's second- and third-most-popular dog food brands: the relative newcomer Blue Buffalo, whose "farm-to-table inspired canine cuisine" features a portrait of a wolf on each bag of its Wilderness line, and Beneful, whose bags brag of "real" chicken, beef and salmon as "the #1 ingredient.

Blue Buffalo has played the healthy-wolf card better than any other company, despite admitting in a lawsuit that its ingredients weren't always as marketed. It commanded 7.5% of the US dog food market last year. If there's a mythos around meat, plants come with their own presumptions.

Pet food in the US falls under a mix of federal and state regulations. Owners looking for assurance that a food meets their pets' nutritional needs should look for the "complete and balanced" nutritional adequacy statement on the package. The statement is based on the dog or cat food nutrient profiles set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials and guarantees that the food is nutritionally balanced. Aafco has no enforcement power of its own, but most commercially available pet foods sold online comply with its profiles, no matter what ingredients are in them. **—Bloomberg**

Creating extraordinary shirts

Troy Patterson

Season after season, men demand white shirts and blue shirts. Sometimes, for variety, they'll choose one that's both white and blue.

Like most top shirt specialists, the Swedish company Eton elevates these basics through the quality of its fabrics and the artfulness of its sewing. But Eton is alone in employing menswear's most innovative shirtmaker as its creative director. His name is Sebastian Dollinger, and his mission is to transform commonplace button-ups into extraordinary creations.

"We always try to reinvent classics," Dollinger says on a recent visit from Sweden to New York. He's explaining how he and Valerio Leone created a solid blue shirt distinguished by its sumptuous twill weave. Dollinger was curious to see how "radically huge" they could make a twill, and he ended up with a business shirt that's both audacious in its bold look and luxurious in its fine feel.

He's being modest. The company sells a million shirts a year, ranging in price from $225 (Rs 14,650) for a lustrous lightweight white poplin number to $315 (Rs 20,500) for Dollinger's psychedelic short-sleeved seersucker shirt.

With all due respect to Paul Smith, it was Eton that popularised shirts with contrasting inner cuffs and collar. His artistic sense is more gratified by Eton's wittier offerings: a blue gingham printed with a bulldog motif; a surprisingly elegant zip-up denim shirt, among others.

"I'm kind of in awe of him," says Chris Olberding, president of American shirtmaker Gitman and Gitman Vintage. "Sebastian's been able to change the perception of what a shirt can be."

A lawyer introduces himself to ask if Dollinger changed the cutaway collar on a recent shirt by a half-centimetre. "It's hilarious how nerdy they are," he says. "It's very product-oriented, which is supercool."

Design inspirations come from simply playing with fabrics, Dollinger says. "Just trying to make a new white. That's what's generally on my mind: How can you make a new white and blue? The basics are the trickiest." **—Bloomberg**

iPHONE RIVAL

An attendee displays a Google Inc. Pixel 2 smartphone during a product launch event in San Francisco. Google unveiled the second generation of its own devices along with an array of entirely new gadgets —BLOOMBERG

CULLED INSIGHTS

Bear market may be closer now

Robert Shiller, creator of the Shiller P/E, says US stocks could be heading for a bear market, adding "my analysis should serve as a warning against complacency." The Shiller P/E Cyclically Adjusted P/E is above 30 when its average is 16.8. "In short, US stock market looks a lot like it did at the peaks," he said. The next one may still be a long way off, he wrote in **Marketwatch**.

Shale can be major contributor

Saudi Arabia's energy minister Khalid Al-Falih said Russia has helped to breathe new life into OPEC and shale can be a major contributor to the market in the years to come. Shale demand nears 100 million barrels next year, reports **CNBC.**

What if India turns out like China?

India has the potential to boost consumption of everything from copper to iron ore as its economy expands over the next two decades and more people flock to its cities, according to projections from the Australian government.

THE BIG PICTURE

How volatility trap is inflating bubbles in the market

Alberto Gallo

Investors face a conundrum: The world is experiencing a record synchronous growth phase, but an increasing number of assets are becoming overvalued just as fundamental risks lurk in the background. Should investors continue to dance to the tune of central bank stimulus and low volatility, or prepare to exit?

What appears to be a goldilocks economy could in actuality conceal a low-volatility trap, a situation where excessive monetary stimulus keeps asset prices rising and volatility low across markets even though real economy risks are rising. On one hand, central bank stimulus directly lowers risk premiums and volatility in rates and credit markets, pushing investors into riskier assets to generate sufficient returns. On the other hand, politics have become less stable as inequality rises, as the recent elections in the US, UK and Europe show, and the number of geopolitical hotspots continues to rise. And yet, markets continue threading higher and volatility remains at a record low.

A prolonged environment of low volatility and low-interest rates can promote asset bubbles, as European Central Bank president Mario Draghi said a few days ago. A number of markets show not only elevated valuations, but also irrational behavior on the part of investors. Potential bubbles can be found in emerging-market debt, technology stocks, US high yield bonds, some sovereign debt, cryptocurrencies, among others.

Even though we may be experiencing a long phase of growth, stretching the cycle with monetary stimulus may be bringing several collateral effects. These include asset bubbles, worsening wealth inequality and a misallocation of resources.

Economic fundamentals are different from the post-war period. Technology is deflationary while demographics are no longer a tailwind. The generation of the so-called millennials is the first to likely be poorer than their parents in the post-war period. Productivity is low as the economy suffers from hysteresis.

FINDING ANTIDOTE

- Low rates have put large bond-issuing firms at an unfair advantage
- **Corporate inequality and concentration is an incentive for new firms**
- Investors shpuld keep liquidity high and hedge against rising volatility

The longer the debt cycle, the longer companies and workers develop business and skills in leverage-heavy sectors (e.g. finance, real estate, energy), the deeper the scars when the bust comes. Often the misallocation is so large that low rates are necessary to keep people in their jobs. Over time, this can reduce rate of adjustment in economy, and its workforce, toward new business models.

There is also corporate and social inequality to consider. Low rates have put large bond-issuing firms at an unfair advantage against small businesses reliant on lender financing, in some cases encouraging oligopolies. Corporate inequality and concentration is an incentive for new firms to reach the top, but can become vicious if the top firms keep their position through lobbying and government subsidies. Social inequality goes hand in hand. With central bank quantitative easing boosting asset prices, asset owners have benefited more than income earners.

Asset bubbles, resource misallocation and rising corporate and social inequality can reduce the potential growth rate of an economy. It is no wonder inflation rates fail to rise despite eight years of loose monetary policy. Bank for International Settlements has argued low interest rates may be part of the cause for low inflation. Yet, exiting QE has proved to be difficult. Financial conditions still remain loose.

Investors should avoid the most overvalued assets, then focus on what's unloved and still relatively inexpensive. Finally, they should keep liquidity high and use hedges against a rise in interest rates and volatility. Former Citigroup CEO Chuck Prince had said investors should "keep dancing until the music stops." Today, we are still dancing, but much closer to the exit door. **—Bloomberg**

Amazon plans a rival to FedEx, UPS

Spencer Soper

Amazon.com Inc is experimenting with a new delivery service intended to make more products available for free two-day delivery and relieve overcrowding in its warehouses, according to two people familiar with the plan, which will push the online retailer deeper into functions handled by long-time partners United Parcel Service Inc and FedEx Corp.

The service began two years ago in India, and Amazon has been slowly marketing it to US merchants in preparation for a national expansion, said the people, who asked not to be identified because the US pilot project is confidential. Amazon is calling the project Seller Flex, one person said. The service began on a trial basis this year in West Coast states with a broader rollout planned in 2018, people said.

Amazon will oversee pick-up of packages from warehouses of third-party merchants selling goods on Amazon.com and their delivery to customers' homes, the people said - work that is now often handled by UPS and FedEx. Amazon could still use these couriers for delivery, but the company will decide how a package is sent instead of leaving it up to the seller. **—Bloomberg**