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THE MISSING COLOURS
Is the LGBTQ+ club an elitist one?

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THE TRIBALS IN AAREY
The tribal community at Aarey are gaining sustenance with the lunches they organise for outsiders

Entertainment

DOES BOLLYWOOD NORTH-IN-
DIANISE REAL LIFE STORIES?Directors Avinash Das (*Anaarkali of Aarah*) and R Balki (*Padman*) debateJB
M
JUST BEFORE MONDAY

Photograph courtesy: Kunal Chandra

GIN:
A WHOLE
NEW
WORLD

As exquisite international gins are making a beeline for Indian shores and artisan tonics are being crafted by domestic brewers, Pooja Bhula explores the buzz around this not-so-poor man's tippler

Gin and drugs, my dear gin and drugs" – this is no mobster trying to peddle illicit substances to a simple lad or lady.

These are TS Elliot's words. It was the 1950s, by which time Elliot was already a celebrity and had only recently (in 1948) won the Nobel Prize for Literature. At a literary lunch – as author Olivia Williams recounts in her book *Gin Glorious Gin: How Mother's Ruin Became the Spirit of London* – when Elliot was asked what inspired his poems, he credited gin and drugs. Half a century later, we've returned to a point where gin is all the rage, and if the prediction by Richie Fawcett – an artist who sits on Asia's 50 Best Bars voting panel – is anything to go by, gin sales are set to overtake sales of Scotch whisky by 2020.

Tough to digest Fawcett's prophecy? Well, here's for some perspective – on a trip to Spain, beverage writer and founder of Giggle Water 411, Karina Aggarwal found that in certain areas at every 2km radius had distillers creating gins with all kinds of botanicals. Further attesting this fact, in a conversation about gin renaissance, chef Manu Chandra tells me, "If you go to a bar in Barcelona, you'll find over 200 varieties of gin." There's tremendous excitement in gourmand turned restauranteur Nikhil Merchant's voice when he mentions a visit to Manhattan Bar in Singapore. Not just because of its No.1 rating on Asia's 50 Best Bars (2017) list, but also because though Manhattan's signature drink is whisky-based, "it has small batches of gin from all over the world" and some "date back to the 1800s and 1600s. And they are doing amazing interpretations and reinterpretations with it." In lay terms, if in Scotland, during a certain time period, two drops and lemon were added to gin made in the region, then Manhattan would try recreate the same experience for you.

TO COCKTAILS &
HEALTH!

Outside India, Merchant says, "For sometime now, the classic cocktails syndrome has been catching up the world over. The reason is that the amount of sugar added to regular cocktails is just not working for people." So in a more health-aware world, gin has a lot going for it. Merchant explains, "Psychologically, white spirits seem easier on the body than darker ones. And it's scientific too" and gin's favourite companion tonic "due to its quinine base, is also seen as healthy."

And guess what? Most classic cocktails are gin-based. Even your martini? Yes, it wasn't until brands like

Smirnoff storm-shook the US market with vodka, roping in celebrities like Woody Allen and characters like Ian Fleming's James Bond, Jeanie in the TV series and others to endorse that

vodka-martini became a thing. Cocktails are all about playing around with ingredients and many, like Chandra, vouch that gin is the spirit for it. "It has a fair amount of complexity and a lot more flavour, unlike the cleaner vodka, for which the more tasteless it is, the better it is. Today, there's ample experimentation around gin, giving people enough to choose from."

THE THIRD WAVE

But what we call classic cocktails today came into being for quite the opposite reasons. They go back to the prohibition era, when the ban on liquor in 1920s US led to mushrooming of speakeasies and bootleggers clubs all over the country. "Alcohol was tough to procure, but gin was easier to produce because once distilled, it's ready to go. These gins though, didn't taste great and only received patronage as people wanted a high. So cocktails were concocted to mask the flavour of the spirit," points out Aggarwal.

So for all practical purposes, we can consider the 1920s the second comeback of gin. Made with juniper berries – which are actually shrubs that bear berry-like cones – gin's origin, most historians and Britannica agree, is attributed to 17th-century Dutch professor Franciscus Sylvius, who distilled juniper with spirits to produce an inexpensive medicine having the diuretic properties of juniper-berry oil. The beverage became popular and was introduced to England by soldiers returning from the Low Countries, eventually giving way to first wave of gin and later its infamy – inspiring monikers like 'mother's ruin' – in the period during the first half of the 18th century that was called Gin Craze. Giving us a glimpse of those times in his book *The Indian Spirit*, Magandee Singh writes: *Ilicit still runners and bootleggers would make gin, just out of anything that could be distilled to make alcohol with. The resulting spirit was illegal, cheap and a potent mix of all sorts... the top producers, to distance themselves, began labelling their gin, London*.

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Clockwise: Shrubs made in-house by Toast & Tonic; 212 All Good's spiced cocktails; Dashanzi at JW Marriot (Juhu) has 29 gin labels; juniper berries

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Karina Aggarwal, Beverage Writer and Founder, Giggle Water 411

don Dry. Today, the Gin Guild in London continues to protect London Dry, easily one of the most popular styles available worldwide.

Everytime gin soars, it falls with a bad name, and both previous waves have been led by bartenders. But this time, there are some significant differences. First, while bartenders are at the front end, marketing by big brands in the background has been just as instrumental in propagation. "Several boutique gins in various countries don't manage to retail at a national level. But because there's so much happening, bigger brands are taking over smaller ones. Last year, Pernod Ricard bought Monkey 47, belonging to the Black Forest region of Germany," shares Aggarwal.

In India, brands are also offering bars good deals and Merchant recalls Diageo mentoring bartenders, including the likes of much celebrated Devender Sehgal, with its Bombay Gin Club. From personal experience, award-winning mixologist Varun Sudhakar, now head of innovation and operations (beverages) at Pizza Express, considers "bartending competitions the best way to create awareness. They provide great exposure. Once you see all that's happening at bars in other countries, your perspective truly transforms."

The other difference is that this time the trend has been more gradual and more global. NAO Spirits' co-

founder, Anand Virmani recalls, "When Bombay Sapphire launched with its iconic blue bottle in 1987, gin stopped being something fuddy duddy that old folks had, and in 2000s when Hendricks launched a craft gin with elderflower and other exotic ingredients, it was a game changer!"

The London market picking up was the trigger, as per some experts, because they export a lot. "And suddenly the trend travelled to other European nations. South Africa has a gin using herbs, and even the Japanese are making local gin," says Chandra. New whisky distillers in London are producing gin alongside to hedge their risk, says Aggarwal.

CRAFTING IN INDIA

On the production end, India has much to celebrate as well. This week, Aneesh Bhasin, Sahil Jatana and Gateway Taproom's Rahul Mehra have launched India's first artisan tonic water in Mumbai as part of their non-alcoholic beverages line under the brand Svami.

Isn't it time we had our own tonic water, considering India was its birthplace? British soldiers mixed the bitter quinine, which they consumed to protect themselves from malaria, with soda and sugar to make it palatable, creating what we now call tonic water.

"During overseas trips, we noticed that along with a variety of gins, bars have a range of tonics, which makes quite a difference, and started working on it 8-10 months ago," says Mehra.

Svami claims to use half the sugar of Schweppes uses for its tonic and gets its quinine from Congo. Mehra says, "it's the best in the world; most international brands get it from there" adding that the fizz "won't have big bubbles like club soda, but small bubbles, so that the tonic doesn't overpower gin." With ₹75 for 200 ml, they are supplying to bars and hotels at a competitive price; individual orders are only being taken on Twitter. By next week, they'll put out three flavours – grapefruit, rosemary and cucumber.

Not too long ago, last September, Delhi-based Anand Virmani and Vaibhav Singh of NAO Spirits launched India's first craft gin – Greater Than, a classic London dry. "The best spices from India are being exported all over the world to prepare gin, but no one was doing craft gin in India. So it was a no-brainer for us. We approached several manufacturers, but none came forward as they all want volume and so we brought Anne Brock onboard, who's now the master distiller at Bombay Sapphire." Greater Than is already available in Goa and Bengaluru, and Virmani plans to roll it out in Mumbai and Delhi by Jan-end and February, respectively. Priced at ₹750 in Goa, it promises bang for the buck, though higher rates will apply in states as per excise duty. More delectable sounding,

though, is their second craft gin Hapusa that has a juniper base, but also includes dried mango, coriander seeds, turmeric, ginger and *gondhraj lebu*. All these Indian ingredients have strong flavours; the challenge was to get the right balance. It's the type of gin you want to sit down and sip, and may not need tonic." It's also the only Indian gin listed on the Guild.

With gin in India, there's also a certain demographic at play. Merchant finds that "youngsters who've just reached legal age still prefer vodka and beer; gin is popular among those in their 30s". This could very well be a function of price because quality gin is far more expensive than quality vodka; all the more reason to cheer our new homemade craft gins and artisan tonics for their competitive pricing. While in other countries you'll find a wide range of gin only at bars, in India, Merchant notes that with dining spaces turning into pubs at night, restaurants are also making an effort to push gin.

The first restaurant in the country to give gin its pride of place as early as 2012 with a gin bar, was Arola, the Catalan eatery by Michelin-starred chef Sergi Arola in JW Marriott (Juhu). Home to 38 labels, each gin was served in a way Mumbai had never seen – like pairing rosemary and olives with a Gin Mare, which has similar botanicals.

But perhaps, it was too early for its time. In 2016, Marriott replaced it with Dashanzi, named after Beijing's art district, that serves modern oriental cuisine – Chinese, Japanese and some Malaysian for our love of spicy food as well as a good range of popular spirits. The best part? It has retained the gin bar, which now has 29 labels from around the world. For tonic, they use Fever Tree and Schweppes. Their cocktail menu too is inspired by Asian ingredients and Dashanzi's beverage manager and mixologist, Benson Varghese is happy to think out of the box and pair your dumplings with the right gin.

Carrying a similar spirit are Manu Chandra's Toast & Tonic outposts in Bengaluru and Mumbai. To go with imported gin, are flavoured tonic water – Spiced Vanilla Tonic (vanilla and cinnamon tonic), Flower Power Tonic (jasmine, elderflower and grapefruit tonic), etc – as well as flavoured ice cubes like coriander-orange, rose petal-cucumber, strawberry spiced ice, etc created in-house. Chandra rightly calls it a "no smoke, no mirrors, no liquid nitrogen..." affair, where all cocktails look the same, yet have great complexity.

212 All Good goes a step further by infusing their gin with fruit, herbs and flowers – their Spiced Gin has dill, star anise, cinnamon, orange and spice bitters; Black pepper and Bhavnagri Chilli Gin has 50 per cent strength tonic and grapefruit bitters; and Robusta Gin has dehydrated lime and coffee bitters. And their tonics and bitters are homemade and preservative-free. In Delhi, as per Merchant, changing the cocktail landscape are HK Club, Perch and Bar Back Collective. Let's go drink!

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To R: India's first artisan tonic water by Svami; gin cocktails with flavoured tonic and ice at Toast & Tonic; coming soon, London's gin Jodhpur

ON
THE
CARDSBRANDS &
FLAVOURS

Several bars, including Toast and Tonic, will soon have Monkey 47; The Runway Project by Pizza Express has recently procured Drumshanbo Gunpowder and Bath Tub and expects Jodhpur and Martini Millers soon; once

Svami's current tonic range picks up, they'll put out juniper tonic to go with gin and vodka.

GIN CLUBS
& MORE

For almost two years now, Chef Manu Chandra has been part of a closed, elite gin club of six members (a banker, consultant, jewellery designer and a chef), who meet every few months to explore and enjoy gins they haven't previously tried. They take notes too. In a few months, he may have similar activations for Toast and Tonic patrons, but says, "We'll have to adapt as we go. Bringing together strangers is always a challenge; each city behaves differently."

FESTIVALS

In March, NAO Spirits with Bar-Back Collective, Secret Supper Project and IHD will host a gin festival at one of Delhi's botanical gardens, bringing you a variety of gin brands and gin-based cocktails to explore with live music.