

Whisk It Up

With a younger audience taking to whisky in newer ways – through engaging, immersive experiences – the spirit is shedding its conservative image and emerging as the new cool



:: Anoothi Vishal

It's a regular Friday at Whisky Samba, a glamorous bar in Gurgaon, stocking 140 labels of whisky. It is still early evening and the decibel level of the music is not overwhelming as yet. A group of women in their late 20s-early 30s from an office nearby, unwind over their drinks, loudly comparing notes of the cocktails.

"Capricious" is pronounced delicious, sweet bourbon mixed with limoncello di Capri. "No-Fuss Old Fashioned" with Jim Beam and angostura bitters and "Tokyo Sour", made from a Japanese whisky, spiked with togarashi spice, are apparently favourites with these regulars. The drink of that day, however, is pronounced to be "Mr Spice and Nice" – Johnny Walker Black Label jazzed up with plum and port wine. Not one of the women has ordered plain vodka, soda, or colourful, fruity margaritas, deemed "women's drinks" in the past.

In the world of spirits, conventional wisdom suggests that every new generation globally rebels against the tipple of the generation before. No one wants to drink what their parents drank, which is why we have cyclical trends where gin scores over vodka, or whisky comes back in fashion.

In India, where we ostensibly consume more "scotch" than produced in Scotland, and where whisky has always been an overwhelming favourite, it is ironical and interesting that the same spirit is now shedding its fuddy-duddy image and emerging as the new cool in the metros. The difference lies



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in how it is being consumed. Instead of scotch and soda quaffers or more discerning single malt drinkers obsessed with notes on age, casks, highland, lowland distilleries and prices, we now have a younger millennial audience taking to whisky in newer ways: In cocktails, and through engaging, immersive experiences.

Older No More

There has also been a discernible shift in terms of gender. Whisky was always seen



(Clockwise from above) A floor-to-ceiling bar and a collection of 140 labels of whisky in Whisky Samba, Gurgaon; In India, in the last two years, classics like Whisky Sours have become the chicest cocktails

as an older man's drink. Till even about five years ago, a handful of high profile whisky clubs that cropped up in cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Chandigarh, with bureaucrats and corporate honchos for members, often boasted of only stag memberships, sans wives. Exclusive cigar and whisky lounges in hotels with heavy wood and leather look only propagated this image of an older man's drink.

Those barriers are now being demolished. While the competitive sport of "my whisky is rarer, older, more expensive than yours" does exist, a younger audience, including women, is sipping the spirit in the right spirit of fun. As far as snobs go, there is a school of thought that says older whisky is not necessarily better and anything over 18-21 years old is just a con job but that's another story.

"The challenge was how to make whisky more accessible to a younger, larger audience. Instead of old, heavy leather-and-wood panelled bars associated with whisky

we decided to be modern. Whisky cocktails are integral to the experience and today these are the highest revenue generating category on the menu. The third key is pricing 18 year old whiskies less, while pricing 12 year olds higher so that more people can try better whiskies. We also did away with Highland-Lowland categorisations because who really cares," says restaurateur Ashish Kapur of Whisky Samba. This year, Kapur plans to take it to Mumbai with the same strategy.

Old Fashioned for the Young

The world over, whisky has been seeing a renaissance. Bourbons, craft distillations, rye whiskies are all riding a wave of popularity amongst millennials. Scotch, meanwhile, is lightening its image not just with non age statement whiskies (brought out because aged stocks in Scotland were dipping to mixed reactions) but with newer, engaging products and campaigns.

Associations with Mad Men and David

Beckham or Gone Girl are only part of the reason why whisky has been trending globally. One big way in which it has been able to reach out to a larger diverse audience is through cocktails. With interest in these at an all time high and with bartenders pushing boundaries to give us drinks that are Instagramable and delicious, it is natural that whisky should seek to pitch itself as suitable to mixing.

In India, in the last two years, classics like Old Fashioned and Whisky Sours have become the chicest cocktails to sip. AJ Snetler aka The Tattooed Bartender, a mixologist from Cape Town and Instagram celebrity, who is in Mumbai this month at the House of Nomad at the Taj Land's End agrees that the craze for Old Fashioneds is far from over. "Whisky is the drink everyone wants to be seen with and orders at bars revolve around classics like Old Fashioneds," he says, while promising to give Mumbai a taste of more innovative whisky infusions.

Old Fashioneds are usually seen as the first step towards drinking serious whisky but there are other cocktails doing away with the image of a stiff drink. "We are trying to teach people how to do drinks like whisky with ginger ale or whisky sour diluted with soda. These are easy and accessible," says Pankaj Balachandran, one of the country's top mixologists, recently appointed brand ambassador of Monkey Shoulder. The Speyside malt whisky blend that pitches itself as "perfect for mixing" launched in India in end 2015.

Balachandran's new campaign to promote it involves appearing with two bartenders in tow at any bar and taking it over for just 10 minutes. In this time, the team whips up simple but interesting cocktails, giving these free to everyone at the bar, and then "disappearing". This strategy of providing short bursts of excitement is targeted at an audience looking for unique wow experiences.

The cocktail route to making whisky accessible is being taken by other brands too, many of who have roped in young brand ambassadors in the 27-30-year-old age bracket to influence trade and consumers.

Dewar's global ambassador based in Edinburgh Kara Anderson is just 30-years-old and was in India recently hosting parties and showing off mixology skills at different bars that spilled over prettily to social media. Jameson Caskmates that launched in September last year seems to have a similar strategy.

Even award-winning Indian whiskies like Paul John, being sipped by sophisticated consumers after their success internationally, are being drunk by the under 30 audience in cocktails. Paul John Old Fashioneds and Goa-inspired cocktails are currently quite trendy.

There are more evolved cocktails too. At the uber chic POH Mumbai, the sweet, spicy, peaty Togouchi, blended in Japan from Scottish malt and Canadian grain, is a premium whisky priced at ₹1,095 for 30 ml on the menu, just a tad less expensive than Lagavulin 16 (₹1,275 for 30 ml). When it goes into a cocktail (with yuzu and orange juice, seaweed and dried kelp and peppercorn burnt on wood to provide smoke surrounding the drink), the drama



behind it finds younger takers. "Typically, whiskies such as Oban, Talisker, Glenfiddich 21, Lagavulin still attract an above-40 audience but the younger set goes in for whisky cocktails," says chef Vikramjit Roy of POH. Vodka is no longer the base spirit of choice for the chic. Gin is still trending but whisky is at the cusp of an explosion.

Millennial Malts

Globally, while vodka is in decline – its sales growing very slowly compared to the



Brands like Singleton and Jameson have been targeting music festivals like Magnetic Fields to reach out to young palates. Instead of old-fashioned tastings where the accent was on education and which could be interminably boring, new tastings are centred around experiences. According to a global Diageo report on trends of socialising, 78% of millennials would rather spend money on a desirable experience than buy coveted goods. The report put together by Zoe Lazarus, Global Future and Culture Planning Director, also sees "immersive entertainment push boundaries further and become truly mainstream".

Marketing strategies are seeking to tap into this behaviour. In 2016, The Singleton Sensorium held in Soho, London, became the world's first multi-sensory experiment into the effect of environment on the taste of whisky. Participants were invited to enter three cinematic worlds, noting down how different sounds, smells and visuals enhanced flavours in their single malt whisky. The event was run in collaboration with Oxford University. In India, while we haven't seen that – as yet – experimental formats like one by Glenfiddich, inviting collaborations between different crafts and bartenders are pushing boundaries. Mumbai's newest party hotspot, the China House Lounge at the Grand Hyatt, has been designated as India's only Johnny Walker lounge, ostensibly to facilitate more immersive party experiences around the spirit.

However, it may be false to believe that "serious", exclusive whiskies are only being sipped by older boys. Vaibhav Singh, partner at Delhi bar Perch, notes that the average drinking age for "serious" whisky has gone down. "I have 27-28 year-olds, including girls, claim to be exclusively single malt drinkers. People are starting to drink earlier, so by the time they are in their late 20s, they are done with binges and ready for quality," he says.

With much of quality spirits only available at homes, home entertainment is an important segment to track the trend. Singh, part of BarBack Collective, a group of top mixologists in the country, says that in the home segment, it is common to see groups of friends appreciate a bottle of Japanese, Korean or Single Malt whisky someone got while travelling. "It's not just their fathers but younger, consumers too," he adds.

Some of this interest is riding on fads too. Big square or round ices that first made their advent into bars thanks to the Japanese art of Mizuwari cocktails (two parts of water, one part spirit, poured over ice) are now all pervasive in home bars too. So are things like putting cold stones into your whisky to not dilute it. Then, there is glassware, which has gone far beyond the mandatory crystal. All sorts of pretty coupes and even copper mugs are being used. Whisky after all is no longer staid. ■



The writer looks at restaurants, food trends and culinary concepts