

Liquid

Dominican Rum

Spirit with Memory

Golgappas

A Liquid Revelation



Khasi Favourites

Meghalaya Heritage

The Alchemy of Highballs



There is something deeply ritualistic within Indian drinking culture when it comes to highballs – the entire foundation rests on the simple whisky-and-soda conundrum. I uncover what really goes on behind its enduring appeal.

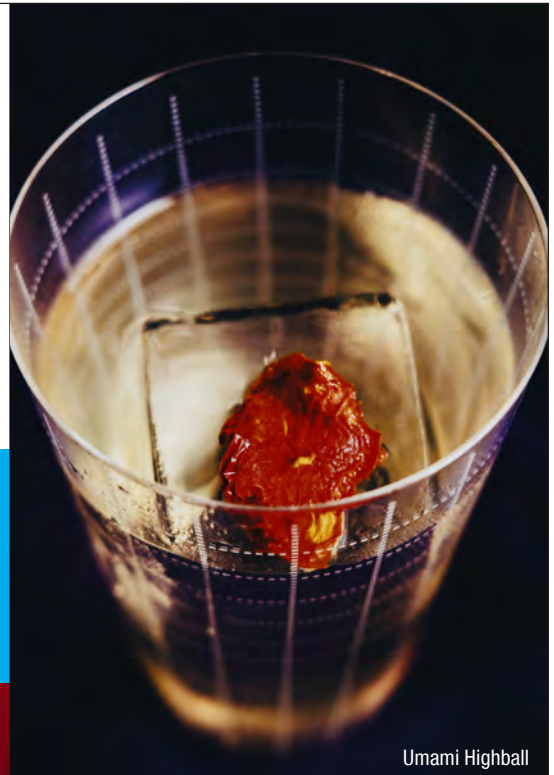
There is a chemical shift that occurs when water is added to whisky; this act of dilution doesn't weaken it so much as open it up, releasing aromatics that otherwise remain tightly bound. It's the ultimate combination when attuned to the right choice of

mixer. The glass clinks with ice, often filled to the brim; a measure of warm, golden spirit is poured, and the drink is finally lifted by the effervescence of soda.

I default to whisky because it remains the most familiar and comforting anchor, but the highball is far from monogamous. Gin, Tequila, rum, vodka – even fortified wines – form equally compelling foundations. What matters isn't complexity, but balance.

Highballs, emerged in the late 19th century, traced to Britain and the United States, where spirits were lengthened with soda for refreshment and

The modern highball isn't casual, and it isn't complex. It's designed to refresh, reset, and play its part of a long, languorous sip.



Umami Highball

approachability. Japan, however, elevated the form into ritual – post-war bars treated the highball as a craft, obsessing over ice clarity, glass temperature, dilution ratios and carbonation. They didn't invent it, but they perfected it – and continue to do so.

That philosophy is finding renewed expression at I doru, a Japanese bar in Mumbai, where the highball is approached technically. Here, dilution is dictated by hard, dense ice chilled to just before cracking, carbonation is introduced, and even the space left at the top of the glass is deliberate – an aroma chamber designed to let flavour cut through in a music-first room. As their beverage consultant Koki Ito-san puts it, "A standard highball isn't simply whisky and soda – it's a complete cocktail. By controlling the technicalities, we allow the whisky's aromatics to express themselves clearly."

Ironically, whisky itself has long been viewed as a spirit resistant to cocktails, too precious or too personal to



Photo: the.whiskyexchange.com

tamper with, for the most part, there are, but a handful. Yet the highball has always existed as its counterpoint, a respectful compromise and a veritable way to stretch the spirit without obscuring it – and make it highly repeatable.

BEYOND WHISKY AND SODA

World over, this combination of whisky and soda is sacrosanct to an individual's taste, but it's also the easiest pour. Grain and water go beautifully together, and carbonation has long been treated as a way to soften and make it refreshing. But that ease is precisely what has kept the highball boxed into a narrow definition.

At Bar Sama, Bengaluru, shaped in collaboration with Singapore's Cat Bite Club, the team pushes back against the idea of the highball as a shortcut. In climates that punish excess – sweetness cloying, citrus acidity and the heaty lingering of alcohol,

Rum and coke is a masterclass in balance, where caramelised sugar, spice, bitterness, and acidity align effortlessly.

somehow soda doesn't conceal flaws, it exposes them.

Their approach begins before bubbles ever enter the glass, building structure through wine, fortified wine, or tea-based components that bring acidity, dryness and grip. The addition of these elements dictate a balance of simplistic ritual and eventually, carbonation is added in. Their cocktail – Eve's Afternoon – conceived not as a traditional highball but as an aperitif, borrows the format: vermouth softened with apple infusion, fortified wine for tension, sparkling wine for finesse.



Eve's Afternoon



Thai & Japanese highballs



Floral highball

Similarly, there are such incredible combinations which bring almost every nuanced flavour profile and spirit to come together – rum and coke is a masterclass in balance, where caramelised sugar, spice, bitterness and acidity align effortlessly. Gin and tonic follows a similar logic, bitterness vis-a-vis botanicals, while Tequila and grapefruit is delicious through salinity and citrus. Even vodka and soda, often dismissed for its neutrality, works when mineral water, temperature and garnish are considered with care.

These pairings are classics, and within good reason – that of being structurally sound.

WHEN HIGHBALLS START THINKING LIKE FOOD

Koki Ito-san approaches the highball as a flavour system that are structured around *go-mi* – the five traditional Japanese tastes – with spice introduced as a sixth. It's a way of thinking that reframes the highball as something deliberately food-aware. He points out that the original purpose of drinks like lemon sour was palate cleansing and meal compatibility. That

philosophy of highballs designed to sit comfortably alongside food is where Japanese structure begins to intersect naturally with restaurant-led bars, and where flavour, rather than form, starts to take the lead.

That idea finds a natural extension at Chaiyo, the new bar expression in Seefah Mumbai. Theirs is the perfect platform to explore an amalgamation of flavours given that Thai and Japanese come together conceptually. Chef-partner Karan Bane speaks of the highball as an exercise in control – a meeting point between two cultures that value balance in different ways. Just like their cooking, the drinks are layered: the first sip feels almost weightless, the next reveals depth, think the warmth of ginger, citrus oil, a flicker of umami, a floral note that lingers. Ginger-led and kombucha-driven highballs rely on temperature, fizz and acid for refreshment, while character comes from ingredients both Thai kitchens and Japanese bars understand with ease.

That same food-first logic plays out at Kasper's, where the highball is designed to complement the rich



Photo: Michael Oedelberth@unsplash.com

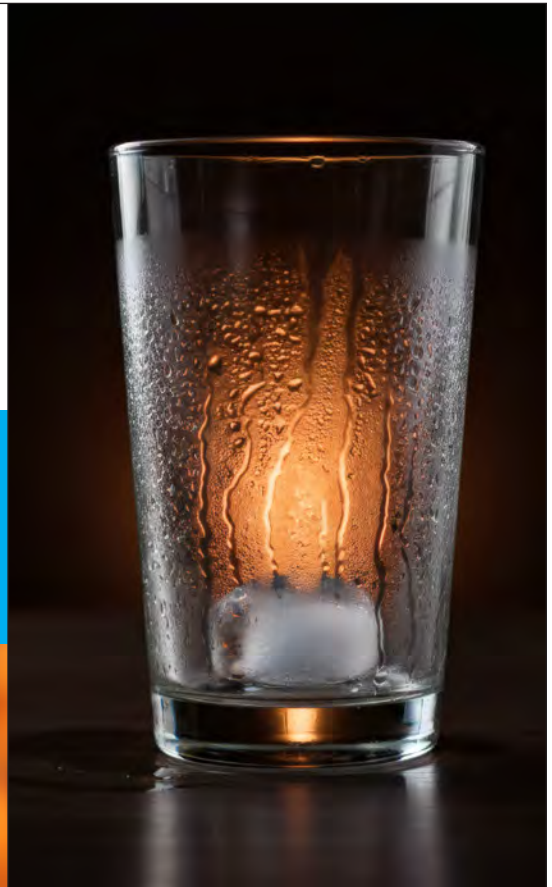
cooking of Chef Will Aghajanian, whose creativity in the kitchen relies on rich sauces, savoury forward foods. “The highball should act like a palate-cleanser,” says Durgesh Singh of Food Matters Group. Base spirits are chosen to mirror the cuisine – light vodka and Lillet Blanc for floral profiles, or Campari, beer, strawberry and soft orange for fruit-forward dishes – with just one or two mixers to amplify the entire beverage.

Scale that thinking up, and India’s luxury hotels – incubators for new drinking rituals – come into focus. At Fairmont Udaipur Palace, *Dahaad* – an immersive

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Imli highball



cocktail sanctuary within its walls, highballs are shaped by its arid climate and the languid pace of luxury. “A destination resort highball must cool, refresh and invite a second sip,” says beverage manager Ritesh Ray. Working with Rajasthani flavours like *imli*, *ker* and *frangipani*, the rule is to let one local ingredient lead. Introduced through clean infusions or distillates, these flavours enhance rather than dominate, preserving clarity and effervescence.

Across bars and palaces, the message is consistent. The modern highball isn’t casual, and it isn’t complex. It’s designed to refresh, reset, and play its part of a long, languorous sip. [TL](#)

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