

Indians are experimenting with their drinks and nothing exemplifies this better than 'Indian Accent'



Daniel Beedle, beverages director, Indian Accent

When life gives you lemons, squeeze them into your vodka. That's exactly what Indian Accent seems to be doing. The marquee restaurant in Delhi, widely regarded as the standard bearer of Indian dining, will reopen at The Lodhi by end October with high expectations and a raised bar when it comes to its cocktails and wine menu. The latter will be along the lines of its chic beverage list in New York, almost as well regarded as chef Manish Mehrotra's food.

Faced with a loss in revenue of about Rs 1 lakh a day (that's the figure its owner and Old World Hospitality CEO Rohit Khattar gives though initial unofficial estimates were pegged higher) over four months and the possibility that the brand itself could take a beating (what's a world-class restaurant without a credible wine list, after all?), Indian Accent had no choice but to move out of its cosy space on

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The Manor premises in Friends Colony after a court order prohibited sale of alcohol within 500 metres of highways.

By the time the Supreme Court clarification came in mid-August that restaurants within city limits were exempt, the agreement with the DLF owned The Lodhi had been signed and sealed. (The hotel is making the most of the investment and will take a share in revenue.) On The Waterfront, which is making way for the new restaurant, was being broken down, and everyone at Indian Accent was in transfer mode. His hand may have been forced but Khattar says “it’s a good thing. We will have more space and t ..

More space is an understatement: From being a 50-seater with a daunting wait list stretching weeks if not months, the Indian Accent is going to be a 115-seater: a 50-cover main dining area, two private areas of 15 and 20 seats each and a space for 30 upstairs with a separate tasting menu. Mehrotra is pulling out classics from his old menus to put the launch menu. What’s spanking new, however, is the beverages programme.

Daniel Beedle is the beverages director for the entire restaurant group. He grew up in a hippie commune, was a part-time actor and a vineyard hand before he studied biochemistry and discovered the world of wines and liqueurs. Beedle has just landed in Delhi from New York to shake and stir things up. On the day we meet, barely over his jet lag, he is biting into a fish tikka for lunch and asking for recommendations on Delhi’s bar scene. What he brings is the headiness of global ideas even on a me ..

Beedle is passionate about obscure liqueurs. He talks about his discoveries: an artichoke liqueur from Italy, a green walnut one he concocted over a year, the complex French liqueurs. “I know, you don’t have them in India, but it is only sensible to make our own. There are so many ingredients here,” he says. With his “pal” Mehrotra, Beedle has lengthy discussions on the nuances of ingredients and spices to get the beverage pairing right. If a dish has fenugreek, he will pair it with a Madeira from his formidable collection (the New York wine list has more than 40 types of this fortified wine from Portugal) because it has notes of the same spice. “We’ll try to get lesser known, boutique wines here and pair these with food, along with more bitter cocktails.” That may be a relief for those looking to be weaned off the sweet stuff that often passes off as drinks for grown-ups in the country.

Up a Peg or Two

It’s not as if India’s bar scene hasn’t been steadily evolving. Palates have been changing over the past year or two. Horrors such as dry ice and liquid nitrogen (that scarred a patron’s innards at a bar in Gurgaon a few months ago), synthetic and syrupy mixes, and drinks in ostensible drip bags have been dying a natural death.

The past year saw trends that have already lost their sheen. Gin and flavoured tonics are doing the rounds at pretty much every bar, almost every place that calls itself upscale is crying hoarse about its

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housemade shrubs and bitters (often bartenders have no option but to devise their own in the absence of international products), and whisky is the new gin.

Whisky is being rediscovered as a younger, cooler spirit worldwide and this is a trend in India too. Though whisky has always been a favourite, and it has been a decade since Black Label drinkers discovered pricey single malts, this latest bar trend pegs the spirit as a non-fuddy-duddy drink.

Old Fashioneds and whisky sours are fashionable cocktails and a younger, more gender-neutral crowd has adopted the spirit. Irish whiskies finished in craft beer casks, and ryes are trending and India is set to be part of this surge.

Shweta Jain, head of marketing for William Grant and Son, agrees. “We all know there are two Indias, and while there is much moral hypocrisy around alcohol in the country, younger Indians across genders are experimenting with cocktails. Whisky is reinventing itself globally as a cooler drink and the adoption of this image in India has been much faster than we expected despite deep-rooted associations of its being an older man’s drink.”

Liquor majors have been reaching out with innovative events. Last weekend, the Mumbai bar Theory saw an artisanal coffee roaster, chocolatier, craft beer maker, musician and chef compete to make the most innovative whisky cocktail for a Glenfiddich event. The prize went to Masque’s high-flying chef Prateek Sadhu who collaborated with bartender Chirag Pal to concoct a cocktail using sea buckthorn, apricot and rosemary with Glenfiddich 15. The idea is to be part of a high-value cocktails market that is coming of age.



In pic: At a competition for the most innovative whisky cocktail, chef Prateek Sadhu and bartender Chirag Pal won with their drink of sea buckthorn, apricot, rosemary & Glenfiddich 15

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The other trend worth watching is of bar chefs and celebrity bartenders. If chefs are now legit celebrities, it is the turn of the people behind bars. “Earlier, no one wanted to be a bartender. It was looked down upon. Now, there are bartenders who earn more than general managers of hotels,” says Vaibhav Singh, one of India’s foremost bar entrepreneurs. They are throwing out old ideas, experimenting with local ingredients, spices and herbs, smoking techniques and upping the experience. “Bartending and mixology have been given a fresh face. Consumers want to try the latest concoction in a bid to discover the new,” says a report by Pernod Ricard India. Finally, there’s also stress on craft spirits, beer and on indigenous alcohol though policy bottlenecks mean bar entrepreneurs fight on an uneven turf.

For all the hypocrisy that surrounds alcohol in India, no one can deny the potential of the market. The NRAI India Food Services Report 2016, compiled by Technopak, estimates a CAGR of 22 per cent for the next five years for bars, pubs and cafes in the organised chain segment: their number is estimated to grow from 540 in 2016 to 2,880 in 2021. The average per person spend in this category is Rs 750-1,500 (customers spend just 30-40 per cent on food and the rest on alcohol).

Despite the buzz and bucks, there’s a damper on the party.

Bar Downers

Indian Accent may have cut its losses and moved on to the next high but many have yet to recover from the losses of the highway ban. While many restaurateurs and bar owners will not go on record, there are stories of smaller operations going bust. Chains and hotels have taken it on their chin, but everyone is struggling to get back on one’s feet.

The loss in revenue due to the “highway liquor ban” was estimated to be approximately Rs 650 billion according to the NRAITechnopak study, with restaurants and pubs contributing to 15-20 per cent of the total loss. However, the same might be less now due to the relaxation by the Supreme Court, says the study.

The Bird Group’s Ankur Bhatia — whose Delhi hotel, The Roseate, took a hit — says he lost more than Rs 1 crore a month—“around Rs 5 crore in four months”. And business is still not back to what it was. It will take time for the crowd to come back, he says. “There is a dampening of sentiment, too. Restaurateurs and hoteliers feel it is better to do business abroad. In Dubai and London, not only are returns on investment higher because of tourism and propensity to spend, but governments smoothen your path.”

While the highway liquor ban was not a state or national government decision, grey areas in licensing and high GST for hotels (28% for tariff above Rs 7,500 per night) are playing party poopers. Bhatia, who is set to open a bar with his Zuma-style restaurant Kheer at the Roseate House in Delhi’s Aerocity, is struggling to get a liquor licence.

This is not new. Ashish Kapur, who owns the bars Whisky Samba in Gurgaon and Antares in Goa, says, “While consumers increasingly want better and exclusive international spirits, licensing and label

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registration policies make this very difficult. We don't even get liqueurs like limoncello or all the varieties of Bols."



In pic: Ashish Kapur, who owns the bars Whisky Samba and Antares, says that while consumers want better international spirits, licensing and label registration policies make this difficult



Import duties (a central tax) to the tune of 150% aside, “You have state policies that make functioning very difficult,” says Vishal Kadakia of Mumbai-based Wine Park, an importer that brings some of the most interesting wines to the country. “Markets like Delhi have excise policies that are not very clear,” he says, explaining some of the challenges. “Licences for sale of registered liquor brands should be renewed every fiscal, for which a sum of money is charged for the entire year. But excise departments keep extending existing licences on a monthly basis, charging extra fees for that, announcing the renewal only several months down the line. You are still supposed to pay for the entire fiscal. Then there is uncertainty about the registration of new labels. No one knows when new registrations will start so restaurants don’t know what to order. Many markets have distribution monopolies and others have absurd taxes,” he says.

While consumers are evolving, laws and their execution haven’t kept pace. “India is one of the most hypocritical countries. We see enjoyment as a sin and it is increasingly difficult to spend money, however good it may be for the economy, whether it is in retail, auto or hospitality”, says Arvind Singhal, chairman, Technopak.

Is there a way to start the party? Restaurateur AD Singh offers an idealistic scenario: “India is a large country and it is difficult for lawmakers to have a one-size-fits-all policy. What’s required is for policymakers to sit down with relevant stakeholders, and the right framework can be put together.” Let’s see if that ever happens.