

TREND

In good spirits

Bacon with bourbon, chamomile flowers in vodka, mango with tequila—bartenders in India are shaking up the cocktail

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The cocktail bar in India is going through a major shake-up. While the usual suspects—Old Fashioned, Manhattan, Whisky Sour, LIIT (Long Island Iced Tea), Martini and its different interpretations—aren't going anywhere, fresh twists are reviving the cocktail in the face of fierce competition from craft beers and ever-improving local wines.

Food in drink

Baconique, essentially a quirky take on the classic Whisky Sour, is a signature cocktail at Sandys Cocktails and Kitchen, a neighbourhood bar inspired by the 1920s jazz era, in Gurgaon, near Delhi. "Bacon and mushroom-infused bourbon, mixed with lime juice and topped with mushroom foam, crushed nutmeg and black pepper," owner Sandeep Verma aka Sandy describes it crisply. "Smoked pancetta fat is added to bourbon every day for 7-10 days for the bacon flavour. The fat is then filtered out and the bourbon double-strained. Infusing the drink with mushroom flavours takes another five-six days. In all, it's a month in the making."

Verma's bar has many such complex craft cocktails that take anywhere from a couple of weeks to three months to create. "A lot of research goes into creating a craft cocktail," he says. So there are a lot of hits and misses.

Cocktails, he says, are essentially a work-in-progress.

In Bengaluru, Toast & Tonic does a variety of craft cocktails, from the Bacon Old Fashioned (bacon-infused bourbon, bitters, orange, sugar and ice), Matcha Daiquiri (matcha tea, white rum, honey, lime and ice) and Royal Bengal Mojito (gold rum, *gondhoraj* lemon, *nolen gur*, mint, pineapple, tonic and ice) to a number of gin and tonics (G&Ts).

"G&Ts are making a huge comeback globally," says Manu Chandra, chef-partner at Toast & Tonic. "Our focus is to eventually make tonics in-house because the commercially available tonic in India is too sweet and the imported ones are too expensive."

Till that happens, they are infusing tonic with shrubs for their gin and tonic. A vinegar-and-water base is infused with ingredients such as lavender, orchids, *gondhoraj* lemons; 5-8ml of the "shrub" (the shrub-infused vinegar-water base) is added to a 60ml pour of gin, followed by a topping of flavoured ice and tonic water for a gin and tonic.

The local flavour

Westin Hotels and Resorts recently introduced its newest "handcrafted" beverage programme, Crafted at Westin Hotels, at its six properties across the country. One of the signature cocktails in Gurgaon, Camomile Mule is prepared by infusing vodka with chamomile flowers from Uttarakhand and then mixing it with honey syrup, lemon juice and ginger beer.

"Bartenders have built their menus to reflect local ingredients as well as their own skills," says Amit Kumar, director, food and beverages, The Westin, Gurgaon.

There is also an increased focus on fresh elements, like mango and lychee in summer, herbs like curry leaves and mint,



Different tales: (clockwise from top, left) The Herbalist at Toast & Tonic, Bengaluru; tonic flavours at Toast & Tonic; and Banta Fizzes at The Bombay Canteen.



brand ambassador, Moët Hennessy India. "This year, we have mixed sage and lemon to create the Chandon Summer."

The wine accent

Spritzers are the flavour of the season for Moët Hennessy India's Chandon. With less than two million people in India consuming it, according to a 2012 study by management consulting firm Technopak, wine remains a relatively small category in the otherwise large Indian liquor industry.

"We have two basic principles for cocktails: Use local ingredients and keep it simple so it can be replicated easily," says Jelkie.

But the Indian consumer is rising above sangrias. Chandon's spritzers this year include the Chandon Summer, the Berry Burst (strawberries and cassis), the Proud Pungent (grapefruit and ginger) and Sun-kissed by Chandon (orange and basil). "We actually encourage bartenders to hand out recipes," Jelkie says. "Besides, they are also available on the social media platforms of the brand."

A dash of nostalgia

"Nostalgia is one of the major guiding forces," says Dua. "The drinks we have created at the Masala Bar would surely bring back memories of happy days from your childhood. For example, An Evening in Chowpatty is a vodka-based drink with a curry coconut mix topped with coconut fizz. It is served in a glass which resembles an actual coconut with a side of *chaat*."

Yash Bhanage, partner and chief operating officer of The Bombay Canteen, too believes it is important to go back to the flavours that one grew up with—a sentiment echoed by many bartenders. Chandra says he started dab-

bling in nostalgia four years ago when he launched Monkey Bar in Bengaluru. "We made a drink called Mangaa, which essentially is vodka plus *aam panna*, and it was a big hit," he says. "Before we realized it, pitchers over pitchers of the cocktail were leaving the bar. We also experimented with rhododendron, *falsa* and *kala khatta*."

Glasses and more

Another important feature in today's cocktail industry is innovative presentation. "In the age of social media, the presentation of an item goes a long way," says Dimitri Lezinska, mixologist at The Good Wife bar in Mumbai. "A cocktail with an edible flower doesn't only look great, but also enhances the overall experience."

Consider Inception from Sandys Cocktails and Kitchen. "It is essentially chamomile tea mixed with rose water, elderflower and rum, and served over chamomile tea ice cubes which have rose petals inside," says Verma. "It looks beautiful and, as the ice melts, the taste of the drink changes from fruity chamomile to fragrant rose."

At The Bombay Canteen, says Bhanage, "the Old Fashioned uses a spherical dome of ice, which has orange peel inside. It not only adds to the theatre but also gives another dimension of flavour to the drink."

The cocktail drama, however, works only when the elements are used intelligently to tell a story. "Innovative packaging works best when it adds to the drink itself. If, for example, you serve a Negroni in a tiki glass, it just doesn't make sense," says Bhanage.

In other words, the good cocktail of the day not only has to be shaken or stirred, but also sane. We can drink to that.