

GOAN INNOVATIONS

You don't have to look beyond Goa when it comes to innovation in the liquor industry in India. **By Vikram Achanta**

When it comes to the most innovative alcohol products in India and forward-looking entrepreneurs, Goa has belied its "Sussegad" image to emerge as the state which is slowly helping put India on the world liquor map, and this time for reasons other than us being the world's largest whisky market, or the home of Old Monk. For some, it was the chance to resurrect the image of Feni in Goa, while for others it was the quality of water which was the lure; for a third, it was the urge to keep tinkering. Whatever be the motivation, the underlying thread has been that of passion and conviction to create a product with integrity.

FENI RENAISSANCE

Curiosity about Feni has prompted many visitors to Goa to pick up a bottle, but until recently, the response from outsiders has been typically to gag, rather than to appreciate its flavour. According to Hansel Vaz of Cazulo Feni, this in the recent past has applied not just to outsiders but also locals, due to what he sees as the increasing adulteration of Feni, in particular mass market Feni, which is bottled and sold in retail establishments. Till recently, Feni was also classified as a country liquor by Goa and for the most part has been looked down upon, with the prices of even the better brands of Feni not exceeding Rs 200-250 per bottle. Hansel's family had been in the Feni business for several generations, making a mass market brand of Feni called Dona Maria.

Although well settled in a corporate job in New Zealand, Hansel was still drawn to the challenge of resurrecting both his family's legacy as well as the image of Feni itself. He decided to launch a new brand of Feni, working closely with the independent distillers who make Feni (they are granted auction rights to collect cashew apple and then also to distill the cashew apple). A seasonal business, temporary distilleries are set up and then dismantled across the state, and there are wide variations in quality, depending upon the practices followed by the distillers. He also had to tread a fine line between making Feni more palatable to a wider audience, while also ensuring that the characteristic aroma of cashew Feni was not diluted too much. A key step taken was to also revive the old practice of resting the Feni for a year in large glass jars, called *garrafaos*.

Hand in hand with his work on the product was the attention lavished by Hansel on branding, and the results are plain to see, in possibly one of the best examples of product design in India, with the firefly which gives its name to the brand (Cazulo means firefly in Konkani) twinkling in the middle of the label. Fortunately, Hansel has not been alone, and others such as Regan Henriques of Rhea Distilleries have also picked up the gauntlet to take Feni into new and exciting directions. Feni has always traditionally been double distilled, and Regan was possibly one of the first to innovate via a brand called Fidalgo, produced by distilling Feni thrice, twice at the distiller's end and once by him, resulting in a cashew Feni which was ultra-fine.

LIQUEURS

A product I was curious about is a liqueur called Armada, made from natural spices and fruit, with all the ingredients believed to be completely natural. Armada claims to be made from an original family recipe which dates back to the Portuguese Empire. Quite like Amrut from Bangalore, which came to everyone's attention after Jim Murray anointed it as one of the world's best, so too was the case with Armada, which came to prominence after the signal honour of winning a Gold medal in the prestigious International Wine and spirits Challenge in 2014. It's not easy to get hold of Armada at the moment though, and on my last visit to Goa, I asked around but couldn't find it. I do hope that the owners are able to fix this and make the brand more widely available in the days to come.



DESI TEQUILA

You normally associate the leading edge in India with its software industry. Thus it's no surprise that the next entrepreneur from Goa to make a mark in the field of alcoholic beverages is Desmond Nazareth, who sold a software company in the US and came back to his native Goa. A born tinkerer, whether with code or spirits, Des began to look for indigenous substitutes to use in the Margarita he loved. Finding the Agave Americana (a cousin of the plant which is used to make tequila in Mexico) growing wild in the semi-arid Deccan wastelands in Andhra Pradesh, Desmond, after trials, went on to establish one of India's first micro distilleries there, while retaining bottling operations in Goa. Desmondji, as the product is now called, has gone from strength to strength and is now available in multiple variants, including a 51 per cent agave spirit, a 100 per cent agave spirit and even an oak aged variant (made with 51 per cent agave spirit). This tinkerer isn't done yet; I'm sure more brands will emerge from his stable.



SINGLE MALT

Maturation of spirits like whisky is far more challenging in tropical climates such as India, compared to the cooler climes of Scotland. Given this, it's a surprise to see one of India's preeminent single malts, Paul John, make its home in Goa. On a recent visit, I had the opportunity to be taken on a guided tour of the distillery by Michael D'Souza, the passionate Master Distiller who is at the heart of the brand. Michael explains that the single most important factor for choosing Goa as the location of his distillery was water. Water is used in all the stages of the production of whisky, and John Distillery is surrounded by mountains, and all the water used is drawn from underground water sources and nearby streams. This water is also sweet in character. With three variants in the Indian market (Brilliance, Edited and most recently Bold), I do hope that Paul John also introduces some of their "export only" variants into the domestic market soon.

Writer's note: The two products on everyone's lips nowadays are both hush hush. One is apparently a new brand of gin and the other is a craft beer, and they are two more reasons to visit Goa when they launch. I urge you to pick up any of the brands I've talked about here, either in your home market, if you're fortunate enough, or else in Goa itself.

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