

DUMMY SLUG

The Cocktail Circuit

**VIKRAM ACHANTA GOES
PUB-CRAWLING—AND
WINE-SIPPING—ACROSS
AMERICA AND EMERGES
IN HIGH SPIRITS**

On the flight from London to New York, I opt for a couple of cans of Heineken. An apt choice, as it was a Dutchman named Peter Minuit who, in 1626, bought the island of Manhattan from the native Indians for 60 guilders. You could call it a Dutch Killing. Coincidentally, there's a bar named Dutch Kills in Long Island, which is an offshoot of Milk and Honey (M&H), a legendary New York Speakeasy-style bar.

David Wondrich, in his excellent book, **Imbibe*, demarcates three pre-prohibition ages of the cocktail, the last of which he calls the Classic Age, from 1885 to 1920. The world over, in the past five-odd years, there's been a yearning for the past in matters relating to cocktails, which manifests itself in two ways: the revival of so-called 'vintage cocktails'—long-forgotten drinks of the Classic Age, now in their second or a third coming; and, secondly, in the cult of the Speakeasy.

Speakeasies, which have just begun to get going in India, owe their origin to the US Prohibition era (1920-33), when illegal establishments plied alcohol on the sly; their locations were not widely known, except to a few who might possess a password, which they used to "speak easy" at the door and enter.

M&H, I learnt, had been established by its founder Sasha Petraske as a revolt against the snobbery of the cocktail bar, and I was expecting

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good things of it. What greeted me was a beat-up door between two East-side shops, with no visible signage outside to suggest that it was a bar or suchlike establishment.

The bottles lined up on the back bar were largely of a foreign nature to me, but as I began chatting with the bartender, I spotted Aperol, an Italian aperitif that I'd heard about. M&H doesn't have a menu, and it's up to the bartender to make you what you want, with all drinks priced at \$16. I asked for something with Aperol, and began chatting with the bartender as he made my drink. Perhaps I'm generalising here, but I find that in most bars in India, there is a marked absence of bar conversation. The social aspect of drinking, which is so important, is completely lost on most bartenders. From the high harrumphs who oversee food and beverage

operations of major hotel chains and from India's leading restaurateurs, the feedback we receive is common: our guys are sound on technical skills, but their social skills are terrible.

Apart from my High Horse (Aperol with tequila and mescal), which was well-crafted and a visual treat, what made my experience enjoyable was being able to chat with the bartender, about anything under the sun, his craft, the bar scene in India, and so on.

From New York, we headed for Champaign, from where I was driving to Chicago the next morning with the rest of the brood, for a visit to the Aviary, in Chicago's seedy meat-packing district. Founded by Grant Achatz, a chef, the Aviary showcases molecular mixology techniques to the extreme. That term derives from molecular gastronomy, which is the application of simple scientific methods along with food-grade chemicals to create interesting food recipes by using existing classics and changing their texture and form. Molecular mixology does the same with drink recipes. Fancy your Mojito served up as gelatinised balls of mint water and limejuice, suspended in carbonated white rum? That's a molecular mojito.

America is blessed with several hundred top-quality bars, which makes for continuing one-upmanship among them. Think of the havelis in the narrow confines of Shekhawati, with one Marwari family

outdoing the other, and apply the same principle across America: what you get is a constantly innovating cocktail bar environment, with one of the key thrusts in the area of cocktail theatre, where The Aviary ranks among the best in the land.

The Rob Roy we ordered (Lavender Air, sherry, Scotch: \$19) was served in a large sealed plastic bag, with the cocktail glass within, so you prick the bag, breathe in the lavender air, and then drink the cocktail. It's a bit like having a drink "in the rocks", as opposed to "on the rocks": the cocktail was sealed inside a large ice cube, placed in old-fashioned glass. You can either give the ice cube a whack, filling the glass with the cocktail or you can give it a gentle tap on the edge, and use a straw to sip the cocktail (a mix of Benedictine, vermouth, cognac and rye; \$18).

We were seated at a bar table, right outside the bar area, which was designed much like a birdcage, with a Show Bar, screened off by a large glass window. Behind the window, apart from the liquid alchemists of the Aviary, was a table with four chairs, for those who opted for The Flight, from the menu--a choice of seven cocktails, which came either with bites (\$125) or without (\$85).

We were given a choice of ordering The Flight, or a Prix Fixe (three cocktails; \$45) or going a la carte, with individual cocktails ranging from \$16 to \$28. We went a la carte—which was a mistake in retrospect considering the number of cocktails we downed.

The highlight of the evening for us was Tropic Thunder (wild lime, hibiscus, pineapple, tequila;

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\$22), where all the ingredients infuse together in a cylindrical vessel, called the Porthole, specially designed for faster infusion. It was visually fabulous, and a treat to taste. We drink every last drop of it.

America's Cup was around the corner, and it was on my mind as I walked past Hangar 12 on the Alameda waterfront, the race headquarters of Artemis Racing, one of the three teams that were to compete for the right to race Oracle Racing, the



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winner of last year's event. My destination is St George Spirits, situated in Hangar One at the far end of what was once a US Naval Air base, on the island of Alameda, a 20-minute ferry ride from San Francisco.

Hangar One Vodka was one of the first products in a range of spirits from St George Spirits; it became perhaps the most famous of their range, and St George is now one of the most famous craft distillers in the US. "No outside booze, no booze outside. No shark riding!" says the St George website. At 12

noon, Andie Ferman, the Distillery Diplomat, opens up the tasting room doors. I enter a long room, divided into two sections: you can "Drink from a Glass" if you go one way--or "Buy a bottle or 3", if you go the other way.

Andie goes behind the bar, and starts cracking open bottles and dishing out shot glasses filled with St George's creations, faster than I can drink them, giving me a pleasant buzz. It's only my questions that slow down Andie a bit, but she's got an answer for them all. We start with the eaux de vie (fruit brandy), made from Colorado pears. It's bursting with the taste of pears, given that 15 pounds of fruit go into each bottle.

One of the many shortcomings of the alcoholic beverage industry in India is the absence of even one 'made in India' product that can stand alongside, say, Mexico's tequila or Brazil's cachaca (a cane spirit, made famous by the caipirinha cocktail). Part of the reason for this is the dif-

tory of distilling, he began to tinker with local fruits and made eau de vie, a clear colourless fruit brandy.

From the Pear, Jorg's first creation, we move on to the Hangar One straight vodka, made from a mix of Viognier (a variety of grape) and grain (wheat) spirit, then the Hangar One Mandarin Blossom Vodka, made using quite literally Mandarin Blossoms, then the Botanivore and the Dry Rye Gin, and finally Breaking and Entering, their bourbon. Neat gin leaves me cold, but the Mandarin Blossom was the best orange-flavoured vodka I've tasted.

Andie leads us into the distillery, and takes us on a quick recap of the growth of St. George Spirits, and the 10 years or so that it's spent at Hangar One. She also briefs us on the Absinthe made at St. George, which is the first absinthe made in the US after it became legal to make in 2007. Were they making Absinthe before that? They're not telling.

Absinthe is a liquorice-flavoured spirit, production of which was banned in the early 1900s across the US and much of Europe. An ingredient present in trace elements was suspected of causing hallucinations, and possibly madness, with Vincent Van Gogh, among others, believed to be devotees of what was known as the Green Fairy. I understand that modern-day recipes haven't tinkered with the levels of thujone in absinthe. I decide to test this on a friend and pick up a half-bottle to gift him.

The vineyards of Napa Valley are next on my radar. I've put together what could be an interesting itinerary, weather permitting, but it's a dull day,



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with rain fore cast later on, so we may have to forego some of our outside activities, including a planned barbeque lunch at the V Sattui winery. The vineyards stretch from Napa in the south to Calistoga in the north, going through Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford and St Helena on the way. We could either take the freeway between the towns or take the country roads, which would probably be far more picturesque. We don't know the latter route, however, and decide to stick with the straight and narrow, which proves disappointing for its lack of any scenic merit. Maybe I should never have seen *Sideways.

From Napa, we head to Yountville, where after a quick tasting of sparkling wine at the winery of Domaine Chandon, we head into the centre of town for lunch at the Pacific Blues Cafe. Burgers all around, and a glass of wine for me, as we sit out the rain, which by

then has begun pouring down.

I'd never heard of Far Niente, and had booked a winery tour and tasting based on a friend's recommendation. It turned out to be the most beautiful winery I've been to. A few photo-ops later, we walked up to the house to enter a long, wood-panelled room with a table set for a wine-tasting at one end. A small group assembles, no more than six: a mother-and-daughter pair from Indiana, an elderly couple and us. Far Niente's story began in 1885, and took a long break from 1919 (when Prohibition was imposed) until 1979, when Gil Nickel, an enterpris-



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ficulty of setting up a micro distillery or a craft distillery; these typically have smaller production runs, are not owned by large conglomerates, and most importantly go beyond the run-of-the-mill stuff.

Across America, the word 'craft' is now gaining traction—from distilling to brewing to wine making. The sheer size of the American market, the sophistication of the consumer and the highly advanced retail and hospitality sectors, all combine to give these craft manufacturers a boost.

Perhaps it was this potential that inspired Jorg Rupf, a German visitor to the US, to set up St George in 1982. Inspired by the variety of fresh produce available in the Bay Area and drawing upon his family's his-



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ing guided missile analyst (go figure!), purchased and restored the winery and made it into what one of the leading wine estates in Napa Valley, and indeed the world. After we're given a potted history of Far Niente, we're taken on a tour of the caves, which sprawls across 40,000 square feet and which were the first modern wine caves built in North America when excavation began in 1980.

The next stop on our tour is the tasting, but not before a small deviation, to the Carriage House, filled with Gil's collection of vintage cars and bikes, including a 1966 Ferrari 500 superfast and a 1961 Corvette. Fancy a spin? Your surname had better be Nickel! Family members



(who still run the winery) sometimes come and take the cars for a spin. There's even a speedboat, which Gil Nickel powered in Europe. Talk about the Good Life: fine wine, Ferraris, speedboats... for a moment, I felt like I was in the middle of the *Great Gatsby.

The \$50 tasting lets us savour five wines: two Chardonnays, two Cabernet Sauvignons, and, to end, the Dolce, an

American-produced sweet wine. The wines were paired with a selection of cheese, drawn from France and California. There was more than enough wine (and cheese) to go around our small table, which made the tasting well worth the money: the Chardonnays came at about \$70 a bottle, and the Cab Sauv from \$135 to \$500 a bottle. The fast plummeting rupee made the wines too expensive for us to buy, and surprisingly for the other Americans on our tour too. But the experience was great, especially the surroundings, which made the wine taste that much sweeter. Sophia reveals that the concierge at the Calistoga Ranch, a high-end resort nearby, told her, that he always kept Far Niente as the last stop on his guest's tour so that they would end it on a high. That's readily believable.

Not bad for a gent who left the Navy to join the family business, a nursery, which is now America's second-largest wholesale nursery. The nursery roots are plain to see in the spectacular 13-acre grounds that surround the winery, and make it a visual treat. Gil succumbed to cancer in 2003, but in his life, he remained true to the name of his winery. When they were restoring the original winery building, they came across the name Far Niente, which they decided to retain as mark of respect to the heritage of the winery, and with good reason too: in Italian, Far Niente means 'Without a care'. Tulleeho to that!



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THE INFORMATION

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