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## World bars: quest for the best

In the fourth of Drinks International's in-depth surveys, owners and managers of 50 elite bars throughout India were contacted directly by Leslie Henry Research Ltd to learn their choice of top bars and spirits.

This month's report covers the best bars within this area, as selected by this group of industry insiders.

# India

The top three bars on our list are testament to the diversity of drinking experiences available in India today: a lounge bar, a nightclub and a live act venue. The explosion in bar culture in India has been fuelled by many things, including the growth in India's economy and the fact that 70% of our population is under the age of 30.

Also contributing is the increased proliferation of liquor brands; greater sophistication of retail environments; entrepreneurs looking for new, glamorous investment opportunities; the easing of licensing norms; and, most importantly, an increasingly aware and sophisticated consumer.

Apart from the lounge bars, pubs and nightclubs, there is now also the spread of chains, both international and domestic – brew pubs, sports bars, wine bars – and even India's first Tiki bar. High quality bars are also no longer confined to top hotels. What's next will undoubtedly be the proliferation of cocktail 'Meccas', where the gap is currently more on the supply side, rather than the demand.

Indian bartenders need to up the ante and for this they also need the support of their employers. And, as also suggested by the experts, India needs to develop its own distinctive cocktails, based on the rich assortment of ingredients available. It's good to know that the best is yet to come!



**Vikram Achanta, co-founder and chief executive of Tulleeho, a consultancy working in the beverage and hospitality industry in India**

## REGIONAL WINNER



### Space and a personal touch

#### 1 Q'BA

E 42/43 Connaught Place, New Delhi 110001 [qba.co.in](http://qba.co.in)

Connaught Place – a major Delhi commercial centre named after the British Duke of Connaught – is being vandalised, legally, by the god-awful machinery of the state. Unfortunately for Q'ba, the leading bar in our survey, it's slap bang in the middle of CP (as it's known locally). But Q'ba continues to throng them in, six years after opening, and has now spawned four siblings across Delhi.

The bar – surprise – is Q-shaped, surrounded by lots of comfy seating, most of which is occupied this Friday night by a mix of guests from nearby hotels, corporate wage slaves and embassy staffers, all drawn to the giant screen, where Brazil and Portugal are fighting each other to a soulless, goalless World Cup draw.

The stairs lead up to a Q-shaped island for dining, surrounded again at an elevation by more seating space for diners. It also leads out to a wrap-around *al fresco* section, which is normally choc-a-bloc during Delhi's balmy winters and which overlooks the central garden of CP. The DJ console, which plays primarily lounge and retro, is on the first floor – there's no dance floor but there's enough space to shake a leg, if you're so inclined.

What's the secret of its success, bringing in 300 covers per day, six years on? Space and its efficient utilisation, and a personal touch for guests. Q'ba's thirsty hours, from 3pm to 7.30pm, are a good example, when, rather than forcing a 1+1 offer, they've just slashed prices on a select range of drinks by 50%.

# The experts' view

Sunil Tickoo, group general manager, Q'Ba

Consumers are becoming choosier and more health conscious. There is definitely an increase in awareness about drinking too heavily. The government has helped crack down a lot on drinking and driving. If I can vote at 18 and get married at 21, why do I have to wait till 25 to legally have a drink in Delhi?

I see consumers experimenting more and developing their preferences and tastes. As more



brands are entering, choice is also increasing. The bar scene in India is becoming more stable as people are heading out more to eat and drink. We need more intense training of international standards for our bar staff. There are many Indian chefs known for their style of cooking, but hardly anybody is known for their bartending style. We need more awareness (as well as encouragement) about talented bartenders in India, such as Best Bartenders of India.

Dimitri Lezinska, global brand ambassador, Grey Goose

I would like to encourage bartenders from India to seek inspiration from the wonders of Indian cuisine and to leverage this to create an identity for their mixology. With all the wonderful spices and fruits available in India, bartenders there have an advantage over others from around the world. Rather than replicate what bartenders do in the west, I'd like to see them use their local produce, spices and ingredients in their creative output.

I also feel we need to provide Indian bartenders with the tools



and resources they need to research the craft of the cocktail and strengthen their skills. I believe this will help drive their passion for creating cocktails.

All over the world people ask me what is my favourite drink. I have to say location is a big factor and using local ingredients is very important to me as they connect me with the place even more. I would encourage all bartenders to take a trip to their local markets to seek inspiration and create a cocktail a day with a different ingredient.

## Ones to watch

mpressario Entertainment, with its three excellent outlets in Delhi – Smokehouse Grill, the newer Smokehouse Deli and Mocha Arthouse – is blazing new trails in the cocktail world and in the creation of distinct, unique spaces.

Rahul Akerkar, who is credited with introducing Mumbai to international fine dining, shines with his signature Indigo restaurant and its newer siblings Indigo Deli, Indigo Café and, flanking Mumbai's racecourse, the spanking new Tote with its "stretching to the sky" bar ceilings and signature spiced cocktail Tote Mary.

Not far from Tote is Aer, 34 floors up on the rooftop of the Four Seasons Hotel. Olive, another chain, with a focus on fine dining and fine beverage experiences, is spread across India, with its sister outlets Ai and Lap in Delhi.

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### 3 BLUE FROG

Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai Maharashtra  
400013 bluefrog.co.in

It's a muggy Friday night, and there's a long line of Mumbai's hipsters snaking outside Blue Frog, all waiting to share the music of Norman Doray, a DJ from France. Around 30 years ago, the Mathuradas Mills compound, where Blue Frog is situated, was one of the centres of the textile industry in Bombay, as the city was then called. The mills have mostly shut now, and the real estate, worth millions of dollars, is where a clutch of expensive developments are coming up. The compounds are full of restored industrial warehouses, now home to pricey bars, restaurants and night clubs, including Blue Frog.

Blue Frog is more than just a live performance music club; it's also home to four state-of-the-art recording studios, a music production house and an independent record label and artist management service.

Entry charge is 500 rupees (about €8.50, £7) and if you want to delay entry, there is an outdoor bar which might not be a bad idea, because getting a drink after entry is not easy, despite the long bar which continues on to an open kitchen.

What takes the eye on entry are the "pods" which constitute the main seating area of Blue Frog. Architect Kapil Gupta has designed the club to give those standing at the bar a clear view of the stage, and they glow in the dark, heightening the whole "beam me up Scottie" feeling. The UK's Munro Acoustics was charged with ensuring the sound quality in the venue and it's done a bang-up job.



### 2 FTV BAR & LOUNGE

50-B Chanakayapuri, New Dehi 110021 fbardelhi.com

Two years on from its launch, F has recently been renovated, freeing up a lot of space for a lounge area, among other design and space modifications. It is a large space, hosting at its peak 1,200 people. A massive island bar (possibly the biggest in India) – easily able to cater to more than 50 people around it – dominates the centre of F, with the lounge area on one side and the dance floor on the other. The dance floor also has a ramp, useful for the slew of fashion-oriented events which keep happening at F.

It's in what was Delhi's first 5-star hotel, the Ashok, which has taken the smart move of leasing out its prime real estate to a range of premium bars, restaurants and spas. One flight up from the dance floor is the Diamond Lounge, which is hired out to high rollers. Also one flight up, at another end, is a VIP section, which is being morphed into a new concept, yet to be revealed.

F has a lean drinks menu, which is always good, especially for a nightclub, as you don't have to agonise over what to order. The choices are clear and well laid out.

Occasional violations of Indian broadcasting law leads to FTV being off air for a few days. There's nothing like being banned, especially in India, to add that extra bit of masala to the brand and, I'm sure, F Bar has benefited from it. Far from being banned, F Bar is open 24/7. If you're in Delhi, don't miss it – but don't get there before 11.

## The experts' view

Vijay Rekhi, president and managing director, United Spirits

Mumbai leads the best bars, the reason being it is the commercial capital with a sizeable population of HNIs (High Net Worth Individuals), international visitors and a more mature and evolved consumer. Delhi and Bangalore are not too far behind with bars such as Highland Nectar in ITC Gardenia. The increase in per capita spending has moved per capita consumption

by a couple of decimal points, with consumers wanting to indulge in socialising. Increasing competition has compelled bars to reinvent themselves and offer improved experiences. This trend will get stronger – the estimated youth population entering legal drinking age in the next five years is nearly 100 million.



Tim Etherington-Judge, beverage consultant, The Taj Group of Hotels

In Mumbai, cocktail culture is at an exciting time – it is still very much in its infancy but will evolve in a way the Indian consumer demands. What Mumbai really needs is some speciality cocktail bars where the bartenders create stunning lists and educate the public on the wonders of great cocktails. A problem is that bartenders are not treated with the



same respect as overseas, with the Indian consumer unwilling to be led into new drinking experiences by the experienced bartender.

I love experimenting with Indian flavours; the spices blow my mind with their freshness and intensity. When I came to Mumbai I made a decision to create Indian-influenced cocktails rather than just copy the trends of London or New York.



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#6

Professional verdict: Indian bartenders select their best bars



#7



#10

**4 HARD ROCK CAFE**

Pendurang Budhkar Marg, Worli, Mumbai

hardrock.com

Oodles of space in the heart of Mumbai, a refreshing door policy, great music and the usual rock memorabilia falling off the walls. Quality cocktails, comfort food and no attitude service, what's not to like?

**5 ENIGMA, JW MARRIOTT**

Juhu Tara Road, Juhu Beach, Mumbai

Mumbai's hottest nightclub, situated in the JW Marriott, where Bollywood's A-listers love to party. It's a large space, with a massive chandelier as the centrepiece. Hope the sonic vibrations on Friday and Saturday nights don't get it moving!

**6 HARBOUR BAR**

Taj Mahal Hotel, Apollo Bunder, Mumbai

tajhotels.com

The oldest bar in India, circa 1933, has also just been renovated, preserving

however the Art Deco look and some of the old elements, like the classic bar made from a block of white marble. Some incredible aromas waft from the bar, as a brand new cocktail list is churned out for experimental guests. With a view of Mumbai's Harbour and the Gateway of India it's the perfect place to wind down a Mumbai day.

**7 TANTRA**

Park Hotel, 17 Park Street, Kolkata

Ten years on, Tantra @ the Park continues to be a club-goers mecca, not just for local residents, but also for visitors from all over India. The design is Indian with traditional Indian influences interpreted in contemporary forms. It's spread over two levels, with a DJ console brooding over the dance floor, as Kolkata's night birds jive.

**8 RICK'S**

Taj Mahal Hotel, Mensingh Road, New Delhi

tajhotels.com

A lounge bar par excellence, everyone in Delhi has come to Rick's at one time or another, primarily to see and be seen, and to sample their signature cocktails and innovative food menu.

**9 AGNI, JW MARRIOTT**

Park Hotel, 15 Parliament Street, New Delhi

theparkhotels.com

Agni (the Hindi word for fire), the nightclub, sits back to back with its restaurant counterpart, Fire. A compact nightclub, located in the trendy Park Hotel, it's slickly designed, with a firewall at one end bringing the place to life.

**10 DUBLIN**

The ITC Maurya, Sardar Patel Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi

itcwelcomgroup.in

An Irish Pub transplanted to Delhi, Dublin is a mix of a pub-cum-nightclub, with a large subterranean space, carved out into smaller spaces, each with its own individual appeal.

BEST OF THE REST

● **China House**  
Grand Hyatt Mumbai, Santacruz East, Mumbai  
mumbai.grand.hyatt.com

● **Hard Rock Café Bangalore**  
40 St Mark's Road, Bengaluru  
hardrock.com

● **Hard Rock Café New Delhi**  
DLF Place, Saket, New Delhi  
hardrock.com

● **Indigo**  
4 Mandlik Road, Apollo Bunder, Mumbai  
foodindigo.com

● **Bombay High**  
ITC Maratha, Sahar, Mumbai  
itcwelcomgroup.in

● **Blue Bar**  
Taj West End Hotel, Race Course Road, Bengaluru  
tajhotels.com

● **Olive Bar & Kitchen**  
One Style Mile, Mehrauli, New Delhi  
olivebarandkitchen.com

● **On Toes**  
3<sup>rd</sup> Khar Road, Khar West, Mumbai  
ontoespub.com

● **Aqua**  
The Park, 15 Parliament Street, New Delhi  
theparkhotels.com

● **Aurus**  
Nichani Kutir, Juhu Tara Road, Mumbai  
dishhospitality.com