

NECTAR OF THE GODS:



THE MAKING OF AMRUT

Words

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Growing up in India, I was always fascinated with its mythology and one of

the stories etched in my memory is that of the gods and demons fighting over a nectar called Amrut. It was meant to make one immortal and the story made clear to me why in India any drink good enough to be regarded as an elixir was referred to as Amrut. So what else would any ambitious distiller call its Indian single Malt whisky?

A decade ago, I drank only Islay whiskies, despite being a poor student at University in London. After a few drams, I often fell to pondering the countries that topped the list of whisky-producing nations. India was not amongst them. I never imagined that a whisky made in my far-off home town would soon become an international brand – let alone that it would start out being sold not in India, but in Glasgow.

I first discovered Amrut and its Bengaluru (Bangalore) provenance (I am a little ashamed to say), after watching a video of Kavyan Novak dressed as one of his characters Brian Badonde tasting Amrut Fusion in Milroy's bar, Soho – and expressing surprise at its quality. Being an avid and curious whisky drinker myself, and only having known poor quality Indian blends, I was determined to learn more of this distillery on my native doorstep.

Having a particular taste for an earthy whisky, I headed to one of my favourite whisky bars, Black Rock near Moorgate, and started with Amrut's Peated Single Malt. Holding up the nosing glass in excitement, knowing that this was from the mothership, there was an instant burst of tar and smoke. Quite fitting, I thought. Amrut is made in an industrial area of Bangalore, and the smell conjured instant memories of home. The nose was the best. On the palate, it was surprisingly fruity before the peat finally crept in.

It was Amrut Fusion, however – which combines Indian and Scottish barley – that really put the brand on the world map. Jim Murray, author of the Whisky Bible, declared it in 2010 to be the third best whisky in the world. And John Hansell, editor of American magazine Whisky Advocate, wrote that Indian whisky used to be seen as “just cheap Scotch whisky blended with who knows what” but “Amrut Distillery changed the way many think of Indian whisky.” It certainly changed how I think of it, and having become increasingly popular in other parts of the world, even the Indian market is now taking notice.

Amrut Distilleries belongs to the N.R. Jagdale Group, one of the oldest industrial groups in the country. Established after India gained independence in 1948, it initially produced and supplied other spirits such as brandy and rum to army canteens, before beginning to distil malt whisky in the 1980's. What made Amrut shine was its use of barley while other Indian whiskies at the time were made with molasses. What intrigued me was understanding whisky production in a tropical country, so I caught up (virtually) with the managing director Rakshit Jagdale, the third generation of the family to head the business on Amrut's journey.

“Though the warmer, semi-tropical climate of India for the most part precludes maturation for more than around 10 years, it is also a boon,” says Rakshit. “Notably, it is the combination of Bangalore's climate, an altitude of 3000 feet above sea level and relative humidity that makes for accelerated maturation of the whisky. A three-year-old Bangalore-matured whisky is probably equivalent to a 10 or 12-year old whisky matured in colder countries.”

Amrut's divine aspect kicks in here, as it has an exceptionally large ‘angel's share’. When whisky is made, a certain amount is lost each year to evaporation as the casks breathe. It's a key part of maturation. In Scotland about two percent is lost, but in India, thanks to soaring tropical temperatures, some 10 to 16 percent of the whisky evaporates. Amrut has embraced this process and created its Greedy Angels limited-edition whisky which manages about thirty years of maturity after ten years of aging. It is one of the most exclusive editions, much sought-after by whisky connoisseurs and collectors.

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Amrut's barley is sourced locally – from the foot of the Himalayas. Oak barrels are procured mostly from the United States, though Amrut occasionally imports a small number of special-purpose, pre-used barrels from Europe. Having worked at Amrut for over two decades, Rakshit is keen on every aspect of whisky production including the creativity of blending (when required) and he's proud of Amrut's variety.

So what's his dream dram? "Amrut Fusion, Amrut Kadhambam and Amrut Naarangi," he replies without hesitation. And he knows the effort that goes into making these elixirs. Even the gods didn't succeed first time. The legend has it that the first attempt produced halahala, a mythical poison. Only on the second attempt did they produce the elixir of life.

Whilst Amrut's focus is strongly on its whiskies, their upcoming ventures are in other spirits including rum, along with hopes of producing a premium quality Indian gin. After all, why limit a brand associated with immortality to just whisky?

And others are catching on. Amrut is facing competition from the likes of Paul John from Goa and, from further north, Rampur.

I end my quest with a glass of the famous Fusion. It may not bring me immortality, I conclude, but there's definitely a divinity in this dram-from-home. **1**