

Why storytelling is key to appreciate India's craft spirits

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At Bengaluru's Flavour Lab, visitors can take weekly tours to understand what goes into the making of their alcohol



The Good Craft Co (TGCC) Flavour Lab.

It is not often you're introduced to a 400-year-old indigenous spirit as having "made Time magazine's list of the worst spirits in the world in 2010." The storyteller was Hansel Vaz, founder, Cazulo Premium Feni, and he was introducing Goa's craft spirit, *feni*, at a session at The Good Craft Co (TGCC) Flavour Lab in Bengaluru. "It is a primitive spirit," he says. "There's nothing evolved about it. In fact, in the world of historical indigenous Indian spirits, which also includes *mahua* and toddy, we are the rank outsiders. Yet, we make the loudest noise." Despite its lack of sophistication, experts have raved about *feni*'s natural complexity, he adds. "Iconic Japanese bartender and expert Hiroyasu Kayama-san has dubbed *feni* 'the most original in its making process' and carried bottles back to Japan."

Vaz was at TGCC's Flavour Lab, an alcohol and spirits experience centre in Bengaluru, late last month. "In India we never showcase our indigenous spirits, unlike the monks in Europe who made chartreuse and benedictine famous. We should make *feni* famous, not just in India but in the world. For this, traceability is important and we provide that, right from the fruit grove to the bottle," says Vaz.

Feni is made from ripe cashew fruit crushed to extract juice and fermented naturally in half-buried earthen pots for several days. The distillation takes place in traditional earthenware *bhattis* or pot stills. The first distillate produces low-alcohol *urrak*, while the second creates a spirit of 40%

drinking strength. At the TGCC bar, Vaz has lined up six *fenis* for tasting—straight-up coconut and cashew, zingy ginger-flavoured Além, one infused with the earthy *dukshiri* or Indian sarsaparilla, the rich 'coffee conserva' version, and India's first Feni RTD (ready-to-drink) – a moreish blend of *feni* with lime, sugar, and green chilli.

The finale included two *feni*-based cocktails created by TGCC's inhouse mixologist Neil Alexander. The first combined cashew *feni* with lacto-fermented basil and chili, lemon puree, *tirphal* (a Goan pepper) tincture and a spritz of soda. The second, a luscious digestif, blended coconut *feni* with condensed milk and blitzed biscuit, vanilla, salted toffee, and aromatic bitters.

It's a fitting end to the weekend workshop at TGCC, a 17,500 sq feet space in Whitefield. Created by Diageo India, TGCC holds spirit-specific workshops over three-hour sessions, focusing on ingredients, unique processes, and untold stories. Soft-launched in September 2024, TGCC's Flavour Lab is appended to Diageo India's own research lab on the premises. Storytelling is the new route to understanding India's crafts spirits, says Diageo's Chief Innovation Officer Vikram Damodaran. "The marketing focus for Indian spirits has been largely centred on their taste and prices, but today the narrative behind the liquid is just as important."



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The idea of creating an incubator for spirits startups was seeded when Nao Spirits, makers of Greater Than gin, reached out to Diageo for help with shelf-testing and technical assistance for Punk, their strawberry-infused gin, says Anand Virmani, Nao's co-founder and master distiller. This exercise helped them figure out the right filters and processes to make Punk more stable as a liquid, he said. Diageo's experts also helped them address

scalability issues and product marketability. The triggered the idea of extending Diageo's expertise to other spirits startups and to hitherto neglected indigenous spirits, *feni*, toddy and *mahua*.

I was first introduced to TGCC's Flavour Lab in July this year during a session on India's favourite spirit, whisky, helmed by Damodaran, creator of Diageo's Godawan single malt. Guests were taken through a museum of historical distilling artefacts. After we touched, felt and examined the ingredients, we peeked at the miniature working copper pot-still and a room filled with tiny wooden casks used for analysis of flavour outcomes.

Then on to the most Instagrammable section of the lab—the forest-green “Living Wall of Flavours” where Kobo Fermentary founder and TGCC consultant Payal Shah houses her 68 living ferments in glass jars lining the walls. Shah, who created Kobo in 2018, describes it as a fermentation playground to explore and develop flavours. She joined TGCC in October 2023. “Fermentation, created by microbes, is one of the fundamental pillars of flavour,” she explains, opening jars for us to taste from. These complex flavours are created from simple processes—from lacto-fermented cherry tomatoes to a range of vinegars including one made from vegetable scraps. Shah's ferments are often the secret ingredient that adds complexity and additional depth to the cocktails served at TGCC. She works closely with TGCC mixologist Alexander whom she describes as a mastermind.

Bengaluru-born Alexander, 42, returned to India a couple of years ago because the lure of a research lab was impossible to resist. India's cocktail scene was growing rapidly and the clientele had matured, he adds. “People want to see layered drinks, flavours, modern mixology, new techniques. It's all about complex tastes and aromas now, and a storyline that talks not just about ingredients but the ideas behind it: you need to make a connection.”

Three-hour sessions are held on Saturdays. Open to all, prior registration required.