

New Indian Single Malt Whiskies Hold Their Own Against Scotch

Whether you're celebrating Diwali or looking for a special pour for Thanksgiving, India's whiskies offer the new and noteworthy.



Bungalow's lineup of Indian single malts. *Source: Bungalow*

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October 30, 2024 at 11:10 PM GMT+8

Updated on November 1, 2024 at 2:17 AM GMT+8

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At Bungalow, celebrity chef Vikas Khanna's Indian restaurant in New York's East Village, a dozen Indian single malt whiskies are spotlighted in their own section on the spirits list.

Just a few years ago, that wouldn't have been possible, says partner Sameer Bhatt. Although India is the world's largest whiskey market, its whiskies are typically blends, often made with a rumlike molasses distillate. Until recently, Indian single malts were virtually unknown, if they were even available outside the subcontinent.

Now, with domestic whiskey consumption rising hand-in-hand with the country's growing affluence, distilleries are turning out high-quality single malts in quantities available to export—and they're not only gaining traction but also snapping up awards. Amrut Triparva was named to the 2024 Best in Class roster at Whiskies of the World; last year, Indri Diwali Collector's Edition 2023 took home the top prize there. This year, Indri Founder's Reserve 11-year-old wine cask was named one of the Top 15 Whiskies at the International Whisky Competition.

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Today, "my Indri is selling more than my Macallan," Bhatt says.

"I tell people what happened in the wine industry is now happening in single malt," says Sanjeev Banga, president of international business at

Radico Khaitan Ltd., the parent company of Rampur Distillery, based in Northern India's Uttar Pradesh. Just as New World wines drew the spotlight from the European old guard, so have Indian whiskies enticed drinkers away from Scotch. "Malt consumers are always looking for something new and innovative."

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A Taste of India

At its most basic, single malt whiskey is made at a *single* distillery using only *malted* barley in the mash—a distinct expression of that distillery's output. (Blending different barrels from different years is OK and often done to produce a consistent product.)

Amrut Distilleries Ltd., which was founded in Bangalore in 1948, is generally credited with pioneering India's single malt industry, with the 2004 release of Amrut Single Malt, a Scotch-style spirit made from germinated barley and flavored with smoky peat. That was followed by Goa's Paul John distillery, which released its first single malt in 2012, and Rampur, which debuted its own version 2016.



Amrut AATMA Indian Single Malt (\$160) — Finished in ex-oloroso sherry barrels and exclusive to the US, this 8-year-old whisky comes from a single cask yielding a mere 300 bottles. It's a deep and dark dram: Think sticky toffee pudding and prune, with a lightly smoky exhale. *Source: Vendor*

Newer entrants include Indri, produced by Piccadilly Distilleries about 100 miles north of New Delhi in the small city of Indri, which gives the whiskey its name; Longitude 77, a distillery closer to Mumbai owned by Pernod Ricard SA (and named for the longitudinal line passing through India); and Godawan, a Diageo Plc brand in Alwar, Rajasthan, that took the best single malt in the world trophy at the 2024 London Spirits Competition. ¹

Distinctions start with the malt: Most distillers use India's six-row barley, which has higher protein and fat content compared to the two-row barley preferred elsewhere. The smaller granules create a robust flavor some distillers describe as "sharp." Especially when fermented with local yeast, it can produce distinctly Indian flavors. Tasting across multiple brands, I frequently detected cardamom, ginger and orange; fennel seed, sandalwood and incense-like spice notes sometimes also came through. (Of course, peat isn't native to India, and those using peated barley such as Amrut and Paul John import the ingredient from Scotland.)



Paul John Christmas Edition 2024 (\$85) — Since 2018 this Goa distillery has released an annual holiday special. This year, it's a 6-year-old whiskey finished for an additional year in emptied Caribbean rum casks, which layers the toffee base with tropical fruit tones. *Source: Vendor*

India's hot, humid climate is another key differentiator. Once barreled, the distillate ages very quickly than in cooler Scotland or Japan. In some regions, wide swings in temperature and humidity—mostly from hot and damp to hotter and damper—means the barrels expand and contract frequently, meaning the oak makes more contact with the whiskey, allowing it to extract vanilla and spice.

The liquid also evaporates quickly, a phenomenon known as the Angel's Share, creating a more concentrated spirit. Producers say one year's worth of aging in India is akin to three or four in a cooler climate. "A 10-year-old [Indian single malt] is equivalent to a 40 year-old Scotch," says Rampur's Banga.



Amrut Greedy Angels 12 Years Old (\$2,000) — Older than most Indian single malts, it's finished in ex-bourbon casks and bottled at a whopping 120 proof. Only 60 bottles are available worldwide, including 18 for the US market. *Source: Vendor*

That rapid maturation also means it's rare to find long-aged single malts—and some producers eschew age statements altogether. Most of India's producers follow the rules set by the Scotch Whisky Association, which requires whisky to be aged a minimum of three years. However, some smaller distilleries are bristling against that, lobbying to age single malts a minimum of one year.

Increased Appreciation

The US is the single largest export market for Amrut, says Raj Sabharwal, founding partner of Glass Revolution Imports, estimating the country accounts for one-third of global sales. “The American appetite for it has grown and continues to grow.”

In part, that's due to the diaspora of often well-heeled Indians in the US—including those running acclaimed restaurants like Bungalow, Semma or Junoon, which gladly boost the visibility of Indian spirits or mix them into cocktails.

“Fifteen years ago, we did not target the Indian community,” Sabharwal recalls. “They would not have been familiar with it, and there was a sense that anything made in India wasn’t very good,” a throwback to the blended whiskey days. He remembers a sales call to Junoon around that time, when the beverage director deflected that their customers preferred Scotch. “Now they buy everything that we release.”

“The Indian diaspora is our biggest brand ambassador,” agrees Rampur’s Banga.



Rampur Barrel Blush (\$110) — The newest addition to Rampur’s permanent portfolio is finished in barrels that previously held Australian shiraz. Expect a delicate red-fruit aroma and flavors that mingle toffee, chocolate-covered orange peel and a cardamom-accented exhale. *Source: Rampur*

But it’s not only the Indian community pouring these drams.

“Indian single malt is still considered new,” explains Ben Wald, head of beverage programming at whiskey-focused Manhattan bar Flatiron Room. That novelty is part of the appeal for American whiskey lovers: “There has been, and always will be, a desire to be the first on the boat. Indian single malt is still capitalizing on this desire.”



Bhakta 2012 Indian Single Malt Whisky (\$149) — This 11-year-old single malt was distilled by Goa's Ocean King Distillers and finished in Armagnac casks. It's an elegant sipper, with plenty of caramel on the nose and palate, finishing with sandalwood, the faintest whiff of smoke and cinnamon sizzle. *Source: Vendor*

Future Growth

Looking ahead, one thing is abundantly clear: more Indian single malts are on the way.

Currently, 24 distilleries in India make single malt whiskey, estimates Sabharwal, with six more under construction. That includes one from Pernod Ricard, which broke ground earlier this month and is anticipated to have a production capacity of up to 13 million liters of alcohol a year, making it the largest malt distillery in the country—and Asia.



Rampur Jugalbandi #5 (\$400) and Jugalbandi #6 (\$400) — The name “jugalbandi” refers to a two different instruments playing together; these bottles, the latest in what will be an eight-part series, each harmonize two different cask finishes. No. 5 brings together bourbon and Tokaji wine casks, yielding rich butterscotch, golden raisin and warming ginger, while No. 6 brings in bourbon and Madeira, creating lush maple and spice cake tones plus a remarkably long, lip-smacking finish. Each are limited to 1,200 bottles. *Source: Vendor*

“We are still a nascent category,” Banga says, welcoming the potential competition. “The more brands in the market, the more people exposed to single malt, they will start liking it and then hopefully loving it. Like what happened to Japanese whisky, I’m sure the same will fall over to Indian single malt as well.”

With the US election looming, tariffs are a wild card for growth. “If the Scotch whisky tariffs come back into play, some consumers may look for another choice where the price/age ratio is more agreeable for their budget,” predicts Flatiron’s Wald. “The key will be who can convert Scotch whisky drinkers over to their single malts. Suppliers talk a lot about ‘liquid to lips’ being the best marketing strategy, and for global malts still in their infancy, getting consumers to try Indian single malt is key.”



Amrut Master Distiller's Reserve (\$170) — The third release of this expression is a 7-year-old whiskey aged in ex-bourbon casks and bottled at 100 proof. Waxy honey and dried apricot lead to a lingering, peaty finish. A mere 72 bottles will be available in the US, and a total of 176 bottles worldwide. *Source: Vendor*

A further sign that Indian whiskey has captured attention here: Kentucky bourbon maker Bardstown is using emptied Indian whiskey barrels to add nuanced flavor to American whiskeys. Its Bardstown Bourbon Amrut (\$160) finishes a blend of straight ryes and bourbon in former Amrut casks, adding nuanced smoke and spice.

“It’s the first American whiskey finished in Indian whiskey barrels,” says master blender Dan Callaway. “It’s Bangalore to Bardstown.”

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1. While some Bollywood stars have backed single malt Scotch and other whiskeys, there isn’t yet a Bollywood celeb Indian single malt; we’re calling it for 2025, in the vein of all those celeb tequilas. [View in article](#)

(Update adds audio file.)

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