

# Spicy spirit

A still life photograph featuring a glass bottle of spicy spirit, a mug of the drink, and various spices on a woven background. The bottle is filled with a clear liquid and has a decorative pattern of red and green flowers and leaves. The mug is filled with a yellowish-orange liquid. The background is a woven basket with a warm, golden-brown tone. There are some green leaves and a dark jar with a label in the background.

Throw away the tomato juice and cranberries as Indian spices stir up a storm of exotic flavours. Say hello to cardamom, star anise and black salt, in a new avatar.

*Text: Sonali Shah*

It's a familiar aroma, the one that escapes the pan when you deftly throw in a pinch of spices in the simmering oil. Now imagine these very spices, out of their usual setting, and into your cocktail glasses. Bartenders across the world are shaking things up and stirring new flavours by muddling spices into cocktails. The resultant spicy glass is a divine one.



Think Indian spices. Think cardamom, chilli, cinnamon, bay leaves and cloves. "International bartenders started experimenting with Indian spices and drinks, before we Indians did," says Sushant Rege, Restaurant Manager, Mi A Mi, Pune Marriott Hotel and Convention Centre. "A lot of spice cocktails are available at several leading bars of the world. Many top bartenders have twisted the classic cocktails with Indian

spices and have achieved fame for those innovations." Case in point is Atilla Iskifoglu, who's popular the world over and has charmed drinkers from the US to Australia, including India, by whipping up concoctions using Indian spices.

"When it comes to Indian spices, I mainly use star anise, cinnamon, clove, chilli, and many others," Atilla tells us. "I have prepared cocktails with spices in cities such as Las Vegas, Miami

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and Holland, and it's been loved by my clients." However, coming up with spice cocktails isn't everyone's cup of tea. Sushant explains, "It's crucial to understand the quantity in which the spices should be used. Too much of any spice can kill the flavour and balance of the drink."

Mixing cocktails with exotic ingredients such as Indian spices requires veritable knowledge not only about the spirits but about the spices too. Kuldeep Singh Rawat, Assistant Manager, 1911 Bar at The Imperial, New Delhi, says, "Each spice is unique and requires a different procedure. Strong ones like star anise, dried red chillies, cinnamon and cardamom pods have a firm woody texture and should be infused for a longer time than lighter fresh herbs like basil, thyme and mint."

If you're wondering whether it's actually advisable to relish such drinks, given India's hot and humid weather, Sushant has a reassuring answer for you. "The hotness of the spices is cut down by the freshness of the fruits that are mixed along with them. Bartenders usually never make a cocktail with spices as the chief ingredient and add a fruit

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element to the drink." Atilla adds a word of caution, "Unbalanced cocktails are a common thing in bars in India. Ensure you're having spice cocktails only in good bars."

Another unsaid rule when downing such hot cocktails is to keep munching on snacks. While Atilla says he wouldn't recommend snacks with these drinks, Indian bartenders have a different opinion on this matter. Francis Ferraro, the bartender at AZ.U.R, at Goa Marriott Resort & Spa, suggests, "One should go for appetisers cooked in minimal oil; anything that is grilled, or Indian kebabs cooked on the tandoor would complement the cocktails well."



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Apart from looking to avoid spice in food, the trick is to also be able to distinguish and enjoy the real flavour of the cocktail. Sushant's advice is to go for a platter of bruschetta, cheese, or even tacos.

Those abstaining from alcohol, take heart! For a range of mocktails too can be prepared using the spices. Sushant comes to the rescue, "These spices do blend excellently with fruit juices and are hence refreshing when served cold over ice." In fact, Atilla exclaims that the flavours of spices work better without the presence of alcohol.

So, if these drinks are indeed as delicious as the bartenders promise us, why aren't they

popular? "Probably because Indians usually tend to stick to their preferred hard drinks. And cocktail drinkers always opt for the classic ones, leaving little room for experimentation," Francis reckons. It's the *Cosmopolitan*, *Sex on the Beach* and *Bloody Mary* that are the culprits.

According to Kuldeep, "Beer and whisky remain the default drink for most men." Sushant shares the blame, "Bartenders usually never experimented with herbs and spices, until only recently. People's palates too will take some time getting used to the new flavours."

"Spice cocktails are a gradual addition to the menus across bars

in India," Kuldeep notes. Head to Mi A Mi, 1911 Bar, Patiala Peg Bar (The Imperial, New Delhi), Aura (The Claridges, New Delhi), JW Marriott Hotel Mumbai or Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai to get a taste of this latest trend. And though it isn't listed on the menu at AZ.U.R, Francis says people can always request him to conjure one.

"My favourite is *One Night in Baghdad*," reveals Atilla. That's a good mix of vodka, chilli, cranberry juice, ginger, Manuka honey, lime, and a full fig." *Brandy Hot Toddy* is the preferred drink for Francis and Kuldeep, while Sushant favours the classic *Whisky Sour* with a twist of cardamom. **Y**



**Sushant Rege reveals famous pairings of spices with fruits and veggies:**

- Cardamom & pineapple
- Star anise & ripe mango
- Chili & raw mango
- Cinnamon & green apple
- Black salt & guava
- Cloves & orange
- Bay leaf & litchi