



Most of the staff at Amrut Distilleries involved in bottling and packaging are women; (below) Surinder Kumar, the master brewer at Amrut standing in front of an American oak barrel

It was the most expensive stain I created. The dark golden liquid that spilt when I accidentally knocked over my tulip tasting glass was priced at a handsome £80-85 a bottle (roughly ₹6,000). But this was no single malt from Scotland's Speyside — what the pages of my notebook were soaked in was Amrut Single Malt Intermediate Sherry, distilled and aged in Bangalore. The spill came just a few moments after Surinder Kumar, Amrut Distilleries' vice-president, (production) and master brewer, indulgently said that for a novice like me, the single malt would go down better with a little more water. Even without the water, the Intermediate Sherry is distinctly more fruity and seems to be more flavourful than the light golden Amrut Fusion, which slips down slightly more easily.

The tasting was the culmination of a walk through Amrut Distilleries' plant on Mysore Road, roughly 20 kilometres from Bangalore. "Tandoori meets tartan in the Amrut single malt whisky, which experts believe will be capable of holding its own in a crowded market," says an August 24, 2004 article on the front page of the Scottish newspaper *The Press and Journal*, announcing Amrut's launch in Glasgow's Cafe India, which has been framed and hung on the wall. "We were a 60-year-old distillery competing with the 400 years old — you need guts just to be in the ring," says Kumar, a food technologist trained at the Central Food Technological Research Institute, Mysore, who has been with Amrut since 1987.



Amrut Distilleries, started by Radhakrishna N Jagdale in 1948, was primarily a manufacturer of rum and brandy, supplied to army canteens. The production of single malt came as a result of Amrut having malt that was fermenting far in excess of what was needed for its medium range Prestige malt whisky. Unlike other Indian whiskies that used molasses, Amrut was using barley. Another thing in its favour was Bangalore's climate, much warmer than frigid Scotland, which meant a higher rate of

The malt OF INDIA

Indulekha Aravind walks through Amrut Distilleries near Bangalore to find out how the first Indian single malt is made



Advocate and *Whisky Magazine* made us aware of the brand which led to many inquiries from clients. For the most part, response has been nice especially with the Fusion... An estimate for Amrut sales would be around 200 bottles."



Single malts are made from a single grain at a single distillery (as opposed to blended whiskies, which combine cereals). In the case of Amrut, the grain is barley, sourced from Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. "The ingredients needed are malt, water, yeast and wooden oak barrels," says Kumar, as he guides us through the plant. The barley is converted to malt by steeping it in water, and it then goes through distilling, followed by fermenting, which has to be in "ex-bourbon" American oak barrels. Bourbon is matured in casks of virgin oak, which are then used by other distillers. Much of the flavour comes from these casks. Amrut currently has 4,000 barrels of whisky "sleeping" in four cavernous warehouses. With the sherry variant, the whisky is fermented in 400-litre sherry "butts" from Spain and Portugal. After the aging, it is poured into bottles imported from the UK and put in its cases, with a picture of the Himalayas, by hand. "Each box alone costs ₹90," says Kumar, weaving through the rows of staff, mostly women, bottling and packing.

Spread over four acres, the plant also makes other spirits such as rum, brandy and blended whisky. Despite the laurels it may have brought to the company, the single malts contribute a mere 4-5 per cent of the company's revenues, targeted at ₹200 crore in 2011-12. And even with the accolades and encouraging reviews, marketing an Indian single malt abroad remains a challenge, says Ashok Chokalingam, head of international operations, though he says connoisseurs are beginning to acknowledge Amrut. The company had initially gone through the Indian restaurant route, used by brands like Cobra and Kingfisher, but this was abandoned as "the resources needed are too high, both financial and human," says Chokalingam, who studied with the junior Jagdale in England in 2001. Marketing is done through tastings and exhibitions, depending on the market.

Both Sharma and Chokalingam say it will be a while before Amrut launches all its variants (10, currently) in India. For one, Sharma says demand outstrips supply. "Single malts are not mass-market products and it's a conscious decision to starve the market," he says. Chokalingam, meanwhile, has the same complaint as most liquor industry players: "The India strategy is going to take time because of our complicated alcohol policy."

evaporation (known as angels' loss because angels were supposed to have skimmed off the missing whisky). "But because the maturation was accelerated it meant that one year of maturing in India would be equal to three in Scotland," says Kumar.

So in 2001, Amrut Distilleries Managing Director Neelkanth Rao Jagdale asked his son, Rakshit, who was studying MBA at Newcastle, to explore whether there was a market for Amrut Single Malt abroad. Intense research followed, including visits to numerous pubs and restaurants across Scotland and England while UK consultants Tatlock and Thomson spent two weeks at the distillery to help hone the process, culminating in the launch of Amrut Single Malt in Glasgow in 2004. It was a conscious decision not to

launch in India, says Kumar. Indeed, the single malt was launched in the domestic market only in 2010, in Bangalore, where 800-1,000 cases is the FY12 target. In contrast, the foreign market target is about 11,000 cases. Acclaimed whisky writer Jim Murray rated Amrut Fusion (in which Indian barley is combined with peated barley imported from Scotland) as the third finest whisky in the world in his annual global rankings. Amrut now sells its single malts in 22 countries and retailers include Harrods in London and the Park Avenue Liquor Store in New York. "India's Amrut distillery changed the way many think of Indian whisky — that it was just cheap Scotch whisky blended with who knows what and sold as Indian whisky. Amrut is making whisky, and it's very good," writes John Hansell, editor of US magazine *Whisky Advocate*, which declared Amrut Fusion its world whisky of the year in 2010.

Says Jonathan Goldstein, vice-president of Park Avenue Liquor Store, in an emailed response on why the store chose to stock Amrut "Whisky

That's the spirit: Amrut has ten variants in its single malt portfolio and it sells in 22 countries across the world

