



Xico, LOWER PAREL

The zig zag Aztec sign at the newly opened Mexican restaurant, at Kamala Mills' Xico, is a deliberate attempt to confuse you, says designer Shabnam Gupta of The Orange Lane. The firm behind the decor of The Bar Stock Exchange wants you to know that washrooms are more than just about going to the loo.

"The whole décor is Aztec. If you look closely, it's a W for women, and an inverted W

which becomes M for men. Because of the multiple zig zag lines, you are sure to get confused. And if you are tipsy, then yes, it will be tough," says Gupta. To us, the design looked like a spider, who went crazy in a riot of colours. Gupta says it's about smiling over what happened when you went to the loo. "A bathroom sign should initiate a 'check this out' kind of reaction," she says.



The zig zag Aztec sign at Xico. PICS/SNEHA KHARABE



And it gets curiouser,

DELLA ADVENTURES, LONAVALA

DELLA seems to have really pushed the envelope when it comes to bathrooms, and almost makes a woman believe she could have walked in on a man doing his business, with a man with his back towards them. This is, in fact, a mannequin. The men's washroom has a generous use of glass, and the impression of a catwalk ramp with female mannequins who watch you as you use the bathroom. Architect Jimmy Mistry, Principal Designer & Owner of Della Group, says, "Washrooms tend to evoke different emotions in people. While cus-

tomers' expectations might be conservative or even indifferent in case of public washrooms, here at Della, we explore the fun element. The washrooms are far from prosaic and are, in fact, naughty, without being over-the-top, or crude. They get the shock value right." Reactions at Della have gone from people being amused to taking pictures with the mannequins. "In fact, customers take home the hair pieces on the mannequins as souvenirs. We've lost so many of them that finally we had to stop putting a wig on them."

Social, BKC AND VERSOVA

Hanif Kureshi of St+art India Foundation, that's behind the washrooms at Capital Social and Versova Socials, remembers the bathrooms he saw in Berlin. "Every washroom was a piece of art that you walked into. People are encouraged to write graffiti on the wall, and draw or sketch. So, it's like layers and layers of art and graffiti, and it's beautiful," he says.

His design for Versova Social is a girl and a boy on

a see-saw embedded into a green wall of leaves, and it needs to be seen from afar to figure out which side has the door you need to open. "The difference is subtle; just one ponytail," he says.

At Capital Social, the theme is Communist, with a man and a woman holding a sickle. But, to us, it just looks all the same. "The point there was to have a Communist hangout in the middle of all that surrounds us."

"To bring a certain civility to any exercise or indulgence, one needs to educate oneself on it, embrace it, respect it, and that is where awareness and control comes from. Outright prohibition leads to ignorance, which is the root of all abuse"

Magandeep Singh



trouble is two-fold: these alcohols aren't allowed to leave their regions (they aren't even manufactured commercially). And, many of them don't fare well over long distances. So, either drink them at source or, well, wait for someone to tell you how awesome it was, or not!

There's a lengthy chapter on India's tryst with wine. Do you think local wine brands have set remarkably high

standards?

India's future holds a lot of good wine in it. Also, good beers, whiskies and gins. In short, we shall raise the level of what we drink by moving towards quality. And that is a big step toward bringing civility to the way alcohol is consumed and perceived, but it also adds to our already rich heritage, a legacy we can leave behind as a continuity to the treasure trove of cuisines that are already synonymous with India.

'He who drinks soma will be impervious to fire'

Here, the author writes of soma, the first alcoholic drink to find mention in Rig Veda in 1700 BC

THE juice of the soma plant is considered an intoxicant, delivering an euphoric high. It sounds very similar to the Incan ayahuasca, a plant-based drink which has hallucinogenic properties (thanks to dimethyltryptamine, or DMT).

...Of what we can gather from textual descriptions, soma had long stalks, tawny in colour and 15 leaves (although the Vedas record this plant as being leafless). Some point out that it was possibly a creeper (somalatha is a candidate for this, still found in the Himalayas) with a bulb but it couldn't have been the source of the juice as it is toxic to humans and, strangely enough,

white ants.

How one found that out will perhaps remain the bigger mystery. The secreted juice was almost milky in nature and obtained by the pressing (and even pounding) of the stalks and stems. It was common to mix this with milk and honey. Although it grew commonly and widely in the Himalayan reaches, nobody knows where it came from or where it was native to. But it was known to be big on the trade circuit; so it could have just as easily arrived in someone's backpack and then found its root here with much commercial success, which then would have further boosted its popularity as a commodity on

the trade route. What does remain are entire strings of songs (well, prayers more correctly) offering apologies to the gods for the loss of this plant and its marvelous elixir.

...Sushruta recorded in his famous medical compendium, the Samhita, that he who drinks soma will not age and will be impervious to fire, poison or weapon attack. He can master all the Vedas and will find success wherever he goes. Furthermore, it could imbue the drinker with the energy of a 1000 elephants!

...But the trouble was that one really had to prepare to drink soma — not before imbibing it, but for the period which followed right after. A

drinker was prescribed an unusually long ritual, which dictated what he was supposed to do to counter its effects as well as explained what the person would feel for each day after consuming soma. From building a house with three chambers and living in each progressively to throwing up worms from all orifices, having fixed meals and drinks at predetermined times of the day, it was almost 120 days before the person was stable enough to be reintroduced into society again.

Excerpted with permission from The Indian Spirit by Magandeep Singh (Penguin-Viking, 2017)