

**IT'S INDEED A RITUAL**

# City Warms Up to Novel Tea

Bengaluru is ahead of Delhi and Mumbai in alternative tea drinking, say experts

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**Bengaluru:** What is common between celebrities Lady Gaga, Lionel Messi, Daniel Craig and David Beckham? Apparently, all are tea lovers. In fact, Argentinian footballer Messi drinks a cup of gourmet tea called yerba mate before every match. Boutique teas, going beyond routine chai and green tea, with fruit and flower blends, are stirring a new trend in Bengaluru too.

Vanilla bourbon, crème caramel, banana nut bread, chilli flakes with vanilla pods are just some of the luxurious flavours doing the rounds. According to experts, the IT city is ahead of Mumbai and Delhi in the tea-drinking culture and menfolk, especially, are readily turning into tea aficionados here.

Software engineer Varun Vasudev (35), an alternative tea drinker, now prefers

gifting tea blends to friends and folks. "Nicely packed gourmet tea is a good replacement for a box of chocolates," says he. His favourite mood-lifters are green tea with lemongrass and a liquorice-based blend.

Jet-setting appears to have fuelled the trend. A good tea-serve is a statement at business meetings and gatherings. Keshav Baljee, managing director of Spree Hotels, visits tea boutiques in Mumbai, Singapore and USA to buy mix-and-match blends with dried fruits, flowers and herbs. "Like single malts, gourmet teas have become good conversation-starters

at gatherings. Hosts show off their tea collection. I typically serve my friends Turkish apple tea in traditional curved glass tumblers post-dinner," says he.

Food blogger Nikhilesh Murthy recently bought a blend from South

Korea, made using a flower that blooms only twice a year and another with an ocean-breeze flavour. "Unlike gourmet coffee which needs several gadgets, tea is easier to consume. All you need is leaf and a flask of hot water," says Murthy. He follows a gourmet tea-potluck ritual with colleagues where each brings an offbeat tea to sample every day.

Tea sommelier Kavita Mathur notes "Bengaluru, with its young and well-travelled people with good paying capacity, is ahead of Delhi and Mumbai in alternative tea drinking."

According to the Tea Board of India, the specialty tea market in the country is growing at 25% annually. Increasing health consciousness and media exposure have led to a pickup in green and alternate tea sales.

Medha Rao, cofounder of gourmet tea company Ausum Tea, speaks of a 350% sales growth between end of December 2016 and July 2017. "Bengaluru traditionally loves filter coffee. But the no-sugar generation, comprising upwardly-mobile migrants, young parents and the fitness conscious, is completely moving from milk tea and coffee to alternative teas," says Rao.

