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Rupee Beer on Indian Restaurants as a Taproom Equivalent

Dear Client:

As CBD readers know, beer is heavy. Which is why it's no surprise that shipping it across the Atlantic Ocean from India to the United States has been a logistical challenge leading to a dearth of Indian-made beers at curry restaurants and other Indian establishments.

Attempting to fill that void, particularly through their parents' Indian restaurants in Maine, led brothers Van and Sumit Sharma to found Rupee Beer five years ago. The brothers grew up in the U.S. after their parents moved the family to Maine from the U.K. in the 80s when "everyone around the world wanted to come to America," Van said, noting his parents founded the first three Indian restaurants in the state.

Rupee Beer started as a Covid-era project, after both brothers moved home to Maine to help with their family's restaurants during

the pandemic after living abroad in the United Kingdom and Australia and found supply chain issues led to a gap in Indian beer availability in the U.S. The company has since grown to a craft brand expected to produce 40,000 CEs this year.

The Sharmas' home state of Maine "was kind of our test market," Sumit said, noting that originally, "the goal was to get the beer into our family's restaurant." They initially self-distributed in Maine (they've since transferred distribution rights in the state to Nappi Distributors) and have steadily added markets since. Now, Rupee Beer is currently sold in 16 states and D.C. ("you can basically find us from Maine down to Florida"), having recently launched Texas with Ben E. Keith [see CBD 05-06-2024] and Midwestern markets in Indiana and Ohio, with another one launching soon.

"OUR TAPROOM BECOMES THESE INDIAN RESTAURANTS." After establishing proof of concept in Maine, Rupee, which sells three beers – a 4.75% ABV Basmati Rice Lager, 4% ABV Mango Wheat Ale, and, 5.4% ABV India Pale Ale – started getting "more and more" inbound requests as word spread throughout the Indian restaurant community.

The community is "connected," Van said, "so word spreads fast, and slowly, more and more people started asking, 'Is this available through the distributor that carries our Indian beer like Taj Mahal or Kingfisher?'" (For the record, Rupee is distributed by a "mix" of A-B, MC and independent houses, with a slight lean toward A-B in bigger markets.)

Rupee had an overall growth rate of 69% YOY from 2023 to 2024, which comes off the back of package-only sales (4-packs of 16 oz. cans), as "we started off building the brand on-premise," Van said, (the brand is about 60-40% on- vs. off-premise) and has just recently "focused more on building out our national chain segment for off-prem" with hopes to "expand with strong distribution partners across the country." (The brewery is "actively pursuing other key markets" in the U.S., zeroing in on those with large Indian

Then too, the Indian population in the U.S. is expanding, coming in as the second-largest Asian origin population, growing by roughly 3.1 million people since 2000 – a 174% increase over about two decades, per Pew Research Center. Now, Indians account for about 21% of the Asian population in the U.S., per Pew.

While they're planning to target larger metropolitan areas with sizeable Indian populations as their next U.S. markets, "we're also working with some potential export," Sumit said, noting they're getting requests from "the Indian diaspora all over the world," particularly from the U.K., E.U. and the Middle East.

"We are speaking with a couple of importers now that they're also relaxing some of their alcohol related laws over there in places like UAE (United Arab Emirates), Bahrain, etc.," Sumit said.

Then too, Saudi Arabia just announced "that it's now going to allow the sale of alcohol in 600 venues," Van added. "So those are countries in the Middle East, as an example, where there's sizable Indian communities and just the brand itself, there's a natural interest," he said.

Interest in importing Rupee Beer outside of the U.S. makes sense, Van says, as not only is the Rupee the currency of India but it's also the name of currency in several other nations including in the Middle East, where "it used to be called the Gulf Rupee" around the Persian Gulf.

"So there's a connection and affinity for the brand from that also," Van said.

populations like Illinois, Washington and California.)

“We don’t have a physical tap room,” Van pointed out, noting they don’t have plans to build one. “So for us, our taproom essentially becomes these Indian restaurants across the United States, and as we grow and scale, we’re obviously focusing way more on the off-premise side as well with a lot of our national and local regional chain partners.”

TAPPING BRITISH EX-PATS TO BUILD RUPEE. Offering some more insight on who Rupee has tapped to help build the brand, Van said they worked with Shipyard Brewing co-founder Alan Pugsley – a fellow ex-Brit who is living in Maine and has helped launch dozens of other craft breweries around the world.

“From his expertise, we were able to really align and create some go-to recipes that strategically were made to pair with the food that we grew up with, but also on a larger scale, [with] exotic cuisine, spicy flavors, anything you see that has a little bit more punch to it,” Van said.

They contract brewed Rupee via Dorchester Brewing Company in Boston for several years before moving production to Wisconsin, Van said.

Another ex-Brit living in Maine, former Allagash Brewing sales director Naomi Neville, has also “become sort of an advisor to us,” Van said, noting she’s helping them gather the data they need to help “scale up” Rupee.

“INDIA IS HAVING A MOMENT.” In terms of the appetite or run room for an Indian beer brand, Van points to stats that show “India is having a moment.

“Last year it surpassed China as the most populated country in the world” and just last week it overtook Japan as the [projected] fourth largest economy in the world,” Van said.