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India Bars 10 Whisky and Rum Products Over Added Flavorings

The food safety regulator said the brands misled consumers by using flavorings to mimic standard spirits, widening scrutiny in a $40 billion market.

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India’s food safety regulator has barred the sale of 10 whisky and rum products made at five production units, saying laboratory tests found artificial or nature-identical flavoring had been added to recreate the taste and aroma expected from standard rum or whisky.

The action, communicated by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India on Aug. 2, affects some of the country's best-known mass-market spirits brands in a liquor market that Reuters estimates at about $40 billion a year. The regulator said the issue is not the general use of flavorings in alcoholic drinks, which can be allowed in some cases, but the addition of rum flavor to rum or whisky flavor to whisky, a practice it says misleads consumers about the true nature of the product.

The products named by the authority include three Old Monk variants made by Mohan Rocky Springwater at its Khopoli unit in Maharashtra: The Legend, Gold Reserve and XXX Matured Rum. Also covered are McDowell's No. 1 Rum made by United Spirits in Baramati, Maharashtra; Bagpiper Deluxe Whisky and Old Cask Deluxe XXX Rum made by Inbrew Beverages in Madhya Pradesh; Central Province Whisky and McDowell's No. 1 Celebration Matured XXX Rum made by Associated Alcohol & Breweries in Madhya Pradesh; and Antiquity Blue Whisky and Royal Challenge Whisky made by United Spirits in Madhya Pradesh.

The regulator said six other manufacturers in Maharashtra have received notices and that inspections and sampling are underway at a Goa plant operated by Mandexi Distilleries & Breweries. That suggests the enforcement drive could widen beyond the first set of brands already named.

In its public explanation, FSSAI said standard categories such as rum and whisky are expected to develop their sensory profile through raw materials, fermentation, distillation, maturation and other recognized production methods. It said some manufacturers instead relied heavily on neutral alcohol or extra neutral alcohol, which lacks a distinctive flavor profile, and then added external flavoring substances to imitate the expected character of the spirit.

Under that view, the authority said such products should not be sold simply as rum or whisky. At most, it said, they should be identified more clearly as rum-flavored spirit or whisky-flavored spirit so consumers understand what they are buying. It also cited India's labeling rules, which require packaged food and drink to state the true nature of the product on the front label.

FSSAI said its laboratories found the sampled products to be sub-standard because of “external artificial or nature identical flavours.” It argued that adding the flavor of the standardized beverage itself serves no legitimate technological purpose because those characteristics are supposed to arise from the composition and production process. The authority compared it to adding coffee flavor to coffee or tea flavor to tea.

The case also includes a labeling complaint tied to age claims. FSSAI said one Old Monk XXX Rum variant carried a “7 years old blended” statement that was misleading because investigators found neutral, unmatured spirit was the major ingredient while matured rum spirit accounted for less than 5% of the blend. Under India’s alcoholic beverage rules, age claims must reflect the youngest spirit in the blend.

The move has immediate implications for producers led by Diageo’s Indian unit, United Spirits, as well as Inbrew and other domestic manufacturers whose brands dominate lower-priced segments of the market. These are products sold far below imported spirits and widely consumed across Indian states where pricing varies sharply because alcohol regulation is largely local.

Reuters reported that United Spirits said in a stock exchange filing that it was engaging with FSSAI over concerns related to its rum product and described the matter as an industry-wide issue. The company said the labels in question comply with current laws and regulations. Reuters also reported that Diageo had challenged part of the order in court concerning its rum brand and was likely to contest directives affecting whisky products as well.

Inbrew and Mohan Rocky Springwater did not respond to Reuters requests for comment, according to that report. Industry executives cited by Reuters said companies were concerned by the order and believed their use of flavorings was consistent with Indian rules.

One unresolved point is how far the ban extends geographically and operationally. FSSAI identified specific factories and units but did not publish affected sales volumes, revenue exposure or a full national scope for each brand. That leaves open whether identical labels produced at other facilities may face separate scrutiny or remain on sale unless tested and cited individually.

The regulator did say two manufacturers won a conditional revocation after appealing prohibition orders. For existing inventory already in hand, those companies may continue selling stock if they disclose the true nature of the product on the front label. For future production, FSSAI directed them not to add identical flavors such as rum flavor or whisky flavor. The authority did not identify those two manufacturers.

That conditional relief may offer a path for some producers to avoid immediate destruction or withdrawal of all stock, but it also points to possible costs ahead. Companies may need to reformulate recipes, redesign labels, segregate inventory by plant and state, and manage retailer returns where products can no longer be sold under their current description.

The case matters because many of the brands involved are deeply established in India’s mainstream spirits trade. Old Monk is one of India’s oldest rum names. Royal Challenge and Antiquity Blue are among United Spirits’ prominent whiskies. Bagpiper has long been familiar in value segments. Any disruption to these labels can ripple through wholesalers, state distribution systems and neighborhood liquor shops that depend on fast-moving local brands.

FSSAI sought to make clear that it is not accusing the entire industry of similar practices. It said many producers remain fully compliant with standards for standardized alcoholic beverages and that only certain manufacturers appear to be making products predominantly from neutral alcohol before adding identical or artificial flavors to recreate category-defining traits.

The enforcement also fits into a broader pattern of tighter oversight in India’s food and beverage sector. Reuters noted that regulators recently moved against high-caffeine drinks marketed as “energy drinks,” signaling a wider push on labeling accuracy and product classification.

For consumers, the dispute turns on a basic question of authenticity: whether a bottle sold as rum or whisky derives its defining taste from ingredients and production methods traditionally associated with those categories, or whether those traits have been recreated through added flavorings while packaging presents the drink as a standard spirit. For producers, it raises legal and commercial questions about where

Indian regulation draws that line in practice for some of its biggest-selling local liquor brands.