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PIC/ SAMEER MARKANDE

## ALL HAIL MUMBAI'S DUKE

In a market overcrowded with fizz, a once familiar drink is back to reclaim its dukedom. And the Parsis are smiling. LHENDUP G BHUTIA reports

FOODIE and television host Kunal Vijaykar loved walking down Byculla's Clare Road, as a child. One would think it was the wafting aroma of Plum Cakes at American Express Bakery that drew him there. But for little Vijaykar, it was a store that stood adjacent to the bakery that held his interest. Through a large glass windowpane, he would watch rows of colourful bottles — deep reds, bright yellows, thick pinks and crystal-like whites. It was the range of sodas put out by Duke's, the once iconic beverage brand without which no celebration, film screening, or family get-together in Mumbai was complete.

When Vijaykar would gather enough pocket money, he'd go grab a bottle. Otherwise, he'd just pass by, ogling at the psychedelic display, a sight that he says, made him forget how sultry the afternoon was.

And then one day, the store shut down, and within a few years, there was no sign of Duke's in the city.

Multinational cola giant PepsiCo bought the company in 1994 and, believing that the market wasn't suitable for flavoured sodas, stopped production of all Duke's beverages (except Lemonade and Soda) in 2004.

Seven years later, relics of that glorious past are being resuscitated, with PepsiCo re-launching three of Duke's premier flavours — Raspberry, Ginger and Ice Cream Soda — and adding a new one, the Masala Soda. Raspberry, says the company, is already available in stores, while other flavours will hit the market in a month.

Sanjay Mishra, executive director, West Market Unit, PepsiCo Beverages says the consumer is looking for variety. "Even other brands are launching different flavours. That's why we decided to bring back Duke's, a brand that already has strong recall." While Mumbai has been chosen as the 're-launch' city, Mishra says they plan to roll out the range across the country soon.

The audience that seems particularly thrilled with the announcement are Mumbai's Parsis. No Bawa wedding was complete without kids clamouring for a sip of the poppy-coloured Raspberry. A red moustache stain was in fact, the most telling proof that they'd been to a lagan (wedding) or navjote (thread ceremony).

And it's not just its loyal audience, but also its origins that bear a strong Parsi mark. Duke's was first established in 1889, when a certain Dinshawji Cooverji Pandole saved enough money to start the company. The story of how it acquired its name is as interesting as the story of its launch.



EVEN OTHER BRANDS ARE LAUNCHING DIFFERENT FLAVOURS. THAT'S WHY WE DECIDED TO BRING BACK DUKE'S, WHICH ALREADY HAS STRONG RECALL.

SANJAY MISHRA  
executive director, West Market Unit,  
PepsiCo Beverages

News monitored for: Pepsi - Corporate

# change



Prominent stockbroker Limji Panday with his ubiquitous cigar, and women guests sharing a Duke's at a Parsi wedding in Mumbai, 1985. PIC/THE ZOROASTRIANS OF INDIA: PARSIS — A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY BY SOONI TARAPOREVALA

The year was 1888, when Pandole was part of the historic Parsi cricket team that was touring England. This was the second time a Parsi team was touring the country. The first team, in 1886, got such a drubbing (19 losses, one win in 28 games), that this one was determined to perform better. The team, which included Pandole, registered eight wins and 11 losses out of 31 games. And while the series gave us Mehellasha Pavri, considered one of Indian cricket's greats, who with his fierce fast bowling captured 170 wickets in the series (often knocking over stumps and reportedly sending bails flying 50 yards away), it also gave us Duke's.

Pandole, the spinner, is said to have taken 86 wickets in the series,

News monitored for: Pepsi - Corporate

## change

using a ball made by Duke & Sons. When he returned home, he couldn't think of a more auspicious name for his company.

Pandole's great grandson Naval Pandole, who works as vice president, Sales and Marketing, Rexam HTW Beverage Can, says, "I was told that my great grandfather was a very hardworking individual, who was determined to make Duke's a successful brand. Thanks to his labour, the company flourished."

But sometime in the 1950s, the company faced a major hurdle. Sales took a beating from international cola brands like Coca Cola, that had recently set up operations in India. According to Naval, it was then that his father Feroze Pandole came up with a masterstroke. To its repertoire of Raspberry, Ginger, Ice Cream Soda, Lemonade and Soda, the company added, for the first time, a fruit-based drink named Mangola. Feroze reportedly bought mango pulp that could last for a year, but the drink was such a hit, all the pulp was used up in just four months.

On another occasion, the company was in the middle of a crisis when Japan, during World War 2, cut off all supply of the marble (goti-topped) bottles that Duke's used. But the company was able to see off that period, with Pandole's son Eruchshaw Pandole developing the now common crowner.

Vijaykar is thrilled with the return. "I loved Mangola. It was so thick and so mango-like; no other soft drink has come close to matching it," he says. Meanwhile Salaam Bombay! scriptwriter and filmmaker Sooni Taraporevala, whose work has often centred around Mumbai and the Parsi community to which she belongs, says she was shocked when she first saw a bottle of Coca Cola. "I had grown up drinking Duke's Raspberry, which was so red, your lips and tongue would turn crimson. I did not know a 'black' soft drink could exist."

As Taraporevala recalls, the drink was especially popular with the Parsi community, and for a long time, no Parsi wedding could take place without bottles of Duke's. While Tanaz Godiwala, who runs the 40 year-old Godiwala Caterers, one of the most loved names in wedding catering, rubbishes rumours that weddings had to be called off because the brand wasn't available, but she admits it came close to that. "Duke's was a must at every Parsi celebration. Everyone knew the different flavours by their colours. While Raspberry was a favourite, some preferred Ginger because it helped the tummy digest a heavy Parsi lunch."

News monitored for: Pepsi - Corporate

# change

Subsequently, Godiwala began stocking Roger's and Pallonji, two old beverage brands that also offered Raspberry, but "their taste never came close to Duke's".

At Ballard Estate's iconic 1923-established Irani café, Britannia & Co., Afshin Kohinoor, who speaks English in a theatrical manner, says, "Why the hell did they stop Duke's?" According to Kohinoor, who manages the eatery with his 90 year-old father Boman Kohinoor, of every 10 colas they sold, seven would be Duke's.

"I always tease my two kids (both teenagers) about how they have never tasted the real cold drink. I guess, I can no longer say that."