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# ILLINOIS TECH

Magazine



**Ankur Jain:**  
**BYOInnovation**

**Shattering (Conventional) Glass**



# Brewing Up Something Big

By Steve Hendershot



Photo courtesy of Ankur Jain

The first taste of craft beer for Ankur Jain (CS '03) was a swig of Anchor Steam, whose nineteenth-century recipe and California ocean-port pedigree made it a great object lesson in a course he took about the Industrial Revolution at Illinois Institute of Technology.

At the time beer was not on Jain's radar. He had come to Illinois Tech from New Delhi to study computer science and architecture, inspired by his father, who was an architect and a Ludwig Mies van der Rohe admirer. But Jain's cultural exposure—to craft beer, to South Side jazz, and to contemporary art—made an impact.

"The flexibility that Chicago and [Illinois Tech] gave me to color outside the box was very unique," recalls Jain, 39, founder of India's largest craft brewery, Bira 91.

Even after that early taste, Jain did not immediately connect beer with his entrepreneurial instincts. The company he started in New York after graduation wasn't a brewery but a tech firm whose software helped health care practices manage their finances. But the team did make regular happy hour stops at Brooklyn Brewery's taproom, and Jain gradually converted into a full-fledged craft beer fan.

When Jain decided to sell the software company and move back to India in 2006, he found the cultural acclimatization process even more jarring than when he had moved to Chicago for college. One factor was the stark absence of the craft beer culture that was catching fire stateside. It wasn't long after Jain took a job helping a large Indian conglomerate build out its grocery business that he began to sense an opportunity to become India's craft beer revolutionary.


He started Bira 91 (91 is India's country code) in 2008 as an import business specializing in Belgian beers. He spent four years learning which of those seminal brews were received best by Indian consumers ("the most expensive focus group in history," Jain calls it), before deciding to begin producing his own beer.

Bira 91's first original beers arrived in 2015, with a lineup of accessible, traditional styles such as pale and wheat ales. Jain's playful, premium brand targeted millennials—a proven strategy in western markets but one that had not been attempted in India—and was an instant hit. The company now has four brewing facilities and 500 employees, boasts a production capacity that's roughly equivalent to that of Boston Beer Company (maker of Sam Adams), and is likely to surpass \$100 million in revenue this year.

"Our ambition is to become the beer of choice for Indian consumers and in emerging markets in southeast Asia," says Jain, who has also begun exporting Bira 91 to established western markets including the United States.

"We always wanted to create a brand that could sit as easily at a Whole Foods in New York as in Delhi or Mumbai," Jain says.

One of the keys to Bira 91's success came when Jain signed on Ashish Dhawan as an early investor. Dhawan is the retired founder of one of India's largest private-equity firms, and liked Jain's vision as well as his business model.

Jain is "mission-driven, passionate, and an out-of-the-box thinker who wanted to build something distinctive," says Dhawan. "He's done an incredibly good job at being innovative." 

## Bringing Indian Flavors to India's Craft Beer

Bira 91's first original beers were contract-brewed by Brouwerij Martens in Belgium, but it wasn't long before Bira 91 founder Ankur Jain moved production to India. The goal at Jain's four breweries is to incorporate the best elements of Belgian and American styles with uniquely Indian flavors. Bira 91 uses water filtration and remineralization processes to mimic the water profile of those classic western recipes, while introducing distinctively Indian ingredients such as the pomelo, a mild grapefruit whose flavor colors Bira 91's Indian Pale Ale.

"Using those local flavors doesn't just make for a cool story; it also leads to flavors that make the beers more interesting," says Jain.

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Bira 91: [bira91.com](http://bira91.com)