

Spirit of the Wild West

A highly refined gin from a historically unrefined waterfront.

SAN FRANCISCO'S BARBARY COAST proffered a devil's grab bag of dubious hard spirits during its heyday, which spanned the period between the gold rush and the earthquake of 1906, but then, the Coast's habitués—murderers, prostitutes, muggers, and thieves, by and large—were not especially fastidious about the liquids they consumed. One character, who went by the name of Dirty Tom, earned his living by charging passersby a few cents to drink or eat anything they offered him—no matter how foul. The libation most frequently served in the district's brothels and opium dens likely was the Mickey Finn—a favorite of bar owners who did a brisk side business supplying outbound ships with abducted crews. Fortunately for San Franciscans, these unsavory tradesmen and their cutthroat clientele would, today, find little that is familiar on their waterfront, though they would doubtless be relieved to discover that at least one of the Barbary Coast's traditional vices is still represented: gin.

Located at Pier 50, near China Basin, Distillery No. 209 lies hidden behind the weathered walls and rusticated Douglas fir beams of a 1910 warehouse—a piquantly furtive arrangement that harkens to the area's underworld past. Inside, the high-gloss floors, stainless steel bins, racks, and scaffoldings introduce a distinctly modern vernacular into the building. Indeed, only the towering copper alembic still strikes a vintage note. "That still was the reason we chose this site," observes John Olson, No. 209's director of sales. "We needed a unique space for its height. We had looked at a lot of different locales, but then we discovered this old pier, which had 25-foot ceilings—and some of the romance of the Barbary Coast, which historically imported gin in the late 1800s."

History was a central ingredient to No. 209 from its very beginnings, when Leslie Rudd, owner of Rudd Winery and Vineyards in Napa Valley, acquired a winery in St. Helena, Calif., known as Edge Hill. The property, which had

belonged to winemaker Louis Martini, had on its grounds an old building that Rudd undertook to restore. The restorers uncovered an old painted sign that read Registered Distillery 209, and research revealed that Edge Hill's original owner, William Scheffler, had purchased a patent on a new type of pot still in New York in 1870 and moved out west to set up his distillery. In 1882, the federal government issued distilling license number 209 to Scheffler, whose spirits

received a medal at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Rudd, who is chairman of Dean & DeLuca, conceived the idea of reviving the artisanal distillery on the Edge Hill site. But, says Olson, "The agricultural regulators in Napa Valley wouldn't allow it. You can't make a distilled spirit in Napa unless it's a grape-based product."

And so No. 209 arrived in the City by the Bay, where technical director Arne Hillesland instills into the spirit a delicious blend of tradition and innovation. Europe's gins, by law, are made with barley and wheat, but No. 209 is made with corn, which Hillesland says Europeans would prefer to use if they could. He infuses No. 209 with essences of Tuscan juniper, coriander, cardamom, cassia (an earthier, darker member of the cinnamon family), and bergamot orange, among others.

The result is a clean, lithe gin that offers a vibrant medley of flavors that never cloy. No. 209's juniper

taste is subtle and cedarlike, rather than resinous. Other flavors that unfold include a trace of nutty sweetness, rose water, spice cake, and a succulent, fresh citrus wave that avoids the bitterness from which some gins suffer. Its gentle intensity may make No. 209 (\$30) the perfect martini gin, although it performs with grace in any gin cocktail. In fact, it might even have tempted the varietal sailor to quaff a Mickey Finn. Certainly Dirty Tom would have drunk this one for free. —BRETT ANDERSON



Distillery No. 209, 415.281.8900, www.209gin.com

No. 209's name refers to a 19th-century distillery in Napa Valley, a region that now prohibits the production of most distilled spirits.