

SPIRITS

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SCOTT MANCHESTER / PD

Sarticious Gin from Santa Cruz, No. 209 Gin from San Francisco, and Junipero Gin from San Francisco.

Bay Area distillers lead gin resurgence

By VIRGINIE BOONE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Back in the day, when times were simpler, all anyone ever needed to be happy on a balmy evening was a tall glass of ice, some tonic and some gin.

Things went kind of crazy from there. Schedules got more hectic, our tastes more demanding and a thousand-and-one flavored vodkas took over the world.

But gin is fighting its way back, with three local producers in on its resurgence.

Distillery No. 209 and Anchor Distilling in San Francisco, as well as Sarticious Spirits in Santa Cruz, are making gins for a new generation of curious cocktailians, proving the spirit can be much more than your grandfather's bitter tippie, the stubborn preference of martini purists or befriended only by tonic and ice.

"Gin is the first flavored vodka, if you will," said Arne Hillesland, the distiller at Distillery No. 209. "One of the charms of it is different distillers can have different takes."

Hillesland's take includes basing his gin on corn, instead of malted barley, rye or wheat.

"It's very clean but has a sweet back note to it that the others don't have," he said.

But that's just the base. Leave it at that, and it's essentially vodka.

To turn the spirit into gin requires the addition of juniper berries, which are too bitter to be eaten on their own; during gin's distillation process, the dried berries are crushed to release aromatics and flavor. Hillesland sources his juniper from Tuscany.

How much juniper flavor a particular gin gives off is a matter of preference. Hillesland thinks too much juniper is what often turns people away from gin, and into vodka's much more neutral arms.

"We were looking to have a tip of the hat to traditional gin," Hillesland said, "but also to create a spirit that was more approachable to non-gin drinkers, not making juniper such an overwhelming flavor - which, as one friend put it, (can taste like) a No. 2 pencil."

Instead, the distillery, owned in part by Napa vintner and Dean & DeLuca chairman Leslie Rudd, decided to go down what Hillesland described as a "citrus-spice road."

All gins include a blend of spices and other botanicals, which are informed by the palate and predilections of the distiller.

Anchor Distilling, the distilling arm of Anchor Brewing, has been making its award-winning Junipero Gin for almost a decade. Hand-made in copper pots, it has a deep juniper taste. It's often described as smooth, but not the least bit tame.

Sarticious has strong hints of angelica, a parsley-related herb, and licorice.

Hillesland infuses No. 209 with such unusual additions as bergamot orange, an especially acidic member of the orange family whose peel has been used for centuries by perfumers and the makers of Earl Grey CQ tea.

Hillesland likes the citrusy, floral note it imparts to his gin; he gets his bergamot from Calabria.

Cardamom is another key ingredient, an aromatic spice related to ginger. In No. 209, it provides a hint of mint.

Cassia cinnamon is also in the mix, which they grind in prior to distillation, as well as coriander and a smattering of other ingredients the distillery prefers to keep proprietary.

"The biggest traditional gin drinks are almost just gin," Hillesland noted, citing the dry martini and classic gin and tonic. "We wanted to make something quite sippable. This is not a big juniper gin that's going to knock you on your backside. It's elegant."

Because of that, people are increasingly pairing No. 209 with a wealth of interesting ingredients, including pomegranate juice and mint for a Pom Mojito using gin instead of rum, and even taking vodka's entrenched place with the basics for a cosmopolitan - cranberry juice, Cointreau and lime.

"It's our favorite gin," said Hollie Schulze, who works the bar at Healdsburg's Ravenous. "It's clean, it's not too heavy on the juniper berry, it's pretty balanced."

To make a Ravenous Martini, Schulze serves up No. 209 with mint leaves and a squeeze of lime.

With their exotic mix of spices and other worldly ingredients, these smaller gin producers are finding an especially receptive audience in Northern California.

"San Francisco is such a great foodie town," Hillesland said. "You say bergamot and people know it's in Earl Grey tea."

This Gin & Tonic recipe is from the "Ultimate Bar Book" by Mittie Hellmich)

Gin & Tonic

Makes 1 serving
2 ounces gin
4 ounces chilled tonic water
1-2 lime wedges

Pour the gin and tonic water into an ice-filled old-fashioned glass. Stir well. Squeeze lime wedges over the drink and drop them in.

Love Wrench

Makes 1 serving
3 ounces Sarticious Gin
1 ounce Triple Sec
2 ounces cranberry juice
1 ounce lime juice
- Orange twist
Shake ingredients with ice, pour into martini glass and garnish with a twist of orange.

Summer Fling

Makes 1 serving
3 ounces No. 209 Gin
4 ounces club soda
1 ounce raspberry lemonade
Serve over ice with a raspberry and blueberry garnish.

209 POM Mojito

Makes 1 serving
3 ounces No. 209 Gin
1 ounce simple syrup
1 ounce POM pomegranate juice
4 lime wedges
- Fresh mint

Fill a shaker with four lime wedges, pour in simple syrup and muddle together. Fill shaker with ice, add gin. Add 4-6 mint leaves and pomegranate juice. Shake well, strain into a chilled martini glass and float a sprig of mint.