

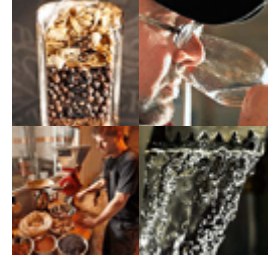
SPIRITS

The other white spirit

New flavorings could make gin the new vodka

Gary Regan, Special to The Chronicle
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Gin was my very first distilled spirit. I sampled it in a room-temperature gimlet -- gin and Rose's Lime Juice -- at a party thrown by my parents. Dad made it for me. Why room temperature? This was in England, circa 1963. I was 12 years old. Dad thought it was time to wean me off the Guinness. I was sold on gin. Never did look back.



I don't remember what brand of gin was in my very first cocktail, but I do know that it was highly perfumed, and it fell into what I now call the "slap me upside the head with juniper and dab a little behind your ears" category. Think Tanqueray. Think Beefeater. Think Boodles. Think Plymouth. Traditional gins all, these stalwarts are as dry as a bone, and in varying degrees they're all about juniper and perfume. Not all gins follow this path, though, and some of the new bottlings on the market come bearing rather unusual flavor profiles. I discussed this point recently with a friend of mine who is well versed in these matters.

Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh, curator of the Museum of the American Cocktail, cocktail historian extraordinaire and author of the acclaimed "Vintage Spirits & Forgotten Cocktails" (Quarry Books, 2004), makes his living as a graphic designer in the movie business. When he's working on a flick, it's nigh on impossible to get his attention, but when he's between gigs he makes his presence known in all corners of the cocktail-geek world. He surfs deftly from Web site to Web site where his patients, having waited patiently for the wrap party to wrap, bombard him with questions about things such as whether he prefers his Alamagoozlum cocktail to be made with green or yellow Chartreuse (the answer is yellow), and other crucial cocktailian matters.

Doc arrived at my door after spending time in London, where he had attended a gin conference. I watched him struggle with his suitcase. Seemed to be quite heavy for its size. He caught me staring.

"Gin," he said.

"Oh," said I. "I got a new gin for you. Haven't even tried it myself yet." I let him settle in for a minute or so before I reached for an unopened bottle of Aviation, a brand-new gin created by mixologist Ryan Magarian of Liquid Kitchen in Seattle, along with a couple of guys from the House Spirits Distilling in Portland, Ore. I held it up for Doc to see. Doc had already sampled Aviation. I should have known. He did seem to be interested in my reaction to it, though, so I poured myself an ample sample, nosed the spirit and took a sip.

"Lavender. It's full of lavender," I gushed. "It's beautiful. But wait a minute ..." I paused here, aiming for the kind of drama that I know Doc enjoys. He eyed me carefully. "It's beautiful, Doc, but is it gin?" The Cheshire cat took over Doc's face. He'd had the same reaction.

Gin, according to the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Trade and Taxation Bureau, "shall derive its main characteristic flavor from juniper berries," so if lavender brings up the forefront in a product, can it be called gin? To be fair, the juniper in Aviation is pretty distinctive. Still, though, is it gin? Doc and I contemplated the question until the wee hours. Gin, after all, is the sort of spirit that makes boys ponder.

Gin is flavored vodka. It's as simple as that. All gin producers either buy or make high-proof vodka, a.k.a. neutral spirits, then add various flavorings to transform it into gin. Juniper, fennel, calamus root, angelica, cardamom, cassia, orris root, ginger, cinnamon, licorice, caraway seed and various citrus peels are typical of the botanicals used in traditional gins, though juniper is the only one of these that's required by law, and producers are free to use all manner of flavorings to add to the list to differentiate their brand from the rest.

Changing taste of gin

In recent years we've been seeing a new breed of gin emerge -- a kinder, gentler gin that points up fruit flavors, yet still maintains a strong juniper backbone. Tanqueray No. Ten is a good example of this phenomenon, along with other softer gins such as Damrak and Zuidam, Dutch gins that boast their mild-mannered palates. Hendrick's, a Scottish gin that's been on the market for a few years now, counts cucumbers and rose petals among its botanicals, though the juniper in Hendrick's remains very evident. Moving juniper into the background, then, seems like the next logical step, and it's bound to further the cause of the gin producers who are wooing vodka drinkers to their category.

Aviation isn't the only gin that utilizes lavender's flavor, and lavender isn't the only unusual flavoring now being used by what seems to be a new breed of gin producers. Ever had a martini with a hint of saffron? Cadenhead's Old Raj, a pretty high-end bottling from Campbeltown, Scotland, is a fabulous gin that delivers exactly that, and although the juniper really shines through well in this one, the saffron makes its presence known too.

Why is gin taking off? For a number of reasons. The fact that the craft of the mixologist has finally become recognized as a very legitimate endeavor probably heads the list. Bartenders find vodka easy to use in mixed drinks, but more adventurous cocktailians look to gin as "the other white spirit." Gin offers far bolder flavors than vodka, and it also issues a challenge: "What are you going to mix me with, then?"

We are also witnessing a growth in microdistilleries in this country, due in part to new government regulations that make it easier to open mom-and-pop operations. Contract distilling is also on the rise, so that any entrepreneur with enough cash in hand can approach an existing distillery and work with them to produce something new and innovative. In short, what happened to craft brewing in the 1980s and '90s is now happening in the world of distilled spirits. Gin can also be sold within days of being produced, whereas if you want to make a new whiskey, you're looking at two, or preferably four years of aging before you see any return on your investment.

Bucking the trend

Some of today's newer bottlings stick with a more conventional approach. Junipero, made by Anchor Steam Distilling Company in San Francisco, is a good example of this. Although it is a traditional gin, it made its debut in the 1990s and was immediately recognized as a classic. It also happens to be a perfect gin for those choosy souls who like their spirits to be bottled at the same proof as their body temperature -- the hefty 49.3 percent alcohol-by-volume (ABV) content of this bottling handily converts into 98.6 proof. "Junipero just hammers you with juniper," says Neyah White, bartender at San Francisco's Nopa restaurant. And White knows how to hit the nail on the head.

Anchor Steam isn't the only local distillery in the gin game. The newly opened Distillery 209 is offering a gin that's being very well received by the cocktail crowd, and it's interesting to note the flavors detected by experts in this bottling. "(Gin No. 209 is) a very smooth gin with hints of fennel and dried herbs," says Peter Greerty, wine and spirits director of Bong Su Restaurant & Lounge in San Francisco.

Arne Hillesland, master distiller at 209, cites juniper, angelica, cardamom, cassia, bergamot from Italy and quite a bit of coriander as his main flavoring agents, adding that there are more "exotic citrus" ingredients in the gin too. "We wanted to do something a little unique," explains Hillesland. "So we went down the citrus-spice road. We wanted something that would mix well with 21st-century cocktails." Hillesland isn't willing to divulge the rest of 209's ingredients. Distillers love their secrets.

Boosting complexity

Sarticious, a gin from Santa Cruz, is made by another man who likes to keep secrets. "(We use) juniper berries, cinnamon, organic orange, coriander and cilantro," says Jeff Alexander, owner of the brand. Cilantro? "Yes. Coriander is a traditional ingredient in gin, and coriander is the seed of cilantro," he explains. "It brings depth, complexity and a fresh component into the picture." Jimmy Patrick, bartender at the Lion and Compass in Sunnyvale, mixes Sarticious, orange juice, orange bitters and a couple of slices of habanero pepper to make a cocktail he calls the Habanero Orange Blossom. "The heat from the pepper goes really well with the orange juice and botanicals (in Sarticious)," he says.

Other new, or newish, gins that are readily available here include Broker's, a well-made, no-nonsense traditional bottling from London that's issued at 47 percent ABV, and Q Quintessential, another English gin, this one flavored with lotus leaves and lavender as well as the usual suspects such as juniper.

DH Krahn gin is described by the Beverage Tasting Institute as featuring "subtle citrus, banana custard and mild botanical aromas." The producers, New York-based DH Krahn, say they use a "touch of Thai ginger" in their formula.

Distiller's Gin No. 6 is made in the Chicago area at the North Shore Distillery, a small family-owned affair that offers fine handcrafted spirits. Lavender rears its head again in this gin too. You might also want to try Bulldog, an English gin, which despite its name, is a fairly mild-mannered spirit that boasts poppy, and an Asian fruit called dragon eye, or longan, in its list of botanicals.

If you want to taste a very unusual, highly recommendable gin, look for G'Vine online, a product distilled in France that calls for neutral grape spirit as a base, and green grape flowers as a very unusual botanical. Traditional botanicals are employed to make G'Vine, too, but it's the green grape flowers that give it its exceedingly intriguing, incredibly seductive, floral notes. Was that gushy enough? I like this gin.

Gins in the queue

If you're willing to be a little patient you'll soon be able to sample Juniper Green organic gin, a consignment of which was reportedly sent to Britain's Queen Mother -- a woman well known for her love for gin -- for her 100th birthday in 2000. The producers say that Juniper Green -- "smoother and fresher" than traditional gins -- will soon be available here. And on the West Coast you're going to have to wait until spring at the earliest, though probably no later, for Tanqueray Rangpur gin, too. But if you want to taste something new and unusual, the wait will prove worthwhile. Rangpur is flavored with "traditional gin botanicals" as well as Rangpur limes, ginger and bay leaves. That's right, bay leaves.

I remain true to the more traditional dry, perfumed gins, but only to a point. You won't catch me, for instance, making myself a dry gin martini with Aviation -- that style of cocktail demands a traditional style of gin. However, in drinks such as the Aviation cocktail, a mixture of gin, maraschino liqueur and fresh lemon juice that surfaced in the early 1900s and remains a classic today, Aviation gin works incredibly well. So well, in fact, that my wife loved the Aviation Aviation I made for her, and she's a hard sell when it comes to gin. Products such as Aviation and G'Vine shed a whole new light onto the gin category. I'm guessing that lots of people who think they don't like gin are about to be converted.

Doc and I pondered the gin question late into the night. We decided to issue a joint statement on the matter, and since we were a little tired by the time we reached our conclusion we ended up paraphrasing words uttered by Mr. Bumble in Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist": "If the law states that gin shall derive its main characteristic flavor from juniper berries, then the law is an ass."

Tasting notes

Gins can be very complex creatures, bringing layer upon layer of flavors to the palate. These snapshot tasting notes point toward the most distinguishing aspects of each bottling. Before buying a bottle, though, it's a good idea to invest in your favorite gin-based cocktail at a bar that carries the brand that piques your interest.

Aviation: Lavender notes come through strongly alongside juniper, cardamom and a faint hint of almond.

Broker's: Traditional and no-nonsense, with up-front juniper, high complexity and intensely dry backbone.

Bulldog: Fresh lemon zest leads the way, and it's followed closely by ginger, but there's very little juniper here, and the spirit is rather soft for a London dry gin.

DH Krahn: Heavy coriander notes dominate this gin. They're balanced with a high-note of ginger and citrus.

Gin No. 209: Highly perfumed with juniper taking the lead and complex floral notes following closely behind.

G'Vine: Floral, grassy, spicy and smooth. There's an unusual sweet/dry earthy thing going on in this one.

Old Raj: Juniper takes the lead here, but it's swiftly followed by a distinct burst of saffron and a nutty, spicy backdrop.

Sarticious: A strange gin, indeed, though it's very well crafted. The herbaceous qualities in Sarticious are reminiscent of, wait for it, Tequila. Probably has something to do with the cilantro in the botanicals. This is a must-try-it-at-least-once gin.

Tanqueray Rangpur: Limes dominate in this bottling, and they play well off spicy ginger and a host of other, more subtle botanicals.

-- Gary Regan

Gin production

As is the case with any flavored vodka, gin can be made the right way or the easy way. Many lower-end gins are flavored with concentrated oils or essences, whereas the more reputable brands use fresh, or dried, botanical ingredients that have been very carefully selected -- the distiller is looking for various attributes from each ingredient -- and these botanicals are then distilled into the gin. Some producers allow their botanicals to sit in the neutral spirits for around 24 hours before adding demineralized water to dilute it, then entering it into the still for redistillation. Others choose to add the botanicals, dilute and redistill immediately, and there are a few producers who hang the botanicals in the neck of the still, allowing the vapors from the diluted spirits to capture their flavors as they rise through the neck of the still. It's all a matter of choice, style and individuality.

When choosing gin, look for key words on the label to avoid buying a brand that has been made with essences rather than fresh botanicals. Phrases such as "distilled gin," "dry gin" and "London dry gin" can be used only on gin that has been flavored by way of redistillation. Generally speaking, when it comes to gin, you get what you pay for. Cheap brands are usually cheaply made.

"London dry" is a style of gin -- the style that you're most likely to think of when a dry gin martini comes to mind -- and the words aren't intended to imply a country or city of origin. Plymouth gin, however, must be made in Plymouth, England. There's just one brand of Plymouth gin, and luckily for us it's called Plymouth Gin. This gin has a different flavor profile from other bottlings, but it's still in the style of a gin that you'd use to make a martini.

-- Gary Regan

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