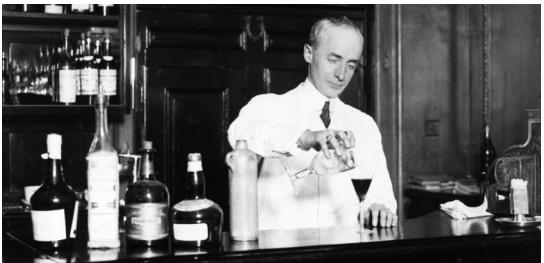


GIN PALACE

Neil Ridley offers the definitive guide to creating the perfect gin and tonic



round this time of year, I usually start to have the same thoughts about just how lucky we are here in Britain. Our summer, as gloriously unpredictable as it may often seem, tends to divert our attention away from the more prosaic and drab aspects of our lives, throwing us well and truly into a more liberal state of mind – especially when it comes to booze.

To highlight this, last month I was asked to host a tasting of different gins for esteemed members of London's Southbank Centre. With the sun blazing through the glass panelled walls of the St Paul's Pavilion on the 6th floor of the Southbank Centre, no less than 50 willing participants threw themselves into the arduous task of nosing and tasting six neat gins; unlocking their distinct flavour profiles with aplomb, without the slightest waft of Indian tonic water anywhere, except for the welcoming G&T I had prepared for them.

Had the tasting been scheduled for, let's say February, a greying outlook smothering the rest of the year would have no doubt descended on the tasting – and the senses of those involved. Here, with the chimes of Big Ben smoothly sounding in the background, I was even required to don my Martini blazer and rifle through my cocktail valise to stir up some classic G&Ts, for a group of people who would usually consider this most elegant of cocktails to be a bit of a departure.

When the sun shines in the UK, it does something to us. Yes, for a certain tier of society, it means bare chests and smouldering, lobster-red burns after overindulging on cut-price Continental lager. But for many, the sun brings the opportunity to explore their bon vivant side, which, let's face it, save for a few days at Christmas, is safely locked away in the attic for much of the year.

Fortunately, a large number of spirits producers, from the established, well-respected, time honoured



companies to brand new 'of the hour' craft distillers, have realised that summer brings out a dare-to-discover element to the consumer and right around now, there is no better place to start than with a good old, full-frontal rummage around the world of gin.

We covered the hallowed (and almost tragic) history of gin in these pages a few years ago, which demonstrated how London was undoubtedly the hub of gin production for countless decades, despite its origins being based in Holland. To cut that particular story short, around the mid 18th century there was so much gin being produced in London that around 11 million gallons was being consumed every year – roughly equating to 90 bottles per adult (and sometimes juvenile) drinker. Something had to give and fortunately a catastrophe was narrowly avoided, with legislation meaning that only properly licenced and distributed distilleries could continue, forming some of the most enduring brand names that are still with us today, such as Gordon's and Tanqueray.

After years in the doldrums, gin has recently been catapulted back into the spotlight, thanks to the meticulous work of a number of craft distillers, each looking to do something different with the spirit. Some harked back to the more simple flavours of classic 'London Dry' gin (which, despite its geographical tether, can actually be made anywhere in the world) relying on few botanicals save for a healthy swathe of juniper at its heart. Others have thrown the botanical net wide, seeking out unusual, outlandish



and – some would say – far from traditional flavours, to influence their gin in a way that opens the spirit up to new drinkers.

Of course, everyone has their particular favourite way to enjoy gin: from the confines of a highball glass, under an icy burial mound and drowned in tonic (no, I am not the biggest fan of the G&T which is too often just thrown together), the subtle harmony of a Martini, which allows the spirit room to spread its botanical legs, neat (yes, neat gin, sipped in a tulip shaped glass) and in a number of other classic cocktails (the Negroni is almost as perfect as the Martini). What's worth considering, aside from the price of each gin, is just how the spirit has been designed to be consumed. Some distillers specifically aim their gins towards mixing with quality tonic water, others for a purer, cleaner and unfettered style drink.

BOTANICAL WHATNOT

The significance of botanicals in gin is like the profound effects on flavour that long, subtle ageing in quality oak casks can have on a malt whisky. Too much intensity will give you a very one-sided gin; too many botanicals will turn your palate a rather turgid brown. What's clear is that juniper, the distinct, musty, almost earthy note in gin has to be the most predominant flavour in the spirit. After that, the distiller can have as much fun as they so desire.

A classic botanical mix will usually include cardamom pods or seeds, citrus peels, cassia bark (which gives warming spice notes) bitter angelica root, liquorice root and coriander. Several newly released gins (as you will discover overleaf) are hell bent on bottling the botanical equivalent of the kitchen sink in their gin, with varying degrees of success. Others have taken the idea of maturing, or 'resting' their gin in oak casks, producing a gin which is no longer as aggressive in flavour, offering a more rounded and textured experience.

A GINTRODUCTION OF SORTS:

Here's The Chap's guide to the best gins to discover, whatever your drinking tastes. While it is easy to group gins into categories such as standard, premium, and niche/craft, often based on price, our aim here is for you, the reader, to consider the types of flavours you enjoy – and, more importantly, just how you intend to drink the gin.

THE BEST GINS FOR MIXING: (particularly in the ubiquitous G&T)

Beefeater Original 37.5% £15

www.beefeatergin.com

 Still one of the most enduring names in the world of gin, but do not mistake its ubiquity for anything other than a sign of its supreme quality. Beefeater Original has a simple mix of botanical flavours, from heavy juniper to an elegant citrus note, which works wonderfully in a G&T. The distillery, based a cricket ball's throw from The Oval, also has a visitors' centre, which is well worth a saunter over to.

City Of London Distillery Gin 40% £30

www.cityoflondondistillery.com

 The City's newest spirited inhabitant, City Of London Distillery (or COLD) produces its gin in very small batches, using tiny stills, based in a wonderfully laid out subterranean location that includes a cocktail bar. Classic notes of juniper, alongside fresh citrus peels (Head Distiller Jamie Baxter peels boxes of fresh lemons each morning before the stills are fired up) and some hearty, earthy spice to boot.

Plymouth Navy Strength Gin 57% £27.75

www.plymouthgin.com

 Plymouth stands as one of the classic distilleries in the rich heritage of gin production, first opening its doors in 1793. Their Navy Strength gin is the traditional strength required by the British Royal Navy, as it was the benchmark strength at which a spirit could be spilt on gunpowder and still ignite. Lots of zest and powerful juniper aromas confront the nostrils, followed by some dry woody spice. The extra strength gives this gin a hugely rugged character, perfect for a G&T, but the alcohol does not overpower the delicacy of the botanicals.

JUST THE TONIC: Four of the best mixers

The key to a great G&T is not just about the quality (and amount) of gin used, but also the amount of ice and the type and integrity of the tonic water used. More often than not, we are burdened with a previously opened bottle of tonic left idling in the fridge, long since freed of its zeal and panache, which will only produce sloppy, second-rate results. If this sounds familiar, consider this simple option. Rather than buying traditional one-litre bottles, purchase your tonic in miniature-canned form. Not only will you have a constant supply of tonic full of vitality, but also you will never again hear that depressing, lifeless 'phhuff' sound when you most need a G&T. Also consider keeping a bag of ice in your freezer as a permanent fixture, and fill your glass liberally, rather than using just one or two cubes.

Below are several brands of tonic worth seeking out, to extract the very most from this classic combination drink.

Fever Tree: Lacking the saccharine sweetness of most mainstream brands of tonic, Fever Tree harnesses the biting astringency of quinine, giving your G&T a more traditional pep talk and creating the perfect colonial sundowner.

Thomas Henry: Much like Fever Tree, Thomas Henry embraces the natural bitterness of quinine, creating a tonic water that is rugged and uncompromising in its flavour.

Fentimans: Using milled quinine bark and lemongrass from Asia, Fentimans is sweetened using cane sugar as opposed to saccharin, giving the tonic a much more natural woody taste.

1724: Taking its origins from high up in the Andes (1724 metres high, to be precise) where quinine bark was supposedly first discovered, this is a masculine, woody tonic that pairs very well with robust gins (such as Plymouth Navy Strength) for a particular heady combination.



THE BEST GINS FOR A CLASSIC MARTINI:

No. 3 46% £31.95

www.no3gin.com

 Made in Holland to a specific recipe designed by Berry Brothers & Rudd of St James's Street, No.3 is predominantly juniper heavy, with strong cardamom notes and a hint of lemon peel. It is simplistic and heavy, making it ideal for Martinis. One of the best 'expressive noses' for a gin, with masses of cardamom on the front palate, followed by citrus creeping in, then some drying bark notes. Back to lemon and lime peel on the finish. Excellent and well balanced. Serve with a Lemon twist every time.

Gin Mare Mediterranean 42.7% £33.95

www.ginmare.com

 A highly unusual experience in gin that defines its own flavour category. Gin Mare uses Italian and other Mediterranean-influenced botanicals, with notes of rosemary/olive saltiness on the nose and citrus peel, with cardamom, rosemary and a perfumed note on the palate. Bold enough to make a flavoursome Martini, superb with an olive garnish and a dash of bone dry vermouth, such as Gancia or Dolin.

Dodd's Gin 49.9% £30.79

www.thelondondistillerycompany.com

 Another brand-new craft distillery, this time based in Battersea, west London. Rather like COLD, Dodd's, made by the London Distillery Company, has gone for a well-balanced but classical twist on the botanical list, with juniper, cardamom, angelica and fresh lime peel, but also throwing in more unusual flavours such as raspberry leaf, bay laurel and London honey for good measure, creating a very precise palate, perfect for an elegant stirred Martini.

THE BEST GINS FOR DISCUSSING WITH YOUR DRINKING ACQUAINTANCES:

Monkey 47 47% £40

www.monkey47.com

 When it was mentioned above that some distillers throw the kitchen sink into their gin stills, Monkey 47 was clearly one of the spirits in mind, containing a purported 47 different botanicals, ranging from juniper to almond, hibiscus, elderflower, dog rose, lavender, bitter orange and lingonberries. While it won't be to everyone's taste, it just about manages to balance the sheer weight of flavours without becoming too muddled.

Cornelius Ampleforth's Bathtub Gin 43.3% £32.95

www.masterofmalt.com

 Some gin connoisseurs have often belittled gins which are derived by 'compounding' the botanicals (basically allowing them to steep in alcohol to impart their flavour) rather than actually distilling them. This gin redefines the category and, with a slew of recent awards, has also silenced the critics. Possibly the most aesthetically pleasing bottle of gin on the market too.

Burrough's Reserve 43% £60

www.pernod-ricard.com

 Burrough's Reserve explores one of the current trends of 'resting' a gin in oak casks, to impart additional flavour, rather like a whisky or tequila. It is produced by Beefeater in very small batches by Master Distiller Desmond Payne, who specifically chose to age the gin in casks once filled with Jean de Lillet vermouth, (rather than more readily available bourbon or sherry casks) which Payne felt would best suit the subtle balance of botanicals used. It is intended to be sipped neat and savoured and demonstrates a subtle vanilla richness on the palate, alongside better-known flavours of juniper and lemon zest.