



A GIN RENAISSANCE

New twists and flavor profiles for this bar staple find favor with mixologists and chefs alike.

By Cynthia Nims

FROM LEFT: BOMBAY SAPPHIRE, BOMBAY SAPPHIRE, PLYMOUTH ENGLISH GIN

There's a juniper-infused excitement in the air lately. The buzz from media outlets, special events and new bar menus is worthy of the latest-greatest-hot-new-thing, though this subject is nearly as old as the hills. If there has ever been a case of something old being new again, it's true of gin today. The spirit with a 300-plus-year history is fueling its own kind of cocktail revolution.

Such a declaration may sound strange since, as an overall category, gin isn't faring all that well lately. During the last five years, nine of the 10 top-selling gin brands showed either a decrease or meager growth. But that doesn't tell the whole story.

The fourth top-selling brand is Bombay Sapphire Gin. Last year's sales of 725,000 9-liter cases represented a 9.4 percent growth from the previous year and annual compound growth rate from 2000 to 2005 of 9.8 percent, according to Adams Beverage Group. The brand is certainly bucking the overall trend.

Other gins in the upper end of the category are growing as well. In 2005, Plymouth Gin sales increased by one-third on the heels of a whopping 136 percent growth rate in 2004; the venerable brand was re-launched in the U.S. in 2002. These figures hint at Plymouth and Bombay Sapphire being at the tip of an iceberg that is a growing base of premium and super-premium gins.

GINS WITH A TWIST

While Plymouth is a veteran of the sector (its production dates back to 1793), brand manager Simon Ford is quick to mention that distillers don't need to have history to make a noteworthy product. "They just need to respect the history, understand that gin is a traditional product and that it has a specific type of flavor foundation." He points to the wildly popular Hendricks Gin, distilled in Scotland, as one example of a gin that bridges tradition and contemporary style. "I love that [Hendricks] is playing with the cucumber and rose elements," he says, not-

LEADING BRANDS OF GIN

(Thousands of 9-Liter Cases)

Brand	Supplier	2005	% Chg
Seagram's Gin	Pernod Ricard USA	2,760	-0.5%
Tanqueray	Diageo	1,367	0.7%
Gordon's Gin	Diageo	867	-1.7%
Bombay Sapphire	Bacardi USA	725	9.4%
Beefeater	Pernod Ricard USA	594	-4.2%
Gilbey's Gin	Beam Global Wine & Spirits	521	-5.3%
Burnett's White Satin Gin	Heaven Hill Distilleries	366	-1.1%
Barton Gin	Constellation Brands	353	-3.0%
Fleischmann's Gin	Constellation Brands	330	-4.9%
McCormick Gin	McCormick Distilling	221	0.5%



ing two of the more distinctive botanicals being embraced by today's gin distillers.

One of the newer domestics is Distiller's No. 6 Gin from the North Shore Distillery near Chicago, launched in November 2005. Co-owner Sonja Kassebaum notes that she and husband Derek find distilling gin offers a "great opportunity to put some artistry into what we do." They experimented with juniper from different regions (they settled on Eastern Europe), different spices (they opt for cinnamon from Ceylon in place of the more traditional cassia bark) and different forms of the botanicals (fresh lemon zest goes into each batch, rather than dried peel). The gin has a complex flavor profile, but ultimately it's a smooth sip.

On the west coast, Aviation Gin from Portland's House Spirits has garnered plenty of attention since its April debut. Named after a cocktail popular at the turn of the last century, its moniker is a nod to the glory days of gin. The distiller counts Seattle mixologist Ryan Magarian among those who helped develop the flavor profile. It was sipping his first Aviation cocktail at Bellagio in Las Vegas five years ago that woke up Magarian to the potential of gin. "I hadn't really played much with gin before that," he explains. "It was a revelation."

Other recent additions to the domestic gin trade include No. 209 Gin from the No. 209 Distillery in San Francisco, released July 2005, and Sarticious Gin, distilled in Santa Cruz. Miles Karakasevic at the Charbay distillery in Napa Valley is working on just the right formula—including design of a special still—for a gin to join Charbay's portfolio of distinctive spirits; it may be released in the next year.

BEYOND THE MARTINI

Say "gin cocktail" and most mental lists don't get far beyond the traditional Martini and Gin and Tonic. But given today's retro-ap-

preciation of classic cocktails blended with the creative impulses of modern mixologists, a whole new gin playing field has taken shape.

Consider Audrey Saunders, owner of New York City's Pegu Club. She reached back into the annals of the cocktail's heyday to find inspiration for her distinctive bar opened in August 2005. Named after a British Colonial officer's club in Burma popular at the height of the British Empire, the signature Pegu Cocktail—Tanqueray Gin, orange bitters, Cointreau, Angostura bitters and lime juice—is a nearly-forgotten classic revived for a new generation.

Saunders leans toward gin because "the botanicals stimulate and enliven the palate, and keep it feeling fresh and clean. When used in a drink, the botanicals cut through the sweetness of liqueurs and sugar. But gin also pushes fruit flavors forward, much the way a squeeze of lemon does, without altering the flavor profiles."

The venerable Canlis restaurant in Seattle is celebrated for its elegant Northwest cuisine and award-winning wine list. But wine director Shayn Bjornholm, M.S. is lately jazzed by gin. The "Inspired Classics" portion of the drink list includes the traditional Aviation, made with the gin of the same name, Maraschino liqueur and fresh lemon juice. The summer drink list included the Honey Basil Highball (Plymouth Gin, homemade honey syrup, basil, fresh lemon juice and soda) and Fancy Chill 'Em (Plymouth Gin, freshly squeezed grapefruit juice, a splash of tonic and simple syrup).

Chicago bartenders have taken quickly to No. 6 Gin; it is featured in 60 bars and restaurants there. At the celebrated Custom House, bar manager Tim Lacey created the Vya di Corso cocktail, pairing No. 6 with Amaro Mio (an herbal liqueur) and Vya Sweet Vermouth in an up cocktail. He notes that, "while I love working with the full spectrum of gins, from the milder Beefeater and Boodles to the highly aromatic Hendricks, No.

BOMBAY SAPPHIRE

6 falls somewhere in the middle. I also love its citrus notes; it's those orange flavors and aromas that stand out in a cocktail."

EPICUREAN EDGE

The savory, layered character of gin—drawn from any dozens of botanicals—makes it one of the more culinary accessible spirits. The crossover is beginning, with gin making its way from the cocktail glass to the broader swath of beverage and food preparations.

For instance, when Portland, Ore. chef Vitaly Paley of Paley's Place packed his knives and cedar planks to cook at the James Beard House in New York City, he also took along some Aviation Gin. The chef made a granité of the gin (using citrus juice, chili flakes, vinegar and a touch of olive juice) to serve on chilled Pacific half shell oysters. He also seasoned Kobe beef with a blend of spices that mimic the botanicals in Aviation Gin, pan-seared the meat, then flambéed it with the gin to finish. The beef was served sliced on a crouton with bone marrow and grilled mushroom relish. Of course, gin cocktails were available.

"I use gin in the kitchen whenever I can," Paley admits, saying he's been curing salmon with gin rather than vodka or aquavit for years. And when he's having a good burger or his steak tartar for dinner, he always opts for a Martini. In fact, the Chef's Favorite cocktail on the drink list at Paley's Place is a Tanqueray 10 Martini shaken with a kiss of vermouth.

Paley is driving a growing trend in gin's renaissance: moving from a purely cocktail hour staple to a worthy dinner partner.

To emphasize gin's potential to crossover to the dining room, Bombay Sapphire Gin has hosted cocktail pairing dinners recently

for the trade and media. Featured dishes include Lobster Empanadas served with a Bombay Sapphire, chili and fresh melon Martini, and Beef Tenderloin with King Crab Tempura paired with a Martini of Bombay Sapphire, blueberry, basil and white cranberry juice.

The food-and-gin-cocktail message is also being driven home with Perfect Pairings events this fall. Launched in San Francisco in September, this six-city tour pairs avid home cooks with select local chefs and mixologists for a spirited cook-off to develop the best dish and Bombay Sapphire cocktail pairing. "One thing we want consumers to understand is how you can pair cocktails with food," explains Sumindi Peiris, group marketing manager for Bombay Sapphire Gin. "This growing epicurean trend is taking cocktails into a new art form; they're entering into an area that has been owned by wine."

Gin is the wise sage of the bar shelf. The spirit predates the cocktail itself by a good century and has survived countless drink trends. People on both sides of the bar are just beginning to understand and appreciate its depth of character and broad perspective.

Learning the subtleties of the range of gins available will help a bar pro create distinct, balanced cocktails. Gin devotee Saunders reveals, "Every time I work through a gin cocktail, I come up with the recipe....and I'll try it with a half-dozen gins to see which one is the best match."

There's a whole new world of gin on the horizon and clearly more excitement is afoot. ●

Cynthia Nims is a Seattle-based writer who specializes in food, travel and spirits and is a self-described gin fanatic.

