

# The Gin Game

Innovation and options increase interest in the botanical spirit

By Kelly A. Magyarics



The Devil's Gate at Flintridge Proper.

Despite the best efforts of craft bartenders and classic cocktail enthusiasts, gin remains a tough sell with many consumers. Gin commands just 5.3% of the U.S. distilled spirits market, according to the Beverage Information Group's 2013 Fact Book, vs. vodka with a 34.1% share, whiskey (23.2%) and rum (13.0%).

What's more, gin sales, which totaled 10.8 million 9-liter cases for 2012, have been relatively flat. So why are some people so excited about the botanical spirit?

For one thing, the craft cocktail revival of recent years ago continues to fuel interest in Pre-Prohibition cocktails—a number of which include gin. There are also many new styles of gin to choose from today, from modern, less juniper-driven versions to aged gins and flavored varieties. These developments have inspired innovations in mixology and helped make some guests more adventurous about gin.

The gin movement is just beginning, according to Brady Caverly, co-owner of Flintridge Proper. The Flintridge, CA, restaurant boasts the largest selection of gins in the country—213 options, priced from \$10 to \$60 for some of the rarer gins.

“I feel like we're now in the age of Bourbon and rye, and I truly believe that gin is the next big thing,” Caverly says. But there's one major difference between how guests enjoy brown spirits vs. gin, he notes: “It really needs to start with cocktails, since very few people sip gin neat.”

The 72-seat Flintridge Proper has about 17 gin cocktails on its menu, with classics represented like the Proper Martini (\$12), with Plymouth gin, Dolin vermouth, a lemon twist and a rinsed olive, as well as modern, locally-influenced libations like the Devil's Gate (\$11), with Plymouth Navy Strength gin, blackberries, basil, serrano pepper, lemongrass syrup and ginger, topped with club soda.



The classic Bees Knees is one of several popular gin cocktails at Oceana in New York.



Gin cocktails the Garden, left, and the Bentley (below) available at Willie Jane in Venice, CA.

At Oceana, a Michelin-starred seafood restaurant in New York, classics are popular, like the Vesper, with Russian vodka, choice of gin, Lillet and vermouth; and the Bee's Knees, with gin, lemon juice and honey (drink prices vary depending on the gin). The 500-seat operator also offers two specialty gin-based sips for \$14 each. The Gin and Ginger mixes gin with house-made ginger ale, citrus, pineapple, lemon bitters and "drunken" raisins, and the Jalapeño Gin Fizz combines Greenhook Beach Plum gin with Laird's Applejack, peach schnapps, cava, jalapeño and lemon. Oceana stocks 46 gins, priced from \$10 to \$18.

### LOCAL AND SMALL-BATCH SELECTIONS

As the "drink local" movement takes hold, more bars are stocking shelves with spirits produced in the same town or state. Oceana wine director Pedro Goncalves believes it's important for any good gin program to support American and small-batch gins. To that end, he stocks Greenhook Ginsmiths (\$10) and Comb 9 gin (\$10) from New York, and Bluecoat gin (\$10) from Philadelphia.

Not all operators have the luxury of available local gin options, Goncalves notes. If that's the case, "be selective and use your judgment, and choose gins with interesting flavor profiles," he advises.

Staff at Flintridge Proper ascertains what guests like about a certain large-brand gin—from its "lightness" to "floral notes"—and then recommends a similar small-batch option. Big gin brands are "a building block," Caverly says. "They provide a reference to introduce guests to the small-batch gins."

Plymouth gin is the best-selling gin for Flintridge Proper, followed by its own house-made Flintridge Botanicals gin. Third is a four-way tie between Tanqueray Malacca, Fords gin, Cap Rock Colorado Organic gin and Uncle Val's Botanical gin.

Modern gin styles that downplay the traditional botanical flavor in favor of other ingredients have really taken off, says Kyle Mathis, head mixologist at Taste by Niche. The European country fare-focused restaurant in St. Louis, MO, offers about 25 gins priced from \$6 to \$11; its top-selling brand is Broker's.

Contemporary gins are lower in juniper, "which is a flavor most gin 'haters' shy away from," Mathis notes. "If you say orange zest, save and lemon instead of pine, pine, pine, it's easier to broaden someone's gin horizons."

### FLAVORED AND AGED GINS

Though all gins are technically "flavored" neutral spirits, some producers are crafting versions with decidedly ramped-up taste. Among the larger brands, Seagram's has a line of Twisted fruit-flavored gins, while Tanqueray and Beefeater have lime-flavored expressions.

In addition to its London Dry Gin, Russell Henry Gin in San Francisco produces two flavored versions. Hawaiian White Ginger Gin is infused with macerated organic white ginger sourced from the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Its Malaysian Lime Gin is steeped in the leaves and fruit of the limau purut, a variety of lime that's native to Malaysia with a robust, slightly





Gin and tonic at Oceana.

## Winning Over the Gin Haters

Guests who shy away from gin seems to have a horror story about why—typically one that involves cheap, inferior products from their youth or school days. Pedro Goncalves, wine director at Oceana in New York, recalls a recent guest in his forties who said he had tasted a sip of his parents' Martini when he was a teenager. The experience was so bad, the guest said, he decided to swear off gin forever.

But when the guest and his friend ordered oyster shooters, Goncalves mixed with gin. And they loved them—much to the gin hater's surprise.

"I see this time and time again," Goncalves says. "I often employ the gin drinker in groups to convince their friends to try the gin cocktails."

Education—and a little nudge—is the key to increasing gin sales and winning over new aficionados. "Our bartenders all have a deep background in classic cocktails, mixology and gin," says Brady Caverly, co-owner of Flintridge Proper in Flintridge, CA. "And they train the

servers who are starting to become fairly expert as they taste and discover our gins."

He points out that a small-batch, under-the-radar gin often becomes a top seller during a week that a server was introduced to it. Flintridge Proper also offers gin flights, which help educate guests on the history of gin, traditional vs. modern styles, and bartender favorites.

Comfort-food restaurant Willie Jane in Venice, CA, holds daily meetings at which the staff is schooled on the history and inspiration for the featured drink, says mixologist Derrick Bass. For instance, "the Bentley (\$12) is a riff on the classic Rolls Royce—gin, sweet vermouth, dry vermouth and Bénédictine—so I explain the difference, where it comes from, the flavor profiles of the gin being used, and what dishes it might pair with," he says.

When in doubt, Goncalves always recommends the G&T as a way to win over the haters. "The tonics give a completely different dimension to the gins. I've yet to have one person not like a Gin & Tonic."—KAM



A gin flight at Flintridge Proper; the operator likes to introduce guests to small-batch gins.



A classic Martini at Flintridge Proper.

tangy flavor. “Russell Henry’s Malaysian Lime Gin makes one of the best gimlets we’ve ever had,” notes Caverly. “Flavored gins are fun, and have their place in making interesting cocktails or putting a flavorful twist on a classic.”

Another recent innovation to the category is aged gin. Placed in barrels after distillation, aged gin takes on color, body and complexity that renders it perfect for sipping neat, like whiskey or aged tequila.

France’s Citadelle gin in 2008 was the first to release an aged version of its gin. Other companies have followed suit in recent years, including Few Spirits in Illinois, and West Virginia’s Smooth Ambler.

Beefeater recently launched Burrough’s Reserve, a hand-crafted, ultra-premium gin made with the original Beefeater recipe. The gin is distilled in the original copper Still Number 12 of company founder James Burrough then finished in rare oak barrels hand-selected by its master distiller.

And New York Distilling Company this past fall collaborated with cocktail historian David Wondrich to launch Chief Gowanus New-Netherland Gin, an aged gin with hops thrown into the mix.

### SAVORY GIN DRINKS

Because of its botanicals—which can range from citrus and coriander to orris root and cardamom—gin works well in cocktails that contain herbs and other aromatic ingredients.

Mixologist Derrick Bass of Willie Jane, a 50-seat comfort-food restaurant in Venice, CA, offers the Garden (\$10), with fennel-infused gin, citron geranium-infused vodka, Lillet Blanc and lime. “Gin used to be a summertime spirit, but now we are seeing it incorporated into more cocktails,” Bass says. Willie Jane offers six gins, priced from \$8 to \$12.

The majority of gin Taste by Niche sells goes into an original house cocktail called In A Pickle. The punch drink, made with gin, lime, St. Germain, Velvet Falernum, dill and cucumber, sells for \$40 for a bowl.

The 100-seat Jade Bar at Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain, a 105-room resort in Paradise Valley, AZ, has several savory, aromatic gin-based concoctions on the menu. The Lady Sage (\$14) mixes Aviation gin, fresh sage leaves, lemon juice, simple syrup and an egg white.

Jade Bar's other gin drinks include the Honeydew Liverthump (\$14), which uses Martin Miller gin, lemon and honeydew juices, clover honey syrup and Regan's #6 bitters; and the Self Starter (\$14), which combines Aviation gin, Cocchi Americano, apricot liqueur and lemon oil for a "well-balanced, true gin lover's cocktail," according to bar supervisor Kelly Roberts.

"Incorporating fresh ingredients is key," Roberts says. "We source many of our cocktail ingredients from our own garden on property—this can take the flavor from good to amazing." Sanctuary offers 11 gins ranging from \$9.50 to \$12.50.

## PLEASING PAIRINGS

Culinary pairings with gin cocktails are becoming more common—not surprisingly, as the botanicals in the bottles are often the same or similar to what the chef might be using in the kitchen. Servers at Oceana suggest the Chinese Steamed Buns and Grilled Cheese with the Jalapeño Gin Fizz cocktail, or the Crispy Calamari, Fish & Chips or Fried Fish Tacos with the Gin & Ginger drink.

Flintridge Proper serves Martini Mussels, in which the bivalves are sautéed in gin and vermouth with olives, cocktail onions and citrus.

"Any dish on the lighter side works, because gin is herbal and light," says Bass of Willie Jane. He likes to pair the Garden cocktail with the Quinoa and Sorghum Salad with Grilled Frisée, Pickled Ramps and Hen of the Woods Mushrooms.

"I think gin goes really well with cured meats," says Mathis. Taste by Niche's chef Gerard Craft makes a bresaola with black pepper, juniper, lemon and allspice, he notes, "and it seems the spices used in curing meats really mirror and complement the botanicals commonly found in gin."

Whether in the glass or on the plate, guests are getting more into gin, Mathis says. It may have a ways to go in terms of popularity, but more people accept gin today, he notes.

As perfect in a well-stirred Martini as it is in an eclectic sip with infuses and local-grown herbs, gin is versatile and intriguing. And the wide availability of gins with diverse aromas and flavor profiles means there is a bottle for any reason, season or palate. ♦

*Kelly Magyarics, DWS, is a wine, spirits and lifestyle writer and wine educator in the Washington, D.C. area. She can be reached through her website, [www.kellymagyarics.com](http://www.kellymagyarics.com), or on Twitter and Instagram @kmagyarics.*

FlintridgeProper's "Improved" G+T cocktails.



## Gussy Up The G&T

The Gin & Tonic continues to be a quintessential gin cocktail. Operators are taking a cue from the cult-status the drink has in places like Spain by tweaking the classic with boutique tonics and other ingredients and garnishes (besides that ubiquitous lime wedge) that are designed to complement a specific gin's aroma and flavor profile.

Flintridge, CA, restaurant Flintridge Proper's "Improved" G+T menu has four eclectic options for \$12 each: Pear + Mint uses Cap Rock Colorado Organic gin; Cucumber + Rose adds Hendrick's gin; Strawberry + Rosemary pours Tanqueray Malacca gin; and the savory Cherry Tomato + Basil incorporates Caorunn small-batch gin from Scotland.

The Bellagio Resort & Casino in Las Vegas offers two modern takes on the Gin & Tonic on its menu. The Perfect Gin & Tonic (\$16) mixes Hendrick's gin with Fever Tree tonic water, served over diamond-shaped ice and garnished with fresh cucumber and a kaffir lime leaf. The May Gin & Tonic (\$16) is a frothy blend of Bombay Sapphire East gin, Cointreau, cream, egg white and citrus, topped with Fever Tree tonic water and a dash of orange bitters.—KAM