

Cheers



01/22/2015 By Jack Robertiello

Next of Gin

Cocktail insiders have been saying it for years, but this time, maybe gin really is in. Interest in the classic cocktails, new products and different styles of gin are all helping to convince gin-shy consumers to give the botanical spirit another go.

Craft cocktail bars where gin gets frequent marquee billing are no longer merely niche drinking spots. More mainstream restaurants are taking a chance on new style gins to enliven their beverage programs.



Flintridge Proper bartender Tobias Jelinek mixes drinks with house-aged bitters.

What's more, establishments that thrive on a gin focus have become more common as many styles of gin—London dry, Genever, Old Tom, New Western—are attracting a new audience of younger drinkers. Even the hard-to-find gin de mahon Xoriguer (made on the Spanish island of Menorca which was once occupied by Britain) is now available in the U.S.

The return of gin was for a long time discussed in a persuasive or hopeful manner inside the bartender/spirits industry bubble, says Charlotte Voisey. A portfolio ambassador for William Grant and Sons, Voisey spent many years flogging Hendrick's gin across the country. "Now, I think we can safely say gin has definitely come back and found a way to survive by getting onto cocktail menus and getting into the consumer mind set," she says.

Voisey is at least partly correct: The multiyear trajectory of more expensive imported gins has righted itself after a falloff following the Great Recession. Consumption of imported gin is up more than 3% last year, and over 10% since 2004, according to annual data published by the Beverage Information & Insights Group, the research unit of Cheers' parent company.

But total gin consumption was down 1.8% in 2013, and domestic gins, which tend to be stronger off-premise, fell more than 4% last year—now below 7 million cases for the first time in modern memory. This, despite the modest growth of new American gins with flavor profiles that are not as juniper-forward as the more traditions versions of the spirit.

Overcoming consumer resistance

While gin acceptance among consumers clearly has a ways to go, the spirit has been bolstered by the emergence of the classic cocktail. So many recipes from cocktailing's golden era are gin-based that serious drink aficionados have practically been forced to overcome any reluctance on their part to dive into gin.

Winning over gin haters remains a challenge, however, as many guests will say they've had a bad experience with gin or gin drinks.

"I love to tell customers that it's not their fault that they don't love gin—it's the fault of the person who mixed their cocktail," says Dave Shenaut at Portland's Raven and Rose. "Nine out of 10 times, if you can get someone to try a well-crafted gin cocktail, you can get them to change their mind."

It also helps that cocktails bars dedicated to gin are opening up in different markets. For example, in Miami there's the Traymore Bar at the Metropolitan by Como hotel, which opened earlier this year. It offers 40 gins, plus house-made tonics and cocktails such as the Miami Heat, with a red chili-infused gin base.

Flintridge Proper in La Canada Flintridge, CA, opened in spring 2013 and serves classic cocktails using fresh-squeezed juices, house-made syrups, premium spirits and classic glassware. The gastropub also lays claim to the world's largest selection of gin—more than 200 varieties, including a house-made version designed to capture the flavors of the local hills. More than half the botanicals used in Flintridge Proper's gin come from within 15 miles of the restaurant.

“There's a real renaissance for gin,” says owner Brady Caverly. “When we first opened we would get plenty of guests who said ‘I don't like gin,’ and then when you ask them when they last had it, it would be years ago—maybe college.”

Caverly prides himself on turning vodka fans into gin drinkers by introducing them to the New Western gins made with moderate juniper influence. “I tell them gin is really the original flavored vodka, and there is a gin for every taste,” he says. “It can be much easier to get people into than turning them into brown-spirits drinkers.”

Flintridge Proper understandably sells a lot of gin cocktails. “Outside of our Proper Old-Fashioned, the Eastside [a version of the gin, mint, lime, simple syrup Southside with cucumber added] is the biggest seller,” Caverly says.

Making gin work

Flintridge does most things right when it comes to focusing on a single spirit: Stock many brands and styles, feature them in cocktails, offer them in flights, introduce new customers with creative marketing and promotions. Those same steps have helped Washington, D.C.'s Gin Joint, located below New Heights restaurant, increase its gin portfolio from 20 something when it opened in 2008 to more than 85 today.

Bar manager Kavita Singh Brar says that Gin Joint, like Flintridge, has become a destination point for gin lovers. It's also found a way to build on that base with new customers.

“Gin as a spirit has become more popular with a younger age group, who thought gin was only for their fathers or grandfathers,” Brar says. “And now with the interest in trying new gins, people will say, ‘Oh, we have to bring our grandfather in to try them.’”



Classic gin and tonic.

Gin Joint features a gin of the month that gets menu billing and is included in a cocktail. It also has an extensive list of house-made tonics which take a decidedly culinary approach.

The tonics rotate constantly, with flavors designed to meet seasonal attributes. Versions made in the fall might include blood orange, saffron and baking spices. Last December’s tonic was a cranberry-jalapeño version.

“When people come in, we always like to give them an element of surprise, whether it’s gin of the month or the new tonics,” Brar says. The bar also welcomes distillers and brand reps for monthly Happy Hour talks, and the seven-drink menu, which changes monthly as well, always includes two or three gin-based drinks. Gin accounts for about 65% of Gin Joint’s spirit sales.

Brar says many of Gin Joint’s regular customers who are used to the broad variety of gins and mixers available will simply ask for something spicy or fruity or citrusy in their Gin and Tonics. What about those guests who have more resistance to gin?

“Sometimes it takes a little convincing to get them to have faith in what you’re going to make them, because they are so used to what they’ve always had,” Brar says of the gin-averse. She’ll start by introducing a different tonic, either house-made or one of the new super-premium brands like Fever Tree or Q to guests. Then once they trust the changes, she can move them to different brands as well.

Offering an Old-Fashioned made with Old Tom gin—a slightly sweeter, richer style of gin—instead of bourbon sometimes can do the trick for the gin resisters, Brar notes. “People are versatile in their tastes, and this is a good time for them, since distillers are having so much fun with the herbs and spices they are including in their gins.”

While many of the chain restaurants emphasize vodka, rum and whiskey drinks, some have reacted to the interest in gin. The nearly 200-unit Bonefish Grill is currently testing a Gin and Tonic made with Hendrick’s gin and a bartender-made tonic syrup using cucumber and ginger.

Even those operations with a more modest collection of gin drinks see opportunity in highlighting the spirit. Philadelphia’s Juniper Commons, which opened in December and highlights 1980s-style dining and drinking, has a healthy gin portfolio, says general manager Tom Pittakas.

“Gin came into focus for us because one of the big things for Juniper Commons is a really large raw bar...and no spirit goes better with a raw bar than gin,” he says.

Betting on botanicals and tonic

In addition to Hendrick’s, which came out in 1999, some of the newer gins on the market include Aviation, Brockmans, Caorunn, Uncle Val’s Restorative Gin and Monkey 47. Juniper Commons categorizes gins by flavor profile—floral, astringent, citrusy—and includes a large selection of gin cocktails and house-made tonics.

Pittakas believes now that gin is widely available with different aromatic notes—lavender, rose hips, verbena and other botanicals—customers are more easily intrigued by the flavors and are interested in how bartenders can make them work in drinks.

The various Jaleo restaurants overseen by chef José Andres include a range of specialty Gin and Tonics. At Jaleo in Las Vegas, for instance, Gin and Tonic varieties include José’s (Hendrick’s, Fever Tree tonic, lime, lemon, juniper and Kaffir lime); the Cítrico (Oxley gin, Fever Tree Mediterranean tonic, grapefruit, lemon, coriander and mint); Hierba (Aviation American gin, Jack Rudy tonic, orange, lime, rosemary and pink peppercorn); and Tierra (Ford’s Gin, house-made tonic, orange, lemon, kaffir and cardamom).



Flintridge Proper boasts the world's largest gin collection.

At the Jaleo location in downtown Washington, D.C., the list of Gin and Tonics includes versions made with unique combinations, such as Kaffir lime, juniper, lemon and lime; fennel, radish and cubeb; pickled ginger, allspice, orange and lemon; and grapefruit, mint, lemon and white pepper.

Creating the drinks and matching them with garnishes, which are added to the drink rather than muddled in, involves a thoughtful process, says beverage director Juan Coronado.

“The way to create a successful Gin and Tonic is to sit down and analyze the gin’s flavor, aftertaste and aromas, pouring a glass and returning to it every five minutes or so, smelling and tasting, allowing it to water down and trying it again, because it changes the flavor,” Coronado says. “We do the very same with the tonics.”

Breaking down old prejudices about gin is one of the points of the well-attended spirit classes Shenaut holds at Raven and Rose. During the summer gin class, attendees smell fresh and dried botanicals, sample gins blind—neat and in cocktails—and get at least a basic understanding of the history of gin.

“Many customers come into the bar and look at the bottles and have no idea what the differences between them are, and blind tasting is the best way to share,” says Shenaut. “What’s in the glass is what’s important and helps people pick out, say, the big citrus profile of the London dries, the lavender in Aviation, or the botanical influences in others. All that versatility helps them understand that gin can be many different things.”

Jack Robertiello is wine and spirits writer/consultant based in Brooklyn, NY.

Spanish-Style G&T Service

While America's love of an icy-cold Gin and Tonic has rarely wavered, the recently imported Spanish style of service has started to gather adherents. When Sable Kitchen & Bar head bartender Mike Ryan returned to Chicago from Spain last year, he took inspiration from the variety of Gin and Tonics, served in a large wine glass or goblet with unusual garnishes when developing his own. His take includes versions made with North Shore #6 gin, orange peel, Thai chili and Q tonic; Plymouth gin, Boker's Bitters, lime peel and Fentiman's tonic; Citadelle gin, grapefruit peel, mint, Fever Tree Mediterranean tonic; and The Botanist gin, celery bitters, rosemary and Fever Tree tonic.

Gin and Tonic menus change depending on location at the various Jaleo restaurants overseen by chef José Andres. But the international favorite is elevated to high-end Spanish style it deserves, says beverage director Juan Coronado.

Coronado himself prefers his in a large wine glass to allow the carbonation, dilution, chilling and flavors added by the garnishes to evolve. "A big glass is very important to me as a way to create an ecosystem for the drink, and it definitely adds to the experience. People get it right away, they love [the glassware]—it captures their attention."—*JR*