



# How Gin Came to Be Known as the Big Bad Wolf of the Spirits World

by [Chaim Dauermann](#) Jun 1, 2015, 4:15p



Courtesy of The Up & Up  
Assorted gin bottles at NY's The Up & Up.

DON'T MISS STORIES. [FOLLOW EATER](#)

×

*Why do some people fear gin?*

Despite the ubiquity of craft cocktails, many myths still exist about alcohol and its effects—myths which often inform, or limit, the choices imbibers make during a night out. However, one could argue that no popular spirit is met with as much trepidation as gin. Drinkers accredit all kinds of maladies to the classic spirit, from horrible hangovers, to depression, to anger or even insanity.

Understandably, people often abstain from consuming certain spirits because of bad experiences from the past. Sense memory is a powerful thing. But the ingrained cultural bias against gin seem to run much deeper, and the deleterious effects that some attribute to gin and only gin can, at times, reach amusingly implausible levels. Getting "gin drunk" is often associated with crazy or mean behavior. Some people feel the spirit makes them "sad" or "weepy." In this narrative, gin is cast in the role of emotional instigator.

The odd (and for many, surprising) reality is that gin is closest in nature to vodka, popularly presumed to be the "safest" spirit to drink. Although that "safety" often translates in the modern drinker's mind to a perceived (and dubious) insurance from hangovers, it's historically relevant to note that vodka was first introduced to the American consumer as a spirit offering a different sort of "safety." Look no further than Smirnoff's **"It Leaves Your Breathless!" ad campaign** from the 1950s, reassuring drinkers that they could enjoy vodka any time of day without fear of the social repercussions that might come from the odor of alcohol on one's breath. ... gin is little more than flavored vodka ... [but] the perceived difference between gin and vodka is as wide as the gulf between a lion and a common housecat.

In the simplest terms, gin is little more than flavored vodka: a neutral spirit steeped with juniper berries and other botanicals. And yet, in much of the public space, the perceived difference between gin and vodka is as wide as the gulf between a lion and a common housecat.

In the early 1700s, gin became a serious problem in London. Dutch-born William of Orange took the English throne in 1688, and with his reign came jenever (also known as genever), a juniper-flavored spirit hailing from Holland. At the time, England was at war with France and the English government placed an embargo on French wine and spirits. For a small fee, however, one could start a distillery business in London. Grain was cheap and plentiful, and a rough approximation of genever, called "gin," was easy to make.

During the 18th century, the lives of London's urban poor were short, brutal affairs.

And although most could not afford the opium, brandy and wine favored by the wealthy, nearly everyone could buy gin. Before too long, gin was even cheaper than beer. In 1721, magistrates in Middlesex declared that gin was "the principal cause of all the vice and debauchery committed among the inferior sort of people." Gin consumption in London and the surrounding area is said to have peaked in the 1740s, with estimates of per capita consumption ranging from two gallons per year to as many as 10.

Far from being the refined, delicate spirit we know it to be today, the 18th century gins of London were produced on the cheap, and often made with inferior and even dangerous ingredients. When juniper wasn't handy, distillers added turpentine to flavor the spirit; it was less costly than juniper, but contributed a "piney" flavor of its own along with its significant health hazards.

Distilling and selling gin was a means to an end: drunkenness. A balm for the souls of London's impoverished lower class, gin was also the fuel for crime and violence. Gin quickly and uniquely became associated with poverty, extreme drunkenness, madness, death and inferiority. Taxes levied throughout the 1700s eventually calmed much of this storm by rendering gin more expensive to produce, but memory and oral history cannot be snuffed out with a tax. The damage had been done.

When juniper wasn't handy, distillers added turpentine to flavor the spirit; it ... contributed a "piney" flavor of its own along with its significant health hazards. Accounts contemporary to mid-19th century London offer a glimpse into the slow evolution and (at least partial) rehabilitation of gin's image. The Victorian era in London saw rise to the "gin palace," a large, often ornately-decorated gaslit bar dedicated to its namesake spirit. Hardly considered respectable, gin palaces could be regarded as the dive bars of that era. Temperance movements at the time continued to focus on gin as a particular source of corruption, as opposed to beer, which was generally seen as healthy, often taken with meals, and not the source of drunken excess to the same degree as gin. Nevertheless, the gin palace did have its charm for some.

The works of Charles Dickens offer a compelling window into the lives of Victorian-era Londoners. Dickens' essay "Gin-Shops" from his 1836 work *Sketches By Boz*, is particularly topical. he describes a walk through the slums of Drury Lane, known as much for its poverty as for its concentration of gin palaces:

... filthy and miserable appearance of this part of London can hardly be imagined by those ... who have not witnessed it.

And yet, for Dickens at least, the gin palaces offered some much-needed respite:

You turn the corner. What a change! All is light and brilliancy. The hum of many voices issues from that splendid gin-shop which forms the commencement of the two streets opposite.

The piece is less a hymn to gin palaces than it is a condemnation of the unlivable conditions that many Londoners had to endure. He concludes that,

Gin-drinking is a great vice in England, but wretchedness and dirt are a greater ... If Temperance Societies would suggest an antidote against hunger, filth, and foul air ... gin-palaces would be numbered among the things that were.

Though gin would later become a favorite of British Royal Navy officers, a vital component to the medicinal "gin and tonic" for British soldiers in India, and a bottle of choice for Jerry Thomas and other influential barmen making cocktails in New York and elsewhere, there remained deep historical connections between gin and poverty, gin and madness, gin and sadness, gin and death.

Many Prohibition-era cocktails ... were developed with the intent of masking the flavor of these gins ... to cover up flavors that would signal that the drink could lead to illness or death.

We here in the States did our own part in contributing to gin's nefarious reputation.

Prohibition saw the appearance of "bathtub gin," a term applied to bootleg gins, sometimes made in bathtubs, and often with alcohol not fit for imbibing (such as wood alcohol and other alcohols intended for medical use) that were then flavored with juniper oil and other (sometimes less innocuous) compounds. Many Prohibition-era cocktails, far from being the more culinary-minded treasures created before and since, were developed with the intent of masking the flavor of these gins, either for the sake of covering up an unpleasant taste or, more ominously, to cover up flavors that would signal that the drink could lead to illness or death. "Tasting the alcohol," the sharp, acrid taste of poisonous bootleg gin, sometimes meant the difference between illicit fun and permanent injury, or worse.

It's only fair to consider gin's history and wonder whether the spirit's infamy impacts imbibers' beliefs today. The placebo effect is well-documented by science.

Conspicuously absent, however, is any scientific study that suggests there's truth to different spirits producing different "kinds" of intoxication. Chemically, gin is an alcohol delivery system just like any other. Historically, however, it holds a unique place in the past, and a lasting association with some unseemly aspects of life.