



How This Man With The Glass On His Nose Predicted The Great American Gin Evolution

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Meet Aviation Gin's co-founder Ryan Magarian

By Simon Ford



Ryan Magarian pioneered the term "New Western Gin," and hopes to have it officially recognized.

During the fall of 2006, I visited Portland to spend a leisurely weekend with my friend **Ryan Magarian**. I had previously met Ryan after inviting him, on a whim, to visit the Plymouth Gin distillery in England a year prior, and we became quick friends. Ryan was one of the bartenders/consultants at the forefront of the new cocktail movement that was emerging back then, and I was a big fan of the cocktails and bars he had worked on. But his next move would take me by surprise.

Ten minutes after he had picked me up from the airport, he stopped the car. It turned out he couldn't wait to show me something he was working on. From a bag he pulled out a small bottle. "Taste this and tell me what you think." Ryan had been working on a gin and I was one of the first people to get to try it. He shared with me the first batch of **Aviation Gin**, a spirit brand that over the past couple of years has grown from a bartender favorite to recognized and noticed in the category.

Ryan dubbed his style of gin "New Western Gin" — which sparked lots of debate amongst gin traditionalists. While the term is yet to be officially recognized, it is certainly used a lot by gin makers and enthusiasts alike. It's a term to help separate a new style of gin that has emerged over the last 15 years from some of the more traditional gin recipes, such as London Dry Gin. I recently caught up with my friend to find out what it's like to be at the center of the American gin evolution.

How did you conceive the idea for Aviation Gin?

The conception of AG was less of a lightbulb idea, than an organic process whose recipe was a careful balance of timing, talent and trust. The story begins with the distillery itself, House Spirits Distillery, which [was started in 2004 by my partner Christian Krogstad](#) in Corvallis, OR. (It was moved a year later to its current space in Portland.) One of the first projects that House began working on was the development of something called a "summer gin" for a local Portland restaurateur with a flair for the dramatic. And it was this "summer gin" — a gin built around a seasonal preference — that I was introduced to at a Seattle house party in the summer of 2005. It absolutely captivated me: the idea of someone taking a traditional spirit and moving it in a more creative and exciting direction. What I tasted had such an impact on me that I asked to have an introduction made with its makers, and, two weeks later, found myself meeting my future partners for vintage gin cocktails at Park Kitchen Restaurant in Portland.

What happened at the meeting?

It turned out to be one of the most important of my life. It was here that I shared my passion for spirit-forward classics and classic cocktail twists, and they spoke of their excitement for bringing to life unique regionally-inspired takes on classic spirits. Towards the end of the conversation, they began to tell me about a gin project they were just beginning to wrap their heads around; a gin project I quickly offered to help develop with them. Over the next seven months, we worked very closely together on the development of the botanical flavor profile, always bearing in mind how it might behave in mixed drinks. Eventually, with near equal input from all involved, we arrived at what we thought was a super delicious flavor profile that was evocative of the Pacific

Northwest, and uniquely, far more “balanced” than just about anything within the wide world of gin.

Why did you choose House Spirits to partner with on Aviation Gin?

As you can tell from the story of its creation, it was purely an organic process. It was built on timing, killer synergy, mutual respect and the willingness to go down a fairly risky path together.



Ryan Magarian (second from left) and his partners pose inside the House Spirits Distillery in Portland, Oregon.

What is unique about Aviation?

There is *so* much that is unique to our gin, but I’ll try to keep things right and tight:

1. Aviation is very likely America’s first bartender/distiller partnership, which definitely sets us apart.
2. Our flavor profile is regionally inspired, thanks to a selection of a spice-forward (as opposed to citrus, for instance) selection of botanicals (juniper, coriander, dried orange peel, cardamom, anise seed, lavender and Indian sarsaparilla) that we macerate for 48 hours in a corn-based neutral spirit.
3. We show a more balanced botanical profile than almost any other gin in the world.

4. We began the discussion of differentiating between these more modern “balanced” gins from their classic dry gin brethren, in the process coining the term “New Western Dry Gin.”
5. At 42% ABV and thanks to the botanicals in the gin, Aviation is one of the few gins in the world that we believe drinks well neat.

You coined the term “New Western Gin,” which has sparked great conversation. Why is it important for you to have the term recognized?

What was always most important to me was to get the industry to acknowledge that gin was evolving, and that it might be important for the ongoing development of the category to begin to attempt to carve out a recognizable space for gins like [Aviation, Hendricks, T10 and many others](#), while at the same time ensuring that the classic dry gin perspective is not diluted when the creativity inevitably begins to get out of hand.

I know you can't sit still for two minutes, so what is next for Ryan Magarian?

You know me pretty well, and as we speak I am getting ready to open my second concept, Easy Company, an equal parts cocktail/beer bar in Old Town Portland. Beyond that, I am still doing consulting projects and pimpin’ my gin.

Give me two cocktail recipes that everyone should try with Aviation Gin.

Well, of course, if you haven’t had a proper Aviation, it should be at the top of the list. I am including the version that I was originally introduced to, before the recent discovery that crème de violette was in the original recipe. It’s a simple balance of three magical ingredients (gin, maraschino and lemon) that changed my life. Beyond that, our Pepper Delicious might be the simplest and yummiest drink I’ve ever come up with for our baby.

Classic Aviation

2 ounces Aviation Gin
3/4 ounce Luxardo Maraschino liqueur
3/4 ounce freshly pressed lemon juice

1. Shake, serve up and garnish with a cherry on a pick.

Pepper Delicious

Loose 2/3 cup full of mint
2 ounces Aviation Gin
3/4 ounce freshly pressed lime juice
3/4 ounce simple syrup
1/2 ounce freshly extracted red bell pepper juice

1. Muddle, shake, double fine strain and serve up.
2. Garnish with a red bell pepper ring and large mint sprig.