

GIZMODO

A Beginner's Guide to Small Batch American Gin



[Adam Clark Estes](#)

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Gin is a divisive drink. It has been for centuries. Responsible for an early booze-fueled crisis in England, the botanical-infused distilled spirit was once seen as scourge on society. Three hundred years later, it's become the elegant answer to vodka and, increasingly in the US, an artisanal concoction.

Regardless of your own history with juniper-laced liquid, now is a great time [to get to know a new kind of gin](#). The industry is undergoing a welcome renaissance, one that some believe will upend the global dominance of boring vodkas and overpriced whiskeys. Many of the gins being produced in small batches across the country bear

little resemblance to the stodgy London dry gin your parents drank. While we've all grimaced at a cheap bottle of Gordon's or a poorly made Beefeater martini, you're going to be blown away by sheer range of flavors and aromas coming out of these little American distilleries.

But before we get too much into what's happening now, let's take a moment [to go over the history of gin](#). Because you can't truly understand what's so unique about small batch American gin today unless you gain some perspective on what's happened in years past.

A Brief History of Gin

Before there was gin, there was jenever. This Dutch spirit gets its name from its star ingredient: juniper. (In fact, *jenever* is the Dutch word for juniper and the basis of the English word gin.) Jenever gained popularity in the Netherlands and Belgium as early as the 16th century, thanks to its purported medicinal benefits. Since it was originally produced by distilling malt wine, juniper was added to offset the sometimes funky flavor of the spirit. Over time, more botanicals—from anis to coriander—were added to jenever, which was often sold in pharmacies.

The tale of how Dutch jenever became English gin [is, rather fittingly, a story of war and empire](#). When William of Orange invaded England and took the throne in the 17th century, he brought the spirit with him. The distillation process evolved until it became the botanical-flavored vodka we recognize as gin today.



By the 18th century, gin had taken the nation by storm. The so-called Gin Craze was marked by a new epidemic of severe public drunkenness, perhaps because the English had mainly been drinking weak beer instead of strong spirits. The period was immortalized in Hogarth's [famous illustrations "Beer Street" and "Gin Lane,"](#) which is sometimes hailed as the first anti-drunk campaign. A series of Gin Acts attempted to curb consumption of the spirits and ultimately led to riots. Weird how gin is now seen as a sophisticated spirit, huh?

Quinine and the Cocktail Craze

In keeping with its designation as a spirit of empire, gin gained newfound acceptance as the British empire grew. The medicinal qualities were heralded once again, after gin was used in the tropical colonies to offset the bitter qualities of quinine, an anti-malarial compound. The trend of mixing quinine, tonic, sugar, and lime would become an early version of the gin and tonic. Meanwhile, in the British Navy, a mixture of gin and lime

juice was used to combat scurvy, while a gin and angostura mix was used to soothe seasickness.



It was during the 19th-century that gin drove the flourishing of cocktail culture. Pimm’s Oyster Bar was one of the first establishments to focused on gin-based mixed drinks, and before long, cocktail bars were popping up all over London, though some prejudice remained. Gin had ascended to widespread acceptance by 1849, when a bottle was included in the Fortnum & Mason catalogue for the first time.

By the time the 20th century had arrived, the cocktail craze spread to the United States. Different styles of gin had emerged by now. “Distilled gin” and the more refined “London gin” is made by redistilling ethanol (basically vodka) with natural botanicals. The specific botanicals added can vary from a few to a few dozen, and precise recipes are often kept secret. Over the decades, however, gin distilleries struggled to overcome the

competition from vodka, which had even managed to edge its way into the martini market. Don't believe the hype: A real martini should be made with gin. Full stop.

Small Batch American Gin

Jump ahead to the early aughts, and gin joined the burgeoning craze for artisanal everything. Todd and Scott Leopold were some of the firsts to give gin the small batch treatment, repurposing their organic and sustainable beer brewing practices for distilling spirits. Their Leopold's Small Batch Gin—distilled with juniper, coriander, Valencia oranges, and many more—[quickly won fans](#). Sold in a now ubiquitous apothecary bottle, the gin married old traditions and yuppie-friendly trends like organic ingredients.

This fusion has come to define small batch American gins. While juniper remains the marquee ingredient, this approach to gin-making welcomes weirdness in the choice of botanicals, and the handcrafted branding is helping gin compete with profitable bottles like American single malt scotch and fancy, tastes-like-nothing vodkas. Gin is also the perfect spirit for startup distilleries who can swirl an easy-to-make ethanol base with their bouquet of botanicals and churn out bottles within a year, well before their cash-cow whiskeys are finished aging in barrels.

As a result, there are dozens if not hundreds of new small batch American gins hitting shelves every year. Almost all of them qualify as distilled gin, though you'll find some London dry style gins out there as well. (By the way, London dry gin does not need to be made in London to earn its moniker.) The variety of botanicals and tiny tweaks to process produce a wide range of flavors, from the very drinkable "wet" gins like Death's Door to the wonderfully complex gins like Greenhook. It's worth noting that gin tends to be a mixing booze, though many small batch American gins are terrific enough to drink neat.

Without further ado, here's a little starter pack of small batch American gins that you'll probably love, regardless of whether you consider yourself a gin drinker or not. I do not consider myself a gin drinker, but I'd sip any of these any time of year.

Aviation



Just to prove that small batch gin isn't just an East Coast thing, you should try Aviation. With unique botanicals like sarsaparilla and lavender, this small batch gin from Portland, Oregon is built to make the perfect Aviation cocktail. That's three measures of gin, one measure of lemon juice, a measure of maraschino liqueur, and a sense of adventure. Try it now! [[\\$27](#)]