

HOW GIN MADE ITS WAY INTO TIKI

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PHOTOS BY CLAYTON HAUCK



Lost Lake's Saturn riff combines aged Jamaican rum, American gin, passion fruit, lemon, falernum, coconut, absinthe and Bēsk.

Like most tiki bars, Jeff Berry's New Orleans haven—Latitude 29—feels a bit like a museum of rum, with a sweeping spectrum of styles lining the back bar. But look closer and you'll notice a bottle or two of gin tucked into the lineup, and maybe even a Saturn cocktail or another gin riff on the drink menu. "Tiki is mostly known for rum, but if you read any of Jeff Berry's books you'll find a lot of gin gems: the Suffering Bastard, the Saturn, the Oahu Gin Sling," says Brian Miller, New York's self-described "tiki derelict" bartender. "I guess people don't often think of gin when they think of paradise, but my experience has been that gin can be just as refreshing." Known for his work behind the bar at Death & Co. and the rotating tiki series he launched five years ago called Tiki Mondays with Miller (currently happening at Pouring Ribbons), Miller says that while rum will always be his favorite tiki ingredient, gin offers plenty of potential and versatility as a foundation for tropical drinks.

Juniper Rising

To understand gin's trajectory in the tiki world, you'll need to jump back several decades, says Jeff Berry. "In the 1920s, anybody with any style, class or money wanted to drink whiskey and gin," he says. "Rum was for sailors and the lower orders of people."

When Prohibition hit, whiskey and gin weren't as accessible (or safe to drink) anymore, but rum proliferated. "People drank rum smuggled in from the Caribbean because they knew it was safe," Berry says. "Chances are a sealed bottle with a label on it was real, because no one was really faking rum. They were faking everything else."

After Prohibition ended, most people returned to their former drinking habits, leaving rum in the shadows, and prices dropped drastically. In part to take advantage of this abundance of cheap rum, tiki pioneer Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt—who spent most of Prohibition traveling around the Caribbean and other parts of the world, and later rechristened himself as Donn Beach—opened America's first tiki bar, Don's Beachcomber Cafe. Rum was the star of the show, but as bartenders like Trader Vic began to replicate Beach's model, they needed to adapt to bring in a wider audience. "One of the things about all the Polynesian restaurants and tiki bars that flourished from the 1930s through the '70s is that they weren't just for rum drinkers, because there weren't enough rum drinkers," Berry says. "Tiki bartenders came up with whiskey drinks, gin drinks and vodka drinks—just about everything you can name—because they were trying to get everyone to come to the bar, not just tiki fans. That's why you see gin drinks starting to emerge."

Always a Bridesmaid



Gin and rum share a shell at Lost Lake in Chicago.

Still, gin remained a tiki underdog—and some say that's thanks to the hyper-secrecy of tiki's pioneers. During the movement's heyday, recipes weren't widely shared, so many formulas remain a mystery. "One of the lures of tiki was that nobody knew what was in the drinks. Even most of the bartenders were only given mixes to pour," says Matt Seiter, a St. Louis-based bartender who presented a panel on the topic of gin in tiki at last year's Paris of the Plains Cocktail Festival. "But you can look at older menus and see gin in there in plain sight. The reason why you don't see more classic tiki drinks with gin is because the recipes were closely guarded."

Berry agrees, and presents another theory. "The biggest revolutionary thing Don The Beachcomber did was mix more than one kind of rum in the same drink to create a base spirit that no other bar could give you," he says. "You can take these rums of different body, character, proof, density and mix them together into some amazingly rich base spirits." This practice eventually became a defining characteristic of tiki drinks, regardless of where they

originated. “No one ever thought to put three gins in a Martini because yes, there were variations within London Dry gin with different spices, but it’s all recognizable as London Dry gin,” he says.

Fan Favorites

Despite gin’s second-tier status to rum, several classic gin-based tiki cocktails have endured. Berry points to the Rangoon Gimlet and the Saturn—the first is essentially a modified Gimlet, and the second can now be found in contemporary tiki bars around the world. The Saturn’s simple blend of gin, falernum, passion fruit syrup, orgeat and lemon juice originated with Filipino bartender J. “Popo” Galsini in 1967; Berry found the recipe printed on the side of a glass he purchased in a San Diego thrift store in the early 1990s. “It’s a delicious drink that hits all the tiki bases,” he says.

The Fog Cutter is a favorite of Lost Lake bar manager Erin Hayes. “Our recipe pairs gin with rum, brandy, lime, Curaçao, sherry and orgeat—all of my favorite things in one delicious tiki mug,” she says.

Another well-known drink, The Suffering Bastard, combines gin, brandy, lime cordial, Angostura bitters and ginger beer, and the Oahu Sling was developed by a Playboy editor in the 1970s—a refreshing mix of gin, Bénédictine, crème de cassis and lime juice. Miller’s favorite gin-based tiki drink comes from Beachbum Berry’s Grog Log. “There’s a drink called the Polynesian Spell that I found in Bum’s first book. It has Welch’s grape juice in it. I knew I had to mess around with it, and oddly enough, Tanqueray worked best with the grape juice. A few years ago I told Bum that I loved that drink and he looked at me as if I was mad. He just laughed and shook his head, saying, ‘I can’t believe you remember that drink, I hardly do.’ I replied, ‘I’m a fan.’”

The New Guard

With today’s tiki-bar boom spreading across the country once again, bartenders are turning to gin in new ways, often looking toward new styles of the spirit. “Gin is so incredibly versatile,” Hayes says. “Especially today, there are so many diverse styles. You can create a cocktail to highlight specific botanical elements in a particular gin, or you can select a gin to work to complement the flavor profile you’re trying to achieve in a cocktail.”

At Lost Lake, Hayes uses all sorts of gin in their modern inventions. “The bright citrus and juniper notes of a London Dry work well in both citrusy- and spice-driven cocktails, while the softer, rounder flavors of a New Western gin like Aviation play beautifully with some of the creamier tiki flavors like coconut and orgeat.”

While working at Death & Co., Brian Miller came up with the the Winchester (recipe below), in which three styles of gin are mixed together in a modern take on the Zombie. Berry cites the drink as an example of how modern bartenders are following the tiki template, but using gin in place of rum. “I’ve always wanted to expand the boundaries of what is considered a tiki drink, and gin is one of many spirits I can ‘tikify,’” Miller says. “In some of the classic tiki drinks that have white rum, gin can be an interesting substitute. Plus, gin pairs really well with some classic tiki mixers like passion fruit syrup, Don’s Mix [grapefruit juice and cinnamon syrup], Don’s Spices #3 [mostly a mystery] and Don’s Spices #4 [cinnamon-based].”

Other gin-based gems include Lost Lake's riffs, including the Heaven is a Place/This is the Place and Smuggler's Cove in San Francisco has two: Marco Dionysus' Humuhumunukunua'pua'a, with gin, lemon, pineapple, orgeat and Peychaud's bitters (detailed in the pages of Martin and Rebecca Cate's Smuggler's Cove recipe book) and Cate's own Max's Mistake, which combines gin, lemon, honey, passion fruit syrup, Angostura and dry sparkling lemonade.

Will gin ever rise to the same popularity as rum in the tiki realm? Probably not, but Miller says to give it time. "With the crews at Smuggler's Cove, Lost Lake and our tiki brethren in the UK, I imagine there are going to be a lot more modern-classic tiki gin cocktails in our future," he says.

The Winchester

1 oz. navy-strength gin

1 oz. Old Tom gin

1 oz. London Dry gin

¾ oz. fresh lime juice

¾ oz. fresh grapefruit juice

½ oz. grenadine

¼ oz. ginger syrup

¾ oz. St. Germain elderflower liqueur

1 dash Angostura bitters

Tools: shaker, strainer

Glass: tiki mug

Garnish: lime wheel and a cherry, skewered with a union jack flag (optional)

Combine ingredients in a shaker with 3 large ice cubes. Shake until chilled. Strain into a tiki mug and top with crushed ice.

Brian Miller, New York City