

## The American way



*An increasing number of distillers Stateside are turning their hands to gin. **Clinton Cawood** joins a panel of tasters in pursuit of the American Dream*

Gin definitions are vague at the very best of times, and they've become ever murkier as the juniper bubble stubbornly refuses to burst, and new countries, production methods, ageing techniques and yet more unusual botanicals emerge into the near-saturated market.

While England remains the heartland for gin as we know it, distillers across the pond are increasingly getting in on the action, and we're tasting the (often unusual) fruits of their labour over here. But do we call these New Western Dry – a term that usually refers to style rather than method or origin – or are they New World Gins?

For the sake of simplicity, we'll just call them US gins for now.

As a general rule, US gins place less emphasis on predominant juniper than we do over here. They're also often characterised by the fact that many of the distillers produce their own base spirit (in reality, some are likely only producing gin in their new craft distillery while their new craft whiskey ages). This means more emphasis on spirit character and often results in a sweeter flavour profile.

## PANEL

**Clinton Cawood**, *Imbibe*; **Johnny Florea**, One Canada Square, ETM Group; **Joey Medrington**, London Cocktail Club; **Nathan Merriman**, Big Easy BarBQ & Crabshack Covent Garden; **Tomas Morch**, Christopher's Martini Bar; **David T Smith**, Summer Fruit Cup; **Thomas Theuermeister**, The Lost Angel & Gaslight Grill; **Ed Thorpe**, ex-Cosy Kettle

## HOW IT WORKS

We called in 14 US gins that are all available in the UK, omitting anything that had been aged or that was navy strength. These were blind tasted by a panel of bartenders, in ascending order of abv. Each was scored out of 20, taking price into account. These scores were collated to attain a total rating out of 100. Prices given are all RRP's.



## RESULTS



### **87 Dorothy Parker, New York Distilling Company, Brooklyn**

New York Distilling Company's entrant was unanimously loved by our tasting panel, clearly a bunch of juniper heads on the evidence of its flavour profile. In addition to this bracing nod to traditional London Dry gin, upfront on the nose and returning powerfully on the finish, there was a distinct floral element. It was supported by bright, fresh notes, from lemon verbena to coriander seed, via riper lime and orange notes, with a dash of pink peppercorn for good measure. These fresh notes complemented what turned out to be a warm and complex palate, leading our taster to recommend it for classic gin drinks. 'This would make a smashing G&T,' said one taster.

*44% abv. £37.87/75cl. Maverick Drinks, 07813 204161*



### **83 Junipero Gin, Anchor Distilling, San Francisco**

Launched in 1996, Junipero (stress on the 'i') is one of the stalwarts of the US gin category, particularly when it comes to exports to the UK. It's distilled in a corner of Anchor Brewing Company's warehouse in San Francisco, and despite carrying the highest abv in this tasting, the flavour profile was light, with tasters using words like 'elegant', 'bright' and 'fresh'. As the name suggests, juniper plays an important part here, joined by classic notes including coriander, lemon oil and grapefruit. According to one, it bridged the gap between classic and contemporary gins, 'sure to appeal to traditionalists and bohemians alike'. Although among the most expensive gins here, it was deemed worth the price.

*49.3% abv. £41.85/70cl. Berry Bros & Rudd, 0800 280 2440*

### **81 Cold River Traditional Gin, Maine Distilleries, Maine**

The base spirit for Cold River is made entirely from potatoes, allowing it to call itself gluten-free. While spuds weren't necessarily evident in the flavour profile, Cold River nevertheless succeeded in being one of the more unusual gins in this line-up. For most panellists, this was a good thing. They described juniper and anise notes, as well as some major floral notes – lavender and orange blossom. Even less expected were Werther's Original notes, as well as some musk. Cinnamon, nutmeg and cardamom joined on the palate, wrapping up with some light juniper and angelica. 'Like a less-juniper Martin Miller's,' said one taster.

*47% abv. £38.85/75cl. Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*



### **81 No. 209 Gin, San Francisco**

No. 209 was elegant, subtle and delicate, with lemon notes dominating. Juniper wasn't lacking though, along with some fresh coriander seed notes. This led to a sweeter-than-expected palate, with a lemon creaminess that reminded one taster of lemon shortcake and syllabub, and making this an option for sipping neat. 'Could be a dry limoncello,' said another taster. A white pepper note added some interest on the finish, rounding off a well-made, not overly complex spirit.

*46% abv. £39.95/70cl. Hi-Spirits, 01932 252100*

### **79 Big Gin, Captive Spirits, Seattle**

Seattle distillery Captive's entry didn't rock the London Dry boat too much, sticking mostly to traditional lines. Juniper was front and centre here – 'like walking through a coniferous forest after an overnight downpour', as one taster neatly put it. This was joined by some bracing citrus pith

aromas, as well as some cardamom. These notes continued on the palate, with more piney, juniper notes and citrus. This would be most at home in a G&T, but would no doubt perform noble service in Gin Fizzes and White Ladies.

*47% abv. £39.95/75cl. Seeking distribution. captivespiritsdistilling.com*

### **76 Death's Door, Wisconsin**

Produced in Middleton, Wisconsin, Death's Door achieves a remarkable amount of complexity from just three botanicals – juniper, coriander and fennel. Fennel is definitely present, particularly on the palate. The other two make themselves felt before this, and in interesting ways. Tasters described aromas including lavender, violet, cardamom, anise, liquorice and even pumpernickel bread. More than one identified an oaky, vanilla element on the nose, too. This led into a more powerful, sweet, fennel-dominated palate, with more liquorice and sweet herbs. You could do worse, according to our panel, if you were looking for a gin to serve neat.

*47% abv. £41.65/75cl. Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*



### **75 Spirit Works Gin, California**

The husband-and-wife team behind the Spirit Works Distillery in California produce spirit from scratch using local wheat. This is bottled as Spirit Works Vodka and also serves as the base for this gin, as well as a sloe variant. The gin went down well with our tasters, with its upfront floral and citrus sweetness, balanced by some creamy vanilla notes – ‘like a Coke float’, said one panellist. The grain was more evident on the full palate, with citrus oil bitterness meeting spicy heat, along with some liquorice notes. More than one taster wanted to see this in a Gin Alexander.

*43% abv. £36/75cl. GX Spirits, 07761 589943*

### **74 Smooth Ambler Greenbrier Gin, West Virginia**

There was nothing traditional about this gin, which rather showcased what new gin styles are capable of. There was fruit in abundance here, from Starburst sweets to banana peels, not to mention some fresh citrus notes. That freshness was further emphasised by a mint-oil element, balancing out a relatively sweet palate. It came with abundant mixing recommendations from our panel, from a fresh

G&T to a Vesper or White Lady.

40% abv. £41.95/75cl. *Maverick Drinks, 07813 204161*

### **72 Brandon's Gin, Rock Town Distillery, Arkansas**

Rock Town uses a traditional botanical mix for Brandon's Gin, employing vapour infusion to produce it. You'd be mistaken for thinking this would produce a lightly flavoured gin, though.

There was an abundance of classic London Dry notes here, starting with a big hit of juniper and coriander. Orange and orange blossom notes were prevalent, too, leading into a bracing yet unctuous palate, with a big, rounded mouthfeel lifted by more juniper and some additional bitter orange notes. The best part, however, was the price.

46% abv. £27.35/75cl. *The Great Whisky Company, 01904 410841*

### **68 Glorious Gin, Breuckelen Distilling, Brooklyn**

With its grainy, almost genever-like aromas, it was evident that this was produced by a distillery that's also concerned with whiskey production. And Breuckelen does indeed use the same base spirit for its gin as it does for New York wheat-based 77 Whiskey. Lemon was a big player here, manifesting as lemon curd or lemon cheesecake. There was a spicy ginger note, along with a menthol note. Good with thyme or rosemary, suggested one insightful taster – the latter is one of the botanicals in the mix.

45% abv. £38.56/70cl. *Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*

### **67 Leopold's Gin, Colorado**

Denver-based distiller Leopold Bros makes this crisp, light gin by distilling each of its botanicals separately. The result is a surprisingly green, vegetal gin, with grass and sugar snap peas on the nose. This is accompanied by some big citrus notes, no doubt a result of the Valencia oranges and pomelos used in its production. Juniper made its presence felt, too, particularly towards the finish. An unusual, yet very approachable spirit, tasters thought it would work well in long drinks, a G&T foremost among them.

40% abv. £37.95/70cl. *Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*

### **64 FEW American Gin, Illinois**

Like some before it, the base spirit used in the production of FEW American Gin made itself known, resulting in a panel divider of a gin. Those who enjoyed the whiskey-like element were emphatic though, praising its malty, bready and even chocolate aromas. There was some fennel and caraway on the nose here, too, leading into a big hit of floral sweetness on the palate, lifted by a little white pepper. A contender for a truly unusual Old Fashioned – and why not.

40% abv. £37.95/75cl. *Maverick Drinks, 07813 204 161*





### **63 Aviation, House Spirits Distillery, Oregon**

Portland gin Aviation elicited all manner of interesting tasting notes. Tasters identified some dominant cardamom and aniseed notes, both present in the gin's botanical make-up. One panellist found savoury, sea-spray elements, while another identified a smoky bacon note. One mentioned root beer, no doubt picking up Indian sarsaparilla. Those savoury notes led tasters to think more about Dirty Martinis and Red Snappers than this gin's namesake cocktail.

*42% abv. £32.35/75cl. Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*

### **63 Terroir Gin, St George Spirits, California**

Nothing shy about this one, it opened with a big herbal burst of juniper and pine needles, followed by some deep floral notes and a muskiness, too. This led into an earthy, oily, botanically intense palate of menthol, spearmint, violets, coriander and cardamom. That intensity suggested some mixing potential though, and it would no doubt do good service in a punch.

*45% abv. £37.95/70cl. Maverick Drinks, 07813 204161*

*Many thanks to Big Easy BarBQ and Crab Shack Covent Garden for hosting the tasting and for all their help on the day.*

## PANEL COMMENTS



### CLINTON CAWOOD, *IMBIBE*

'While some of these definitely strayed too far, there was an abundance of excellent gins here. The occasional use of non-neutral spirit adds an interesting dimension, when it is kept in balance. These aren't about to replace your house pour, but there's a place for a few on your back bar.'



### JOHNNY FLOREA, ONE CANADA SQUARE, ETM GROUP

'It was interesting to see how important the base spirit was here. I think that's why there were so many sweet examples. For me, those that mixed the American style with the European style were really good.'



### JOEY MEDRINGTON, LONDON COCKTAIL CLUB

'There's clearly not one American style. You had classical gin styles, some malty, some light and delicate... The price point is prohibitive in some though, especially when you consider how much you can get a bottle of Beefeater for.'



### NATHAN MERRIMAN, BIG EASY BARBQ & CRABSHACK

'I tended to prefer the style of those with higher abvs, as opposed to some that were really floral, with not a lot of body and a lot of sweetness. One thing I've found with American gins is that they work with drinks like the Martinez.'



### TOMAS MORCH, CHRISTOPHER'S MARTINI BAR

'There were a lot of different characters here: some would work in a plain G&T, while others were better for a Martini. This is definitely good for mixology – if they all taste the same what's the point? These open another chapter of gin.'



### DAVID T SMITH, SUMMER FRUIT CUP

'There are more people getting into these now. I think one factor is the Spanish-style G&T, which already does things in a less traditional way. A lot were so expensive: there's always going to be a premium, but there's got to be a way to bring the price down. That said, some were worth the money.'



### THOMAS THEUERMEISTER, THE LOST ANGEL & GASLIGHT GRILL

'There were a lot that reminded me of genever here, and I think part of the reason is that there are a lot of craft bourbon distillers making gin. Ultimately, those that taste different are the interesting ones for us, so why not?'



### ED THORPE, EX-COSY KETTLE

'There's only so far you can go with a predominantly juniper profile, and for cocktails it's nice to be able to play around, even if some weren't noticeably gin. Of course, it would depend on your bar. We don't get that much call for unusual gins, but these would work somewhere more high-end.'

## CONCLUSIONS

- Discussions of style or definition aside, with nothing below 63%, it's safe to say there are some quality gins making their way to our shores.
- The majority of these distillers produce their own spirit, rather than buying neutral spirit as is the case in the UK, and this played an important part in flavour profiles.
- The gins were diverse, both in terms of botanicals and flavour profile. Sweetness cropped up frequently though, as did floral notes.
- Tasters didn't discriminate between traditional and more experimental styles – both were praised equally.
- Once again, abv is a sure-fire way for a spirit to endear itself to an *Imbibe* panel. There was nothing below 43% in the first half of the field, and every one of the highest-strength gins scored highly.
- Cost was definitely a concern across the board, but based on these high scores this isn't a category you can afford to ignore.

*Editorial feature from Imbibe Magazine – July/August 2014*