

PUNCH

The British Are Coming: Will London's Craft Gins Sell Stateside?

A new wave of British gins is calling on history to break onto American shelves. In an overcrowded market, is Anglophilia enough? Tyler Wetherall on the latest British Invasion.

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At the height of the British Gin Craze of the 18th century, the English were drinking over six gallons of gin per person per year. It was also the only time in the country's history when more people were dying than being born. Luckily, our gin skills quickly improved from that early turpentine-laced, 160-proof death juice, but it was the start of Britain's long love affair with the

juniper-based spirit. And it is this rich history of gin making that the new artisanal London Dry gin brands are channelling as they arrive on American shores.

While Britain continues to produce some of the best-selling gins in the world, America has forged ahead in the craft arena. Some have called it the “American Gin Renaissance,” with the number of craft distilleries in the country growing from 60 in 2003 to over 600 a decade later. The number of these making gin trebled between 2003 and 2011 alone, although many are just producing gin as they wait for their whiskey to age.

For the last century, London Dry was the only style of gin people really knew. To qualify as a London Dry, juniper must be the dominant taste and aroma, and no flavorings or colorings can be added after distillation. In the past 10 years, however, America has been pushing these boundaries wide open, letting other botanicals share the stage in a style known as New American. Brands like Aviation changed the gin landscape in the mid-2000s, with many following its lead. While the U.K., and notably London itself, has been experiencing its own independent, small-batch spirits boom – boosting sales of gin in the country by 9.6% last year – for these new brands to break the U.S. is another story.

“America has been making plenty of the good stuff themselves in recent years, and perhaps the English side of things has been a little neglected,” said Jake F. Burger, one of the founders of Portobello Road Gin, which launches Stateside this month. “Englishness is a huge part of our brand. We have the Union Jack on the bottle and Portobello Road is a famous London address. We’re a London Dry Gin that is actually made in London, which is rare. We’re proud of where our gin comes from and think it’s an attribute; if that helps us stand out from the crowd of American gins it’s more by happy coincidence than by design.”

Less than three years old, Portobello Road is one of Britain’s fastest growing gin brands, created by the triad of bartenders behind award-winning cocktail pub the Portobello Star, located on a site that has served alcoholic beverages since 1740. Upstairs is the Ginstute, where Burger is a Ginstructor, taking gin enthusiasts on the spirited journey of London Dry Gin in what is the second smallest museum in London. The gin itself is distilled by Charles Maxwell, an eighth-generation gin distiller whose family has been making gin since before William of Orange took to the throne in 1688 and deregulated the distilling industry, unleashing a decades-long national stupor on the streets of London.

But while Portobello Road has gained a strong foothold in the U.K., translating that success to America is notoriously difficult. Not only do new brands need to navigate the U.S.’s complex distribution laws – without in-house lawyers and big budgets this is especially challenging – but they also are fighting for a corner in a culture which favours the local.

“These new British gins are up against a double-edged sword,” said Eben Freeman, director of beverage at New York’s Madam Geneva. “Not only are they competing against the big brands with their massive budgets, but they’re also up against the small, local companies. If the average

consumer doesn't opt for a gin brand they already recognize, the next thing they'll go for is something made in their vicinity. It helps if there's a story behind the product. As a bartender introducing a new brand, you either want to be able to say it's from a shed down the road or from an old distillery with a long history."

The revival is about more than just marketing. Many of these brands are taking an artisanal approach that calls on age-old English recipes or methods. In the last five years, numerous small distilleries have popped up in London itself – though not quite to the extent of the estimated one in four houses that were operating a still back in the 1700s.

Certainly part of the way British brands set themselves apart is by calling on their gin heritage — a fact that's just as true of the big guns of distilling as the craft players. Quintessential – the maker of around 20% of all quality gins worldwide, who have had their trademark Greenall's Gin on the US market for several years – recently launched Opihr in America and will follow up with Berkeley Square come September. They all hail from the G&J Distillers in Warrington, the oldest continuous gin distillers in England founded by spirits innovator Thomas Dakin in 1760. Opihr, an Oriental Spiced London Dry Gin, takes its inspiration from the ancient spice route, which British merchants would plunder in search of new botanicals to bring home, and the super-premium Berkeley Square is named after a haughty London address.

"We're channeling the spirit of old members' clubs: the image of a gentleman with a walking stick that has an element of refinement and sophistication," said Kate Harrison, Quintessential's international brands development manager. Marketing spiel like this, along with hang tags on their Greenall's Gin promoting the chance to win a Mini – that other beloved British export – highlights how British brands are tackling the issue of differentiation in an overcrowded gin market. Similarly, Beefeater has flown London's Travelling Gin Co. – two dapper London lads who serve gin cocktails from the basket of their vintage bicycles – to New York for their latest publicity push. I couldn't think of a more English image if I tried... unless they were to wear tweed flat caps and whistle "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."

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The biggest British success story has been Sipsmith. Started in 2009 by Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall, former Fuller's and Diageo employees, respectively, it was inspired by the craft distilleries the two visited in America. They returned home determined to revive London's

distilling glory days and promptly bought the first new copper still to operate in London in nearly 200 years, which they named Prudence. They employ methods dating back centuries with a recipe developed by Master Distiller and spirits historian Jared Brown, featuring 10 classic botanicals that wouldn't surprise a distiller working in the 1800s. Most of all, the resulting classic and particularly dry gin is delicious, and making good inroads in America. As Galsworthy said, "The American scene is amazingly exciting and pushing boundaries, but what I love and what I believe will set us apart is a return to classicism, a flavor people will always come back to."

Simon Ford, founder of the 86 Co. and industry stalwart, has also seen a swing in preference back to traditional styles. Ford was one of the key players in the original gin resurgence, traveling to America as an ambassador with Pernod Ricard back in 2002 to relaunch Plymouth when there were only four or five other gins in the market and most bars met their efforts by saying, "People don't drink gin." Even he is surprised at how much the category has grown. When he started the five-year process of developing Ford's Gin – also distilled by Charles Maxwell at the Thames Distillery – he was looking to make a great cocktail gin and garnered the opinion of around 50 industry figures on multiple test batches. What he ended up with was a traditional London Dry. "After Hendricks, everyone was trying to do something different with their gin, experimenting with botanicals or looking for a unique selling point," he said. "I wanted to go back to basics, so juniper was the driving force of the flavor, something that comes to life in a cocktail. Clearly I wasn't the only one thinking that."

While interest in craft and small-batch gins, whether British or American, barely makes a dent in sales of the big players — Tanqueray, Beefeater, and Bombay — there are some 200 gin brands available on the general market, a number added to almost daily, with new gins launching from Germany's Black Forest to Australia's Yarra Valley. This can only be considered a good thing for gin drinkers and the industry as a whole.

"We're not trying to take business away from the fabulous distilling companies in New York, or anywhere else," Sipsmith's Galsworthy said. "We should all be locking arms and trying to source growth from the 10 gins that dominate 80% of the market. These are the giants on whose shoulders we stand, but this is just the beginning, and history is going to look back so favorably on this short period of time in gin's story."