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Whitechapel's Victorian palace for gin geeks creates a buzz

By [Esther Mobley](#)

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Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

Whitechapel in S.F. evokes the look of an abandoned London tube station, circa 1890.

Whitechapel, Martin Cate's new bar in the Tenderloin, exists in the same sphere as his other bar, Smuggler's Cove. Both are studies in a single spirit: Smuggler's Cove is a shrine to rum; Whitechapel, to gin. And both are method actors, cloaked in period-authentic costumes and living their parts in every nook and cranny.

In the case of Smuggler's Cove, that character happens to be a recognizable genre of watering hole — a tiki bar, elaborately decked out as if it were a pirate ship — but Whitechapel plays the role of something more esoteric and, consequently, more jaw-dropping in its execution: an

abandoned London Tube station, circa 1890, transformed by squatting bootleggers into a secret gin clubhouse. Oh, right, *that*.

In content and form alike, Whitechapel is designed to be exhaustive: a complete time-capsule artifact, down to every crack in the vaulted train platform ceiling; a 400-plus-selection gin list, the largest in North America; and, if you choose to accept it, a rigorous educational mission in the history and nature of the great juniper-inflected spirit.

Research for the bar's decor involved visiting Victorian-era sewer facilities in England. "Air-freighting the tiles was a nightmare," says Cate, who purchased from the same British company, Fired Earth, that reproduces period-authentic tiles for the London tube.

"It's easy to say 'steampunk,' but that's not what I was going for," Cate says. "I was more interested in how the Victorians actually did valves than in a baroque fantasy of that era." The bar feels baroque nonetheless, its three rooms taking you from a train platform to a distillery — featuring astonishing copper-tube lights coursing with water and gin botanicals — to an ornate "Victorian gin palace."



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

The Classy Lassy (\$12) puts gin in quiet harmony with orange flower water, lime, a drop of bitters and a layer of egg white.

Cate seems devoted here to both theatricality and verisimilitude — in conveying the true visual intensity of his chosen setting. The layers go deep, and you won't have to encounter them if

you'd rather just order a G&T and be done with it. Everyone gets the one-page menu, but you don't encounter the 19-page cocktail list (featuring 100-ish gin cocktails) or that behemoth 400-odd-selection gin list unless you ask.

The house G&T (\$11) flows from a tap, and it's clean and balanced, but there are also Scotch, Spanish, French and Italian riffs on the G&T (\$12-\$13); the Spanish version's brassy, nutty oloroso mingles beautifully with the Fever Tree Mediterranean Tonic's bitter bite. The martini's evolution from the 1840s to 1993 is offered in 28 installments (\$11-\$18). Gin concoctions gone extinct are revived; some, like the 1930s-era Broken Spur (gin, vermouth, white port, anisette, egg yolk; \$13), perhaps should not have been.

The Classy Lassy (credited to Aviation Gin's Brooke Arthur; \$12) was recommended to me each time I visited, and with good reason: It's dreamy and rich, the gin in quiet harmony with orange flower water, lime and a drop of bitters, its top layer of egg white thick like a cappuccino. I'd steer clear of the Hippy Wallbanger (\$12), whose herbal Galliano liqueur and patchouli tincture were drowned out by too much orange juice.

The culinary allusions are no less elaborate: how to characterize dishes from the kitchen that include "brain & toast" (\$14), farmer's cheese & naan (\$15), mussels vindaloo (\$19) and the now-ubiquitous bitterballen (\$9)? Turns out, the neighborhood in which the actual Whitechapel tube station stands has been a Bangladeshi community since World War II.

"We use Bangladeshi spices as a jumping-off point," Cate says. And the Dutch (bitterballen) vibe? That's because gin was born in the Netherlands as genever before it migrated to the United Kingdom and became dry London-style gin.

If you're thinking right now that you wish you knew something about gin, Whitechapel wants to help. Led by resident "ginneseur" Keli Rivers are the Polk Street Irregulars, a gin-education club (like the rum-centric version at Smuggler's Cove) that involves downloading a dossier, authored in large part by Cate's wife, Rebecca.

The chapters begin with a primer on the juniper berry and conclude with the spirit's modern resurgence; each chapter implores you to order a certain set of educational drinks at Whitechapel. You may not ever care that the first Gin Act was repealed in 1733 (not going to explain it here), but the curriculum is fun to read and will probably help you be a more careful gin taster. Pro tip: Complete your missions on Wednesdays, when Rivers works the floor, sommelier-style, and administers quizzes to her students.

At Whitechapel there exists the possibility of having a gin epiphany. Guided by the staff, over one visit or many, you just may have a breakthrough moment of discovering the intricacies of gin, of entering some deeper chamber of flavor awareness, of eventually *getting* all of the geeky inside jokes and winks in the setting, the menu, the dossier. You may be lucky enough to catch Rivers when she's decanting a rare, aged gin and snag a taste (price not disclosed). You may, with enough time and enough of a liver, work through a tasting catalog to the point where it feels like sheer accomplishment.

But are people given the chance to appreciate all of this?

Problem is, on many nights, Whitechapel, burdened by the weight of its success, behaves as if it were a high-volume, bro-packed bar in the Marina. There's an incongruity between the exhaustively informative aim of the place — the sense that you're in a museum — and the frequent difficulty of even getting through the door.

On a recent Thursday night, the line to get in stretched so far down the block that the bouncer, estimating a wait of over an hour, advised us to cut our losses. Busy nights like these make it hard enough to flail for the bartender's attention, let alone ask her about the significance of the kopstoot. (It's a head-butt shot that you're meant to pick up with your mouth; a sufficiently difficult and awkward activity that you'll need a bartender's coaxing to do it.)

In those cases, you might end up feeling lost in a sea of gin. But then again, there are worse afflictions.

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To order: Classy Lassy (\$12), Spanish G&T (\$12), bitterballen (\$9).

Where: Whitechapel, 600 Polk St., S.F. (415) 292-5800, www.whitechapelsf.com.

When: 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. Sunday to Wednesday; 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday to Saturday.