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Aviation Gin: As American As The Hipster

by Alex M. | Nov 26, 2014 | Drink, Gin |



Any liquor origin story that begins with “Summer, 2005. A small tiki party in West Seattle. Bartender Ryan Magarian is handed a complex summer botanical infusion by a friend from Portland, Oregon.” is guaranteed to be some hipster nonsense. I mean, without a question, this is going to be some absolute hipster nonsense. That’s the opening line of the about us page for [Aviation Gin](#), produced by [House Spirits](#), a small-batch craft distillery in Portland, OR partially owned by Joe Montana. Yes, THAT Joe Montana. See? Hipster nonsense. But buried under the layers of flannel, beard, and irony is a deliciously delicate gin that eschews tradition for a decidedly colonial profile. This gin is as American as hot dogs and apple pie – brought over by poor immigrants from the motherland and reforged in the spirit of American exceptionalism and the frontier spirit until they became uniquely ours.

I had first heard of Aviation Gin from an article in possibly GQ. This was the late ‘aughts and I was just beginning my torrid love affair with gin after several years of being a function over form drinker. The article caught my attention immediately – here was a gin that was trying something new, and different. While vodkas and whiskeys and other beverages had innovators lining up in droves to take a shot at creating the next big thing, gin seemed to be left behind in its traditional form. This isn’t

surprising – until very recently, gin was a tough sell to younger drinkers. The complex botanicals, the dryness, the difficulty in mixing gin cocktails – all of these factors led to gin falling out of favor with the early-to-mid 20's crowd. And since no one drinks like a 22 year old, distilleries were following the money towards drinks that could be poured with abandon into a glass of Kool-Aid and served in fraternities and house parties to people who honestly wouldn't be able to tell a good drink from a kick in the face. So gin sat in its lonely corner, dreaming of a day when more refined palates would come to take over drinking culture.

So in about 2007, I decided I had to go out and find some of this Aviation Gin. I bought a bottle, tried it, and fell deeply in love immediately. I love traditional dry gins. I love the complexity and strength of the juniper-lead botanicals, and the way it makes you work to appreciate the subtlety of flavors. Aviation took this to a whole new level. The juniper is gone! Well, it's not gone. You can't ever get rid of the juniper if you still want to have a gin. It is, however, muted. Knocked down a notch or two. In its place, we get lavender and cardamom and sarsaparilla (oh my!) It's a flavor profile that simply couldn't exist in the old country. It's ours, definitively and distinctly.

Then something terrible happened. It seemed as though Aviation fell off the face of the planet. For years, I searched liquor stores, distributors, bars...anywhere I could think of. No one had it, no one had seen it, no one had even heard of it. I was devastated. It seemed like this fantastic distillery somehow missed out on the cocktail movement and the resurgence of gin in American culture. All of a sudden, gin was everywhere, with Hendricks leading the "new gin" revolution of milder flavors, more complexity, and more focus on the cocktail. And still Aviation was nowhere to be found. Which is a massive shame, because the updated list of botanicals makes this gin much quieter than typical London Dry-style gins. Which is good, because that makes it significantly easier to mix, and gives it a lot more versatility in the cocktail department. It begs to be combined with interesting ingredients which would normally be overpowered by the taste of Christmas. Aviation Gin could have been Hendrick's. Aviation Gin SHOULD have been Hendrick's, because quite frankly I find the focus on lavender in Aviation to be much more interesting than the focus on cucumber in Hendrick's.

But this article isn't all about the past tense and spirits long gone but fondly remembered. A few days ago, on a routine whiskey run, I discovered that my local beverage superstore (the excellent [Bottles](#))

had Aviation in stock! I picked up a bottle and ran home to fix myself a gin and tonic to relive those glory days of old. I wasn't disappointed. The gin is just as good as I remembered it being. Still flavorful, still interesting, still alluringly American in the face of British traditionalism. Unfortunately, these days it has an uphill battle. Gin has taken off in the last few years, and most bars have a pretty good selection of local, national, and international gins ranging from traditional to nouveau to pre-prohibition to "gin-in-name-only" concoctions. So as I sipped my gin and tonic, savoring the brightness of Aviation's unique formula, I worried about this particular gin being able to stand out. Seven years ago, when Aviation was one of the few companies doing anything interesting with Gin, this gin and tonic could have been a revolution. Now? It's just one more small distillery doing something interesting and different. What was unique and amazing then almost fades into the crowd today. It's still an excellent gin, but I'm no longer as sure that it's my favorite gin in the whole world. I think it still is, and I plan to keep drinking it heavily until I'm convinced one way or the other, but it's a much tougher sell.

Would I recommend buying a bottle? Absolutely. It's still a phenomenal example of gin nouveau. If you are a gin drinker, or you've been curious to try a new gin that tells tradition to suck it and focuses on this side of the Atlantic, you should absolutely buy a bottle if you can find it. But would I recommend going out and buying a case so that you never run out? Probably not. With so many wonderful craft gins already out and more coming out every day, I just can't bring myself to commit to a single bottle like I used to. Don't get me wrong, it's an EXCELLENT drink, but so are a lot of newer craft gins. So go out and get it, try it, love it, but don't limit yourself. And try the cocktail recipes Aviation provides on their website. They're generally quite interesting and well thought out.

Rating: (8)/10

(Photo credit House Spirits, Inc.)