

Oregon distillers at forefront of American gin revival

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(Photo: Courtesy of Ransom Spirits)

As a gin lover, I've long mourned the demise of this libation with a long history, replaced by high-octane vodka and its countless flavored cousins. Vodka came to epitomize everything that I hate about popular cocktail culture and the death of the martini.

But to my delight, I have discovered that gin is on an upswing. A resurgence led in part by a cadre of Oregon distillers who are gaining national attention for their New World Order gins.

Oregon gin makers are making gins in various styles including London Dry Gin, with its juniper-forward and dominant notes, New Western, with its intensely alluring aromatics, and even Old Tom Gin, with its lightly sweet and rich malty flavor and amber color.

For people who love the flavors of faraway savory and exotic spices, this new generation of gin is for you.

One of these is Ransom Old Tom Gin, made by [Ransom Spirits](#) in Sheridan. Started by Tad Seestedt in 1997 with a small life savings and maxing out his credit cards, he named the business after the debt incurred to start it. Tad was paying his own ransom to realize his dream.

"I'm a winemaker by profession. I was making brandies and eaux de vies and grape-based spirits and I realized that there were a lot of us who were passionate about brandies and eaux de vies, but Americans don't drink a lot of it. Gin is appealing to me because of the aromatics," he said. "One of the nice things about gins is you have a blank slate in the beginning and you turn it into what you want. All gins have juniper, but beyond juniper the possibilities are limitless. Coming up with a gin recipe is kind of like developing a baking recipe and you figure out what works well in combination together in baked goods."

Tad was visiting with a friend, a historian, David Wondrich, and was having lunch with him in 2006 and Wondrich suggested that Tad make an Old Tom-style gin. "We worked on it together to come up with the recipe and I released the first one in the fall of 2008," Tad said.



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Unlike most gins which are colorless, Ransom Old Tom Gin has a deep amber color that comes from being aged in barrels. "When you distill spirits, any spirit comes out clear. You can take red wine and make brandy and it will come out colorless. So to get color, you have to barrel or add color. We use cooperage and aging and that's where the brown

color comes from." Tad uses 100 percent French oak wine barrels for this and ages his Old Tom Gin three to six months.

When you drink Ransom Old Tom Gin the first time, you won't believe it's a gin, your palate and brain will think whiskey. The savory, spicy and malty notes are rich and you get lost in them. There's only a slight whiff of juniper berries.

"Most people don't realize that gin began in Holland and the British imported it," Tad said. "And the gin in Holland is like malted whiskey with juniper and botanicals added to it."

For Ransom Old Tom Gin, Tad uses the best of the best. In the distilling process, the run (alcohol that's distilled) is broken into three parts, the head is the first part and it's generally discarded because it has a small percentage of ethanol and you don't want to use that. Then there's the tail, where all of the flavors begin to taper off. In the middle there's the heart. "We use the best part of the heart. The heart of the heart. I think that really makes a really big part of the spirit. It's an extremely important part of the distillation process and has an important impact on what the flavor is like," he said.

Tad uses malted and unmalted barley, juniper berries, orange peel, lemon peel, coriander seed, cardamom pods and angelica root in making Ransom Old Tom Gin. When you taste it, you can taste the rich notes of malted barley, layers of cardamom and orange peel, and then hints of lemon and coriander, all laced with a note of juniper. It's great for sipping, used in a gin and tonic, or a Tom Collins. This gin won a gold medal in the 2013 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

For Ransom Small's Gin, this colorless gin is more in the New Western style. It's clear with a hint of juniper in the intensely floral aroma that's laced with anise. On the palate, you taste a combination of star anise, juniper berries, caraway, notes of orange and lemon, and a hint of raspberry. If you're a martini lover, go for it.

The first time I tasted [Aria Portland Dry Gin](#) was at an event in Portland organized by the 2014 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. It had won a double gold medal and it's more in the style of London Dry Gin, but co-founder Erik Martin describes it as bridging the style between London Dry and New Western style gin. "It's juniper forward, but not juniper dominant," Erik said.

"We got our start making vodka from scratch. One was made from honey under the Apia artisan vodka label and another was made from local wine under the Martin Ryan handmade vodka label," he said. "The problem was it was expensive to make, labor intensive and we were competing against other vodka makers who don't make vodka from scratch and we couldn't compete with the price point." So that project got shelved.

"Instead of another vodka, we decided to focus instead on gin. We were trying to come up with a locally made alternative to a London Dry style but not trying to copy Tanqueray and Beefeater. It took us four years and over 100 distillations to perfect a recipe," he said. When they were playing around they were looking at local gins and noticed everyone was making Western style, but not London style. "We decided to come up with something to try to bridge the styles: sippable in its own right while at the same time working well in the classic gin cocktails like in the Savoy Cocktail Book."

Aria Portland Dry Gin is clear, and the nose is not heavy on the juniper, more herbaceous and floral. On the palate, the juniper is there, but right afterward, you're filled with rich flavors of cardamom, coriander, anise and orange peel.

Another Oregon gin I tasted for this column is probably one that's more familiar with gin lovers.

Aviation American Gin is made in Portland by Christian Krogstad and Andrew Tice. It has a light juniper and floral nose. On the palate, the juniper is quickly followed by savory notes of cardamom, coriander and anise on a backbone of sarsaparilla (your brain will strain and think, hmm root beer?), hints of orange peel and layers of lavender. The editors at Wine Enthusiast magazine gave this high-flying brew a 97 rating, that's five points higher than Hendrick's and Bombay Sapphire.

Other Oregon gin makers include **Vivacity** in Corvallis, which makes Vivacity Banker's Gin and Vivacity Native Gin, **Desert Juniper Gin** in Bend, **Rogue Spruce Gin** and Pink Spruce Gin, **New Deal 33 Portland Dry Gin** and **New Deal Gin No. 1**.

Caitlin Prueitt and her husband and partner Chris Neumann released their first **Vivacity** gin in 2012. Vivacity makes two bottlings: Vivacity Banker's Gin and Vivacity Native Gin.

"I've always loved gin," Caitlin said. "I've just always loved the smell of it." Banker's gin is a traditional gin made in the London Dry style. "We named it after our banker, who loaned us the money for the equipment, the still and boiler," Caitlin said. His favorite gin was Tanqueray.

Vivacity Banker's Gin is more of a classic recipe. Caitlin described gin has having four distinct flavor profiles: juniper, herbal, spice and citrus. For Banker's, besides juniper, the herbal notes come from coriander, spice notes come from grains of paradise, and citrus notes come from grapefruit peel.

Native Gin grew out of Caitlin's desire to look at botanicals in the area, so it's mostly native ingredients. Those include hops, hazelnuts and myrtle leaf and handpicked Oregon grapes and juniper berries from the Cascades.

Vivacity also has the rare distinction of being one of a handful of Oregon craft distillers that are owned and run by women.

If you're a gin lover, you should definitely make room in your bar for a few of these excellent specimens. And if you're not because you're not wild about juniper, give one of Tad's Ransom gins a try. You just might be surprised.

Victor Panichkul is food, wine and beer columnist for the Statesman Journal but will occasionally venture into the spirit realm. Reach him at (503) 399-6704, Vpanichkul@StatesmanJournal.com, Facebook.com/WillametteValleyFoodWine and on Twitter @TasteofOregon.

Take the gin plunge

Want to try them before taking the plunge and purchasing a bottle? Head to Table 508 where Rob Melton stocks Aria, Ransom Small's Gin, Ransom's Old Tom Gin and Aviation. You can also try the Gin Through Time flight at Archive Coffee and Bar that includes Bols Genever, Ransom Old Tom and Aria.

Table 508: 508 State Street, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 4 to 11 p.m. Saturday

Archive Coffee and Bar: 7 a.m. to midnight daily

Vivacity: Will be pouring samples at Salem Center Mall next to Ross, noon to 9 p.m. Thursday through Sunday Dec. 10 through 14.