



## How Ryan Magarian Made the Leap from Bartender to Spirits Innovator

Liz Blood / Feb. 17, 2016



Ryan Magarian contributed his expertise developed through years behind the bar to the creation of Aviation Gin. Photo courtesy of Ryan Magarian.

Aviation Gin was born of a partnership between brand and bartender. The brand, House Spirits Distillery, began in 2004 with the intention of making whiskey. The bartender, Ryan Magarian, started his career working at Club Med — “Of all places,” he says.

Because whiskey is expensive and time-consuming to make, House Spirits Distillery commenced with vodka and then branched out into making small batches of gin. In 2005, Magarian was at a backyard party and a buddy handed him a gin and tonic, made with House Spirits’ summer gin. “I was captivated by the idea of a seasonal gin,” says Magarian. “To my knowledge at that point, gin was a one-dimensional experience.”

This wasn't the case for long.

Magarian asked to be introduced to the summer gin’s makers and after a few hours of sharing passions — theirs for making craft spirits with a regionally creative bent and Magarian’s for making high-quality craft cocktails and developing recipes — the meeting culminated in an agreement to partner together on a gin.

That gin was (and still is) named Aviation Gin. House Spirits and Magarian refer to it as a “new western gin,” a term they coined, which has grown in popularity as more non-traditional gins that

allow botanicals to play a larger role than traditional, juniper-focused gins, are made. “The name made waves. Now it’s a universally utilized term that describes gins that speak with a balance of botanicals versus a dictatorship of juniper.”

The gin’s name, Aviation, wasn’t just pulled out of a hat either. “In 2003, I had the Aviation cocktail for the first time, made with gin, maraschino, and lemon — the Savoy Hotel recipe — without crème de violette,” says Magarian. “For me, it was a gateway drug to the gin category. The experience made me want to name the gin ‘Aviation.’ It was me remembering that cocktail as being a life-changer in my journey. I hoped that our gin would be a life-changing experience for others.” Many must find it life-changing enough, as Aviation Gin can be found worldwide, from restaurants in Portland, Ore. to backbars in Jakarta, Indonesia.

To both House Spirits and Magarian’s knowledge, this successful partnership was the first of its kind. “There was a growing connection between bartenders and brands, where brands would align with notable bartenders and those bartenders became ambassadors,” says Magarian. “But no one has refuted that we created the authentic partnership of half-distiller, half-bartender.” Magarian looks forward to the day “that there are enough bartender-made spirits you could have an entire wall of them. And we’re moving that way.”

Magarian credits his success in the spirits industry in part to his early years as a bartender, and later time spent as a cocktail consultant. But in equal proportion to those work experiences was Magarian’s dedication to his craft. “I saw cocktails as my future and security, so I managed myself like a business.” He was also as fearless as he was professional. “The toughest parts were in making mega-leaps from areas in which I had expertise to those that I didn’t, like from bartending to making gin.” To him, being focused, tenacious, and diving in one day at a time are all key.

When I interviewed Ryan Magarian, there were two questions I really wanted to ask him. First, a little context. Magarian is a co-owner/creator of Oven and Shaker, a pizza restaurant and bar, and Hamlet, a cocktail-and-swine-centric restaurant — both in Portland.

What links your bartending, your restaurants, and your gin?

“The common thread is a desire to create really healthy, exciting opportunities for people with which to refresh. It’s also about pushing boundaries in beverages and businesses, from both an intellectual and recreational point of view and to build quality, intellectual experiences that help people enjoy themselves. Whatever you create, make sure you’re contributing to the intellectual space, the larger narrative. Create new ideas that can be shared.”

And, because pizza is my favorite food, I had to ask:

If I walked into your bar and ordered a pizza, but didn’t know what to drink, what would you serve me?

“The Corleone. It’s made with muddled green grapes, Aviation gin, grappa, fresh lemon juice, simple syrup, and orange bitters. It’s called The Corleone because it’s meant to be the liquified version of the Sicilian countryside: floral and dry.”

Sign me up.