

bon appétit

A BOTTLE IN FRONT OF ME

Watch Out, Vodka: Gin's Going Top-Shelf

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Bon Appetit Restaurant and Drinks Editor Andrew Knowlton has a lot of bottles of booze in front of him. In this column he goes through them, one by one.



We all know books shouldn't be judged by their covers, and the same holds true for bottles of booze. You could pour me a glass of bourbon out of a repurposed pickle jar, and as long as it tasted good (and you got all the pickle juice out beforehand), I'd be a happy man. But every once in a while, the packaging actually has a story of its own.

Aviation Gin, made by the Portland-based House Spirits, is one of the brands that defined the new style of American gins that sprung up in the past ten years, mellowing out the classic juniper punch of a London Dry (like Tanqueray) with gentler botanical and citrus elements. Aviation is still a bartender favorite across the country, and if it hadn't gotten off the ground in 2006, bottles like [the Spring 44 that I reviewed last year](#) probably wouldn't be around today.

And in March of this year, Aviation got a new bottle. Coming from a bigger company, this kind of update would qualify as just another rebrand attempt, but for Aviation, this is a big capital investment (custom glass molds don't come cheap), and a step up into the big leagues. The original Aviation came in what looked like a clear wine bottle, with just a simple label to let you know what was going on inside--now, it's a serious design object, with an Art Deco vibe, a unique shape, and even a logo cast into the glass itself. This is not the bottle of an upstart distillery.

I called Christian Krogstad, the founder and head distiller at House Spirits, to get some confirmation on my guesses about where Aviation is heading. "When we came out with Aviation, six years ago now, we were really a regional distillery," he told me, with 90 percent of their sales in Oregon and Washington state. Today, though, you can get Aviation all around the country (and even overseas), so, as Krogstad said, "you can't be present at every spot, and you can't expect retailers to even read the information that we've sent them, so the bottle has to speak for the brand." The new bottle had been in the works for two years, as House Spirits brought in new investors and partners (including former NFL star Joe Montana, who Krogstad says is "actively involved," and "is an insightful businessman--you can tell he paid attention in class at Notre Dame"), which helped fund this kind of overhaul.

Krogstad described the bottle's new design as going for "the between-the-wars, golden age of the cocktail, golden age of aviation, Chrysler Building sort of look," but added that the redesign served some practical purposes, too. Aviation began as a collaboration between Krogstad and bartender Ryan Magarian, so has always been made with the working bartender in mind. The ridges along the back of the new bottle match up with the '30s Streamline aesthetic, but also make it easy to grip behind the bar, and they made sure that the boxier shape was still the right size to fit in a standard speed rail.

Aviation is the first of the new American Gins to take the redesign leap, but the British brand Plymouth Gin changed its packaging to a squatter, more artisanal-looking bottle last year. With both of these moves, and the reintroduction of Tanqueray Malacca just last month, I think we're starting to see a real top-shelfing of gin: even casual drinkers have started recognizing the higher-end bottles on the market. Lucky for us, though, the Aviation redesign hasn't upped the price--you can still find a bottle in most places for around \$30.