

June 12, 2012

Take On Summer With Gin From Experienced Hands

By ERIC ASIMOV

GROW your own, brew your own, butcher your own, ferment your own. This has been the mantra of the do-it-yourself ethos in pursuit of authentic flavors and pleasures uncorrupted by corporate or other intrusive interests. Distill your own was never far behind.

Small distilleries have proliferated throughout the United States in the last 10 years. They've made any number of applejacks and fruit brandies, whiskeys and eaux de vie. But no spirit seems to have captured the imagination of these small distillers more than gin has.


Tasting Report

The panel tasted gins. Click on each name in the list below to see its label, rating and more information.

1. [BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS](#) 
2. [THE NEW YORK DISTILLING COMPANY](#)
3. [THE ANCHOR DISTILLING COMPANY](#)
4. [PHILADELPHIA DISTILLING](#)
5. [FINGER LAKES DISTILLING](#)
6. [DEATH'S DOOR SPIRITS GIN; MIDDLETON, WIS.](#)
7. [GREENHOOK GINSMITHS](#)
8. [BREUCKELEN DISTILLING](#)
9. [SPRING 44 GIN; LOVELAND, COLO.](#)
10. [GREAT LAKES DISTILLERY](#)

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

 Best Value

Ah, gin. Brisk, peppery gin. Once, it epitomized summer elegance. It was the cool-breeze component of martinis and gimlets, rickeys and slings, fizzes and Collinses. It was the soothing tonic that helped the quinine go down. It was yardarms and pastel sunsets.

Then the ground trembled and the sky darkened. Along came the devil, I mean vodka, and gin was forsaken in favor of — What? No flavor? No aroma? No character? Well, that's vodka for you: a bland, neutral cipher. Gin's cocktails became vodka's cocktails, championed by those who ought to have known better, consumed by the masses who had no idea what a martini was, much less a yardarm.

And yet, great gins abound. Unlike the craft-brewing movement, spurred 35 years ago by the poverty of the mass-market beer selection, small distillers faced no such desperation. If anything, consumers are blessed with a profusion of superb, distinctive gins in many guises that are widely available, among them the elegant, graceful Plymouth; the crisp, proper Tanqueray; the classic Beefeaters and Boodles; and the more exotic Citadelle and Hendrick's.

Even inexpensive standbys like Seagram's Extra Dry and Gordon's London Dry are pretty good, though I submit you will not find a better gin than Plymouth for enjoying a martini with a summer sunset.

Even so, the vodka blitzkrieg required action. In the last third of the 20th century, gin sales plummeted as vodka sales accelerated. The big spirits companies fought back by trying to duplicate vodka's success, using high-budget branding, marketing and positioning. While they emphasized packaging and status, they also toyed with the classic, predominantly juniper flavor profile of gin. High-end brand extensions like Bombay Sapphire and Tanqueray No. 10 aimed at a new audience by infusing the standard gin palette with a range of related but unconventional spices and herbs.

These efforts have been modestly successful, though they have done nothing to slow vodka's ascendancy. According to the Distilled Spirits Council, a trade group, sales of vodka in the United States have risen steadily to around 62 million cases in 2011, from about 39 million in 2002. Sales of gin, however, have been static, hovering around 11 million cases a year. The one area of encouraging growth has been at the highest end, in the super-premium category, which was up 24 percent in 2011 compared with in 2002.

The output of the new, small distilleries amounts to no more than a trickle. Like so many in the cocktail renaissance, many of them have rejected vodka as hopelessly square and dull while embracing gin as complex and distinctive. Perhaps, too, they have a historical appreciation for gin, just as the cocktail connoisseurs embraced the nearly forgotten rye whiskey and, in an earlier generation, craft brewers resurrected moribund styles of beer.

They have practical reasons to focus on gin as well. Whiskeys and brandies, and sometimes even rums, generally require distillers to put the spirits into barrels to age. The expense of production and storage without a significant return on investment is simply not feasible for small start-up distillers.

That leaves vodka and gin, two spirits that are perpetually at odds yet ever intertwined. Vodka is easier to make — hold that thought — yet fails the hipness test. So for small distillers who want to make names (and possibly profits) for themselves, and do that immediately, gin is the thing.

To get a sense of what these small distilleries are doing, the spirits panel recently tasted 20 bottles of gin, all made in the United States, mostly by distilleries that have started in just the last few years. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by our colleague Julia Moskin, for whom gin has long been a favorite spirit, and [David Wondrich](#), the cocktail historian and author.

Though gin has been blown out of the market by vodka, it nonetheless depends on it. You cannot have gin without vodka. Vodka is neutral spirits. It can be distilled from practically anything. Most is distilled from grain, but you can also find it made from grapes, potatoes and plenty of other materials. Regardless of the base, the point is to distill the distinctiveness out of the vodka, rendering a spirit of aloof purity.

While that is the end result of vodka, it's just the beginning with gin. The vast majority of gins, modeled on the prevailing style known as London Dry, are essentially vodka that has been infused, steeped or otherwise flavored with botanicals, that is, herbs, spices and fruit essences. The traditional flavorings begin with juniper, which gives gin its bracing burst of cool. Other classic flavorings include coriander, licorice, citrus zest and angelica: pretty much anything you'd find in a witch's brew, though individual recipes are generally guarded as zealously as the formula for Coca-Cola.

If the preparations have a medicinal ring, it is not without reason. Gin was invented in the 17th century by a Dutch doctor seeking a cure for kidney disorders. It took some time to earn its reputation for elegance. In its early days, it was the drink of the British working class, and it was not until the mid-19th century, after producers like Beefeater and Boodles shaped the flavor of modern gin, that upper classes adopted it. Even so, gin has fought off less flattering sobriquets, like "gin soaked" and the Prohibition-era bathtub gin.

Most of the new American gins are in the London Dry style, though many of the distillers, perhaps reserving the right to be creative, call their gins American Dry. Given the fondness for rare and bygone styles, it would not surprise me to see American distillers take a crack at genever, a staple of the Netherlands rarely seen in the United States, which offers a sort of malty edge that is very different from London Dry, and a sweetened gin known as Old Tom.

As with vodkas, most big gin producers buy their neutral spirits from huge distilleries rather than making it themselves. But that is not the way of the small gin producers, who do it themselves. Three of the 20 distillers in our tasting are based in Brooklyn, and a fourth, though situated elsewhere, calls its gin Brooklyn, for all that connotes nowadays.

Regardless of where the gins came from, the collection offered a clear lesson: making gin is not for amateurs. The best of the big gins, like Beefeater, Plymouth and Tanqueray, are excellent and beautifully integrated. They seem to achieve their signature complex blends almost effortlessly. Except for our favorites, the small-producer gins seemed far more labored.

“Gin is the hardest spirit to make well,” David said. “It’s hard to get the balance of these things right.”

The evidence bore him out. Too many of the gins seemed out of balance, dominated by one flavor: too sweet, too floral, too sweaty, too vegetative or simply harsh and artificial tasting. It reminded me of the early days of craft brewing, when so many brewpubs that talked a great game were unable to deliver. A shakeout was inevitable, and those that could not improve fell by the wayside.

So, the question has to be asked: If the last third of the 20th century was cruel to gin, has the beginning of the 21st been crueler still?

We’ll know in a few decades. Meanwhile, the matter of yardarms remains. Few things speak of summer like gin, whether at the beach or on the deck, lazing on the balcony or on a tarpaper roof, gazing out the window or merely settling back and putting your feet up. Vodka favors complacency, but gin offers a stylish infusion. By all means, toast the season with a Collins, fizz or gimlet. And let it be gin.

Tasting Report

BEST VALUE

Berkshire Mountain Distillers, \$28, ***

Greylock Gin; Great Barrington, Mass., 40%

Light, subtle and complex, dominated by classic flavors of juniper, citrus and coriander.

The New York Distilling Company, \$33, ***

Dorothy Parker American Gin; Brooklyn, 44%

Brisk, bright and pungent, with citrus and herbal flavors; not classic, but intriguing.

The Anchor Distilling Company, \$32, ***

Junipero Gin; San Francisco, 49.5%

Clean, dry and classic gin; botanical flavors and a slight alcohol burn.

Philadelphia Distilling, \$36, ** 1/2

Bluecoat American Dry Gin; Philadelphia, 47%

Smooth, bracing and straightforward with a touch of heat.

Finger Lakes Distilling, \$29, ** 1/2

Seneca Drums Gin; Burdett, N.Y., 43%

Complex and slightly sweet, with spicy, earthy flavors and a bit of vanilla.

Death’s Door Spirits Gin; Middleton, Wis., \$36, **

47%

Flavors of juniper and licorice; a little sweet.

Greenhook Ginsmiths, \$30, **

American Dry Gin; Brooklyn, 47%

Unusual combination of cucumber, juniper and salty flavors.

Breuckelen Distilling, \$30, **

Glorious Gin; Brooklyn, 45%

Smells like potpourri, with flavors of root beer, anise and wintergreen.

Spring 44 Gin; Loveland, Colo., \$25, **

40%

Very busy, with smooth, spicy flavors of cloves and ginger.

Great Lakes Distillery, \$38, **

Rehorst Premium Milwaukee Gin; Milwaukee, 44%

Savory, with aromas of lemon, lime, root beer and witch hazel.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 12, 2012

A previous version of this article misstated the number of cases of vodka and gin sold in recent years, expressing sales in the thousands.

In 2011, 62 million cases of vodka were sold; 39 million cases in 2002. Sales of gin are steady at around 11 million cases a year.