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ISSUE 21 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2009
WWW.IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM

\$4.95 US/\$5.95 CAN



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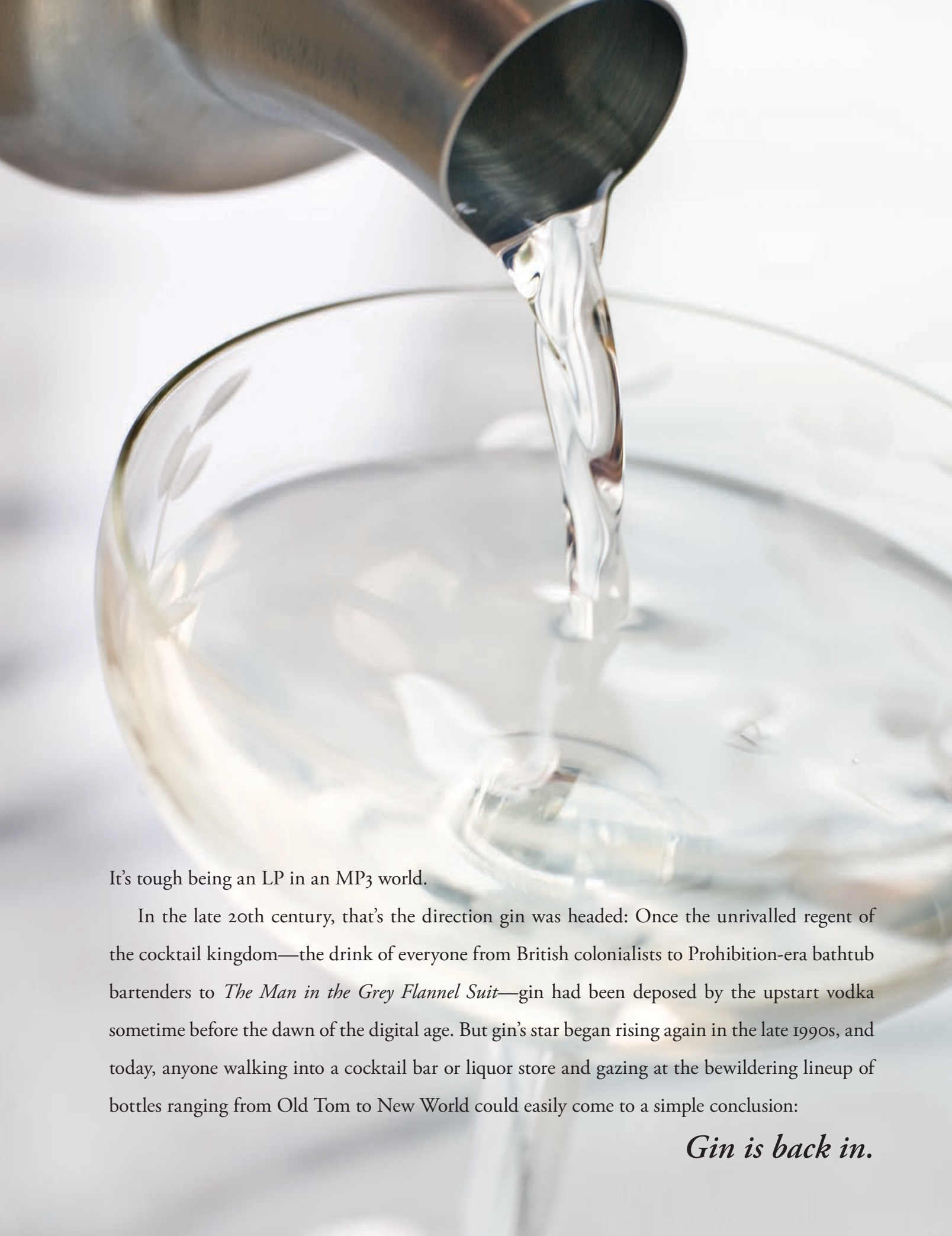


ginning things up

Story by PAUL CLARKE

Photos by STUART MULLENBERG

*A new crop of distillers
is giving an
old-fashioned spirit
a modern makeover*



It's tough being an LP in an MP3 world.

In the late 20th century, that's the direction gin was headed: Once the unrivalled regent of the cocktail kingdom—the drink of everyone from British colonialists to Prohibition-era bathtub bartenders to *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*—gin had been deposed by the upstart vodka sometime before the dawn of the digital age. But gin's star began rising again in the late 1990s, and today, anyone walking into a cocktail bar or liquor store and gazing at the bewildering lineup of bottles ranging from Old Tom to New World could easily come to a simple conclusion:

Gin is back in.

At its simplest definition, gin is merely flavored vodka. But by distilling neutral spirits in the company of botanicals ranging from the classic—such as lemon peel, cardamom and licorice—to the innovative—such as cucumber, rose petals and rosemary—distillers can craft a spirit of unique power and beauty. As long as the basic legal requirements are met—that the gin is created using neutral spirits and is flavored with juniper berries—gin is, in many ways, the ultimate blank canvas for a distiller.

“If you look at what goes into gin, there’s a lot of room to be creative,” says Marc Bernhard, owner of Pacific Distillery in Woodinville, Washington, and creator of Voyager Gin, which debuted last November. Bernhard says gin is an appealing product for startup distillers because it’s so approachable. “The ingredients to make gin are fairly readily available to a distiller, and you can make it one day and bottle it the next.” There’s only one catch, he adds: “It’s easy to make gin. It’s more difficult to make it really good.”

For consumers, discerning a good gin from a mediocre one is only one of the questions that can arise about what’s already a pretty confusing spirit. The name “gin” encompasses everything from malty Dutch genevers, such as Bols, to classic juniper-assertive London Drys, such as Tanqueray and Beefeater, as well as savory spirits, such as Martin Miller’s Gin and DH Krahn, and citrus-forward gins, such as No. 209 Gin and Bluecoat. Then there are the category-jumpers, such as the soft and versatile Plymouth, and category-benders, such as the roses- and cucumber-forward Hendrick’s. With so many styles, the world of gin can be intoxicatingly diverse—or maddeningly Byzantine, depending on your perspective.

With around 11 million cases of gin sold each year in the U.S., the demand for the spirit has remained relatively constant since 2002. But during this same time, more than 40 new brands have appeared in liquor stores, many of them produced by fledgling distillers. While it’s tempting to try to categorize or cluster these new gins based on their ingredients or flavor profiles, or simply on the basis of their newness, imposing an enduring taxonomy on these contemporary gins creates more questions than it does answers. “Saying ‘New Generation’ gin is about as useful as saying ‘New World’ wine,” says Zane Harris, co-owner of Rob Roy in Seattle. “Just naming it doesn’t make it different.” Harris recommends avoiding the temptation to make each gin fit under a semantic label; instead, view them as points on a continuum, ranging from herbaceous to savory to floral to citric. With the flood of new gins continually entering the market, it’s helpful to have an approach that’s as flexible as the creativity of the distillers.

reviving madame geneva

Gin’s past is no less complicated than its present. Born as *genever* (from the French *genévrier*, or “juniper”), the spirit spread from its ancestral home in the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France to Great Britain in the late 17th century. In beer-drinking England, the cheap spirit known variously as “Madame Geneva,” “Blue Ruin” or simply “gin” became dangerously popular, especially among the poorer classes, prompting laws to regulate production and sale, starting with the Gin Act in 1736.

Over time, gin evolved: The rich, malty genever style gave way to the sweet Old Tom style, which was faddishly popular in the late 19th century and then all but disappeared in the 20th, when it was in turn eclipsed by drier, crisper gins. These include Plymouth, a style of gin named for the city that is its sole place of production, and London Dry, defined by its crispness and strong juniper presence balanced by other ingredients, such as lemon peel, orris root, licorice and other botanicals.

It wasn’t until the late 20th century—as the vodka tsunami engulfed the world of cocktails—that gin began to dramatically change again. Large-scale distillers added brand extensions, such as Tanqueray Ten and Bombay Sapphire, in an effort to appeal to the vodka crowd with flavors that were softer and rounder, with less of juniper’s assertive character. At the same time, other distillers started pushing boundaries with new ingredients, styles and production methods; still others began reinterpreting the classic styles of gin.



don bruno

In the Don Bruno, Zane Harris uses the rich tangy flavor of sherry vinegar to counter the sweetness of St. Germain elderflower liqueur. Harris recommends Martin Miller's Gin as a good match for the fragrant orange-peel garnish. "It has a great peppery aroma that cuts right through the citrus peel," Harris says.

2 oz. gin

¼ oz. St. Germain

¼ oz. Don Bruno sherry vinegar

Cracked ice

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: cocktail

Garnish: orange twist

Fill mixing glass with ice. Rinse ice with vinegar and drain excess. Add gin and St. Germain and stir well. Strain into chilled glass. Twist wide piece of orange peel over drink, and drop into glass as garnish.

Zane Harris, Rob Roy, Seattle

tom & genny

While new gins proliferate in liquor stores at a pace envied by kudzu and bunnies, some of these newcomers aren't all that new. Two styles from gin's early days have been revitalized in recent years.

Genever is the Dutch ancestor of modern gin. Rich and malty, and often aged in wood, genever—sometimes called Holland gin—is a complex spirit that is aromatic with savory botanicals and has a flavor often compared to that of unaged whiskey. While still commonly enjoyed in the Netherlands, genever hasn't been widely consumed in the United States since the mid-to-late 19th century, when it was considered an essential ingredient in American bars.

Until recently, what little demand there was for genever was sated by brands such as Boomsma and Zuidam, which have limited distribution. But in late 2008, Bols—one of the more prominent makers of genever—launched a new formulation of its venerable product based on a recipe nearly 200 years old. This new/old gin was quickly embraced by bartenders across the country, including Eric Alperin, who serves it in classics, such as the Improved Gin Cocktail, as well as in new creations, such as the apricot- and amaro-laced Skid Row. "It's the grandfather of all gin," Alperin says. "People have this conception of what gin is, but genever is so heavy and malty that when you serve it to them, they say, 'Whoa, what is that?'"

By the late 19th century, genever had been eclipsed in popularity by Old Tom, a style of sweetened gin that is rich and heavy like genever but has many flavor similarities with today's London Dry gins and is considered by some as the "missing link" in gin's evolution. Old Tom was the hot spirit of the Gilded Age and was the gin used in classic drinks, such as the Princeton and the Martinez, a precursor to the Martini.

After dipping close to extinction in the 20th century, Old Tom has found new fans in the 21st. The sweet, gentle Hayman's Old Tom appeared in American bars in 2008, and earlier this year the lightly aged Ransom Old Tom—distilled in Portland, Oregon, and created in consultation with drink historian David Wondrich—began showing up in bars in the Pacific Northwest, with wider distribution expected by the end of the year.

skid row

Eric Alperin created this genever-based drink for a cocktail competition. Matching genever's rich maltiness with the flavors of apricot liqueur and the Italian bitter liqueur Ramazzotti, the Skid Row is an intricately flavored drink.

2 oz. Bols genever

½ oz. apricot liqueur (Alperin uses Rothman & Winter Orchard Apricot Liqueur)

½ oz. Ramazzotti

1 dash Fee Brothers Orange Bitters

Cracked ice

Glass: coupe or cocktail

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Garnish: flamed orange twist

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and stir well with cracked ice. Strain into chilled glass. Using a lit match, briefly warm the outer surface of a wide orange twist before squeezing the peel so that the flaming oil sprays onto the surface of the drink. Drop into drink to garnish.

Eric Alperin, The Varnish, Los Angeles



One of the brands that appeared at that time, and that is now gaining a wider audience in the United States, is Martin Miller's. Introduced in the United Kingdom in 1999, Martin Miller's Gin is distilled in the U.K. and brought to bottle proof using water from Iceland. In addition to the original 80-proof version, Martin Miller's also makes a Westbourne Strength, introduced in 2002, which weighs in at 90-proof and has a slightly revised proportion of botanicals.

Created by Miller and a team that included creative director David Bromige, the gin was inspired—if that's the right word for it—by an absurdly bad Gin and Tonic Miller was served at a London bar. "He was poking around at this horrible slice of sort of artificial lemon and ranting lyrically about how poor the quality of the Gin and Tonic was, and he asked, 'Why can't you make a gin?'" says Bromige, who at the time was working with Miller as a vodka distiller. "We thought it'd be a limited edition, or [that] we'd wind up with a lifetime supply for ourselves. So we made it very much along the lines of a project: What's the Rolls Royce way of making gin?"

Miller's team arrived at a recipe that has a very clean aroma and flavor, with a savory herbaceousness. "They add a level of peppery spiciness that you don't find in a typical London Dry style," Harris says. "It adds a savory depth that falls in between a London Dry style such as Beefeater and the more citrus-oriented Plymouth style."

Some distillers see many contemporary gins as going too far in their pursuit of vodka drinkers, stripping away the flavor that is a big part of gin's charm. Denver distiller Todd Leopold recognized this trend when he and his brother, Scott, were designing their eponymous gin, and planted his flag firmly in the juniper-forward camp. "At the time we released our gin in 2002, a lot of the gins that were out there were being lightened up to make them taste a bit more like vodka," Leopold says. "They also tended to hide the juniper with a lot of citrus. I wanted to make sure the juniper was prominent."

Leopold's American Small-Batch Gin is not a simple copy of traditional gins, though. Using ingredients that include hand-zested Valencia oranges and pummelo, Leopold distills each botanical separately so he can retrieve the desired flavor notes, and then blends the distillates together. Leopold says this process is especially worthwhile when handling juniper berries, which can contribute a tannic astringency in a typical gin distillation; by distilling them on their own, he's able to capture the juniper's crisp sweetness. "Distilling the botanicals separately means we can make bolder flavors, and a lot of bartenders like that because the flavors don't get lost," Leopold says. "It also rounds out the flavor—the mouthfeel is a bit fuller than you'd get from a traditional London Dry."

When he was designing Voyager Gin, Marc Bernhard at Pacific Distillery aimed to remain true to the London Dry tradition without overwhelming the gin with the flavor of juniper. "When you talk to people about gin, especially people who don't have much experience with it, they say it's like eating a pine tree," he says. "I wanted to avoid that. I wanted something in the London Dry style that a lot of vodka drinkers would find flavorful, but I didn't want to just copy Tanqueray or Bombay—they're already there, they already have their fans."

After working his way through 24 small prototype batches, Bernhard arrived at a botanical combination that has the crisp snap of a classic London Dry but that balances the juniper's directness with a citric tang and follows it with a light yet rich licorice finish, giving the gin a satisfying depth of flavor.

In Sheffield, Massachusetts, Berkshire Mountain Distillers owner Chris Weld decided to take gin in two distinct directions. Last year Weld introduced Greylock Gin, an 80-proof spirit that Weld says was crafted to be embraced by gin novices. "It's really approachable for people who aren't real gin lovers of the Beefeater type, but it has enough body and character that gin lovers would love it, too," he says.

But Weld recognized that there were parts of the cocktail world that wanted something more ambitious; to that end, he introduced Ethereal Gin last May and designed the 86-proof spirit for true gin aficionados. "I wanted it to go to 11," Weld says, whose barrier-pushing sentiment was shared by some of his regular customers, such as Boston bartenders Jackson Cannon (Eastern Standard) and John Gertsen (Drink).

know your gin

Aviation

Soft, rich and fragrant with cardamom and lavender, this distinctive spirit from Portland, Oregon, works particularly well in cocktails that include fresh citrus. \$28, drinkupny.com

Beefeater 24

Large and venerable gin distillers are also actively creating new gins. Beefeater introduced its 24 last spring; it features botanicals including grapefruit and two types of tea to create a gin that is dry and herbal, with tannic citrus tones and a subdued juniper profile.

\$29, sfwtc.com

Blue Gin

Vegetal and robust, with a prominent juniper character folded into cascading layers of savory spice, Blue Gin is an ambitious, masterful spirit made by Austrian distiller Hans Reisetbauer. \$40, drinkupny.com

Bols Genever

With the growing interest in gin, it's not surprising that what's old is becoming new again. Such is the case with Bols Genever, reintroduced last year to much fanfare. Based on an almost 200-year-old recipe, this spirit has a sweet, malty character that is richly aromatic and closer in flavor to an unaged whisky than to a London Dry gin. \$44, drinkupny.com

Cadenhead's Old Raj Dry Gin

Many contemporary gins are mild and unassuming; then there's Old Raj. At 110 proof, it's bold and assertive, with a spicy flavor laced with saffron; a very memorable Martini gin. \$49, drinkupny.com

Citadelle Reserve

Matured for six months in used Cognac casks, this light-yellow gin is aromatic and oaky, with a woody character similar to that of Chardonnay but a floral presence that keeps it firmly in the gin camp. \$32, drinkupny.com

DH Krahn

Bearing a delicate aroma but a full-bodied flavor, this gin has a sweet herbal center that's light on the juniper and tinged with ginger and licorice. \$26, drinkupny.com

Greylock

A relative newcomer to the scene, Greylock has a floral aroma pricked with juniper and a lightly sweet, well-balanced flavor spanning from lemon peel to licorice, all surrounding a juniper center. \$32, anconaswine.com

Leopold's American Small Batch

The aroma is bold and citrusy, with strong touches of bitter orange and pummelo, and the flavor rounds out with the richness of anise and the gentle sweetness of juniper. \$37, klwines.com

Martin Miller's London Dry

This gin ventures further into the savory realm, with an herbal sweetness touched with black pepper, orange peel and cassia. The Westbourne Strength London Dry Gin (\$35, samswine.com) has a savory foundation leaning to floral, with notes of lime peel and nutmeg. \$28, drinkupny.com

No. 209

With a crisp aroma and a bright, citrusy flavor, this is an easy-to-embrace gin for those starting to explore the spirit, but it has enough complexity to appeal to longtime gin drinkers as well. \$38, wallywine.com

Plymouth English Gin

Easy to love, and considered a must-have gin by many bartenders. A crisp coriander-citrus aroma leads to a full spectrum of citrus and savory botanicals, such as caraway and orris root. \$26, drinkupny.com

Port of Barcelona

Taking its flavor in a different direction than the juniper-heavy varieties, with a crisp, astringent dryness filled out by a sweet, floral character, with notes of chocolate, ginger, almonds and hazelnuts. \$31, drinkupny.com

Voyager Single-Batch

Voyager starts off lightly floral, but it's no shrinking violet. The aroma is crisp and clean, hinting at grapefruit, but the flavor is rich and vegetal, with the juniper center supported by a luscious licorice base. \$31, drinkupny.com

Ransom Old Tom

One of the newest gins on the market is resolutely old school. Aged in oak and the color of young whiskey, Ransom has a rich, spicy flavor, with a lean juniper profile laced with orange peel and cardamom. \$36, infinespirits.com

"They were looking for a little stronger, almost pre-Prohibition style of gin with a bit more oomph in it."

Whereas Greylock is flavored with seven botanicals, including orris, orange and cinnamon, Ethereal is flavored with 14, including black pepper, nutmeg and spearmint. Both of Weld's gins are created using a gin hat—a basket-type device that suspends the botanicals in the still so the alcohol vapors can pass through them and absorb their flavors as the neutral spirit is heated—but Ethereal is distilled with fresh botanicals three times, giving it a more assertive flavor.

Another recently introduced gin with a distinctive botanical design is Port of Barcelona. Produced in Spain by American distiller Bryan Alexander Davis, Port of Barcelona has a rich, creamy heaviness that contrasts with the more typical clean-and-crisp gin profile. This is the result of using a botanical mix that includes a large quantity of sweet almonds, which contribute a rich, chocolaty character to the spirit, and of distilling the gin in the same still Davis uses to create Obsello Absinthe, which Davis says tweaks the gin's viscosity and flavor. Both techniques were discovered almost by accident, but Davis says he embraces them as a way to stake out new territory for Port of Barcelona in an increasingly crowded gin market. "I realized that the gin brands you see growing are unconventional," Davis says. "So [my gin] should be as unconventional as humanly possible."

While bartenders and gin drinkers are finding many things to like in these contemporary gins, none of the distillers has the production capacity—or the desire—to attempt to change the global gin market on their own. "We don't have any PowerPoint presentations with plans for world domination," Bromige says. "Not even in our dreams."

in the mix

With its crispness of flavor and compatibility with a wide range of ingredients, gin is in many ways the perfect base for a cocktail. "It has botanicals going on that work well with the flavor of other ingredients you use," says Eric Alperin, co-owner of The Varnish in Los Angeles. "Especially with the new gins coming out, you have a much larger range to play with. You have some wonderful flavors that push your other flavors forward—it really rounds out the whole experience."

For the gin-curious, Harris recommends cocktails bright with fresh citrus, such as a minty Southside, a raspberry-rich Clover Club or a modern classic, such as the Bramble, flavored with blackberry liqueur. Alperin likes to introduce people to gin by serving it in the mint-and-ginger inflected Gin-Gin Mule, and in the Southside's close relative, the Eastside, which adds fresh cucumber to the mix. "Throw some cucumber in there and some mint, and you're gonna hit a home run," Alperin says. "It doesn't cover up the flavor of gin, but the mint and the cucumber latch on to the botanicals. It's almost like the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down—it works in much the same way to get people accustomed to gin."

Not surprising for a spirit that's served as the base for some of the most enduring cocktails, gin also functions beautifully in drinks that play its lacework array of botanicals against complex-flavored ingredients, such as vermouth, absinthe and herbal liqueurs. Alperin recommends a Turf Cocktail, which incorporates absinthe, maraschino liqueur and orange bitters into the basic dry Martini formula, along with intricately flavored drinks such as the Angel Face, which mixes it with applejack and apricot liqueur and which Alperin describes as a good "bridge" cocktail for those seeking more complex-flavored gin drinks. Harris recommends a classic Martinez, made with Old Tom gin, along with the Alaska, which combines dry gin with the vegetal complexity of yellow Chartreuse.

And one of the best ways to test a gin's nuances and character is by taking it for a test drive in a classic Martini, using a good-quality fresh vermouth; Alperin recommends the 1930s approach, which calls for two parts gin to one part vermouth, with a dash of orange bitters. While his preferred Martini gins are Beefeater and Plymouth, Alperin says the choice of gin is largely subjective, and is dependent in part on the brand of vermouth. "In a London Dry like Beefeater, you get a lot more juniper attack, while with Plymouth you get more earth tones," Alperin says. "It just depends on what palate you're serving."

While vodka is firmly entrenched in today's bars, gin is looking better than it has in decades. For Todd Leopold, the choice for tipplers looking for drinks that taste good is obvious. "With gin," he says, "there's a lot more *there* there." ■



■ Try more delicious gin cocktails, including the Eastside and the Stone Fruit Sour.
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turf cocktail

There are several versions of the Turf Cocktail, the oldest dating back more than a century. This version, adapted for modern palates from Harry Johnson's Bartenders' Manual, ramps up the herbal elegance of a standard dry Martini with touches of maraschino liqueur and absinthe.

2 oz. gin (Johnson recommends Plymouth)

¾ oz. dry vermouth

¼ oz. maraschino liqueur

1 dash absinthe

1 dash orange bitters

Cracked ice

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: cocktail

Garnish: lemon twist

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well and strain into a chilled glass. Twist a piece of lemon peel over the drink and use as garnish.

Adapted from Harry Johnson's Bartenders' Manual, 1882