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Craft Gin: The Ups, Downs And Surprising Twists Of A Classic British Spirit



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Dining

I write about food & drink, and the people who grow, create and eat it



Gin's popularity has been boosted by the rise of artisanal craft production. GETTY

Gin is a drink whose reputation precedes it. During the [18th-century gin craze in London](#), “mother’s ruin” was the crack cocaine of its day, deemed the cause of disorder, dissolution and moral decrepitude.

It took two centuries, but this juniper-infused spirit’s reputation slowly mellowed, and the G&T eventually became the default cocktail for those times when a stiff drink is called for but imagination is in short supply.

But gin is full surprises—a decade ago, few could have predicted the emergence of craft gin as a cerebral drink for the cognoscenti. On **World Gin Day** (Saturday 13 June), it’s likely that the spirit will be

more enthusiastically embraced than ever by locked-down tipplers. (Equally surprising is that some distillers have risen to the challenges of coronavirus by turning alcohol into hand sanitizer.)

Figures from the UK's [Wine And Spirit Trade Association](#) show that in 2019 Brits bought a record-breaking 83 million bottles of gin, worth over £2.6 billion pounds. Gin sales began to rise in 2013, and by 2016 gin was experiencing double-digit growth in volume and sales. Snap-survey [figures from data analysts CGA](#) show that, in late March this year, gin was the most popular spirit bought online in the UK.



The G&T is a classic that invites creative interpretation and fresh ingredients. GETTY

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Gin's resurgence has largely been driven by the small-scale, quality-focused craft gin sector, where the emphasis is on the use of specific [botanicals](#), [the plant-based flavoring elements](#) that give each gin its unique aroma and taste.

Covid-19: A Pivotal Change

And then came Covid-19. Kathy Caton, founder and MD of craft producer Brighton Gin, sums up, "In March we lost 85-90% of our business overnight. Last year the hot subject was 'When is the craft gin boom going to end, and what's going to bring it to an end?' Never did I think that it would be a global pandemic."



Juniper berries are the key botanical used in gin. GETTY

Fortunately, distillers do have a lot of alcohol on their premises; and Brighton Gin, along with many other distillers worldwide, have “pivoted” into making hand sanitizer—although Caton admits, “It was certainly never in any business plan!”

Brighton Gin have joined forces with a local skincare company and for every bottle of hand sanitizer sold on their website, two are donated to others who need it, such as the local NHS and other key workers. “We love a cheesy pun at Brighton Gin, so we’ve done it under the tagline ‘spray it forward,’ rather than ‘pay it forward.’ The reaction of people has been breathtakingly generous.”

Other craft gin producers are using the enforced downtime to think and plan. Chris Garden, distiller at Northumberland-based Hepple Gin, says, “It’s given the small team breathing-time to think creatively about new product development. We have acquired new clients and stockists in Singapore and France and on a local level we have teamed up with Newcastle’s best cocktail bar, Mother Mercy, and are offering cocktails delivered to the doorstep. We are also in the process of launching our own at-home martini series developed by the legendary [bartender] Nick Strangeway.”

What’s Next For Craft Gin?

That’s a question that Kathy Caton describes as being in, “the Donald Rumsfeld-style ‘unknown-unknowns’ world.” She continues, “I hope the quality, authentic brands will be here to stay. The big ‘If’ is what size and shape of financial crisis we’re looking at, and for how long.”

It’s hard to define exactly what’s behind gin’s popularity but drinks

educator Jane Peyton, author of the forthcoming book *The Philosophy of Gin* (British Library Publishing, out October 2020), thinks she's put her finger on it. "Gin starts off as the alcoholic spirit equivalent of a blank canvas that distillers flavor with exotic or out-of-the-ordinary botanicals. Gin is constantly innovating and offering customers something new. No other spirit can do that."

A Nose For Gin

Pine-fresh, astringent juniper is at the heart of every gin but beyond that, the final flavor is down to the imagination of the distiller, who relies on a signature mix of botanicals. Craft distillers love to use local plants and ingredients, in addition to juniper, to give gin a particular "taste of a place". Here are three to try:

Brighton Gin Pavilion Strength 40% ABV, £37.50 (70cl)

from England's south coast is big on orange, with a touch of milk thistle, which is native to the South Downs.

Hepple Gin 45% ABV, £38 (70cl) from Northumberland majors strongly on locally grown juniper and douglas fir. Dry and a bit wild.

Isle of Harris Gin 45% ABV, £37 (70cl) from Scotland's Outer Hebrides uses classic botanicals such as cassia bark, coriander, bitter orange and licorice as well as local sea kelp. As bracing and lively as sea air.

If you're keen to know more, *The World Atlas of Gin* (Mitchell Beazley, 2019) by Joel Harrison and Neil Ridley is an informative world tour.

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