

# High spirits

Mark Smith explores the newly fashionable world of gin

From Winston Churchill to TS Elliot, JG Ballard to James Bond, gin has been the staple palate-pleaser of legends both real and imagined for generations. Eschewing the macho swagger of whisky and seductive urban *joie de vivre* of vodka, gin has always been a sophisticated spirit that whispers rather than shouts, quietly content to take a back seat to its sexier and more popular cousins – until now.

Gin is undergoing a renaissance. A resurgence in cocktail culture and its relative ease of production have giving rise to waves of new artisan gins from all over the globe. “Gin is – and has been for four years at least – our most popular spirit category. It’s also showing no signs of slowing as it grows by around 30 per cent yearly,” says Chris Hysted-Adams, general manager of Melbourne’s famous Black Pearl bar.

Recently minted as the world’s best bar at the Spirited Awards in New Orleans – a sort of ‘drinks Oscars’ –



MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA



it’s fair to say Chris, himself a former Bartender of the Year winner, knows a thing or two about serving up an alcoholic treat. The dapper denizens of the Black Pearl’s favourite gin drinks, according to Chris, are Negroni, martini, and South Side – in that order.

“Gin is an incredibly versatile spirit,” Chris says. “With countries all over the world creating their own styles of gin – Australia and America especially – it’s really breaking the boundaries of what this spirit is capable of achieving.

“People are really digging all these new gins coming out. In fact, with so many Australian gins being released, people are becoming more curious than ever about the category.”

Gin has a longstanding reputation as the quintessential English drink – a reputation achieved despite its Dutch roots. Traditionally flavoured with juniper, it was initially valued for its medicinal qualities before the modern, drinking version appeared with the invention of Genever, a Dutch-style gin, in the 17th Century. Finding its way across the English Channel, it became well known in Britain after William of Orange took the English throne, with low taxation and ease of production resulting in more than half of London’s drinking establishments being ‘gin joints’.

The Age of Empire saw it spread around the world where it has enjoyed a niche popularity. And although it still pales by comparison to other drinks in terms of volume of the market, its star is undoubtedly rising – according to Jonny Forsyth, global drinks analyst at Mintel, a market intelligence agency.

“Gin is very small relative to other global spirits categories like whisky ➤➤➤





Steve Schneider







## Unlike the whisky and vodka markets, which are dominated by big brands, gin has been an accessible drink for smaller distillers to experiment with

and vodka. Gin's biggest market by volume is Philippines, followed by US – although gin is tiny in the context of a huge spirits market."

Forsyth says that gin's recent renaissance comes from Europe, where sales have increased in recent years, led by the popularity of premium and craft gin in Spain and the UK, but also increasingly in Germany.

"Gin has grown as consumers have become attracted to quality spirits, meaning they appreciate gin's more nuanced taste and sophisticated image," Forsyth says. "Drinkers also like the fact that gin uses a range of botanicals, which appeals to their desire for natural ingredients and experimental flavours."

The UK still remains gin's heartland, where sales have grown from \$1.15 billion in 2014 to an estimated \$1.7 billion in 2016. Tristan Stephenson has been well placed to see gin's rise first hand. Author of the *Curious Bartender* series of books, he's also a world-famous gin mixologist. He says the rise of artisan gins, and an explosion in cocktail culture, has seen gin's popularity rise.

"I think the general rediscovery of the gin and tonic has had a hand

in this, along with the renaissance of the cocktail. Over half of all reputable classic cocktails out there contain gin, so stocking a bottle or two is essential. Then there's the rise of craft distilling, which has flooded the marketplace with small gin brands – the go-to spirit of the artisan distiller on account of it being relatively quick and easy to make."

But what does he love so much about gin? What's so special about it?

"I'm fascinated by juniper itself," he says. "It's not an ingredient we use much in cooking or in any other drinks, and yet it's intrinsic to the gin flavour profile and therefore hundreds of classic cocktails. The best gin drinks are usually the classics in my opinion. Drinks like martini, Martinez, Negroni and gin fizz. All of these cocktails permit the juniper to shine a little, and that for me is a good gin drink."

Unlike spirits such as whisky and vodka where a handful of major brands dominate, gin has been an accessible drink for smaller distillers to experiment with, much to Tristan's delight. "I think that the excitement for gin that has been generated by these small brands is fantastic," he says.

"Yes, some are better than others, and



some will likely never develop beyond a few cases in their nearby towns and villages. As the number of gin distilleries in the UK grows, the need for the next new distillery to diversify its brand, flavour, or marketing strategy increases, and this leads to increasingly tenuous brand stories and occasionally some rather weird ingredients."

It's not many barmen who can justifiably claim to have helped start a worldwide rebirth of cocktail culture, but Steve Schneider can. With a range of mixing skills that would give Tom Cruise and Bryan Brown a real run for their money, he is the former head bartender at Employees Only in New York and the central character in the documentary, *Hey Bartender*.

Founded in 2004, Employees Only is considered one of the seminal bars for the craft cocktail industry and played a central role not only in the revival of



the cocktail scene in the US, but more broadly too, winning the coveted 'World's Best Cocktail Bar' award at Tales of the Cocktail. "Gin's popularity has risen in conjunction with the popularity of the bartender," says Schneider.

"A decade ago, I could name about five or six classic cocktail bars in NYC, and now there's seemingly one on every stop on the subway. When the bars started taking pride in these cocktails, their guests soon followed suit."

A former US Marine, in 2012 Steve won the Cocktail World Cup, an international bartending competition held in New Zealand. He's also taken home six awards for fastest bartender in different speed competitions around the world and is now the co-owner of Employee's Only Singapore – the company's first expansion outside of NYC.

"At EO in Singapore, gin is one of the most popular spirits, as is our EO Gimlet

and Fraise Sauvage. Gin and tonics outside of the US aren't treated like just another party drink, but are treated like a legit, serious cocktail," Steve says.

Stephenson believes the industry is in the midst of a 'gin bubble', where the popularity of many smaller, artisan distillers will soon burn themselves out.

But analyst Jonny Forsyth thinks the market will continue to expand globally.

"We expect the market to continue growing healthily in UK and Spain – led by smaller craft brands – with the most successful being bought by big spirits players," he says. "But we also expect it to find new markets in US and China, which will really put gin on the map. For example, gin is seen as quite a cheap spirit option in the US, but this is slowly changing and once premium gin takes off in the US global sales will rocket."

Either way, gin lovers look to be in for an exciting next few years. ①

## THREE RECIPES

### TRISTAN'S COCKTAILS

#### Martini

#### Ingredients

50ml gin  
15ml dry  
vermouth

#### Method

Stir over ice for at least a minute and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with a very small slither of lemon peel (or not at all). Drink while it's still cold.

highball glass and top up with soda (no ice). Garnish with a slice of orange.

### STEVE'S COCKTAIL

#### EO Gimlet

#### Ingredients

1.5oz Perry's  
Tot – Navy  
Strength Gin  
.75oz EO lime  
cordial\*

#### Method

Add ingredients to a mixing glass. Add ice, shake and strain over a large ice block in a rocks glass. Garnish with a kaffir lime leaf and lime wheel.

#### \*EO lime cordial

Heat four cups fresh lime juice, 2.5 cups agave nectar and 30 bruised kaffir lime leaves. Let cool, strain and bottle

#### Gin fizz

#### Ingredients

40ml gin  
20ml lemon  
juice  
12ml sugar syrup  
Half an  
egg white

#### Method

Shake with cubed ice, then shake again with no ice (to improve the foaminess). Pour into a chilled