

Cheers

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EAST MEETS West

P.F. Chang's Eclectic
Beverage Program Wins
Best Overall Beverage
Excellence Award





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ON THE COVER: P.F. Chang's winner of the Cheers Beverage Excellence Award for Best Chain Overall Beverage program.
Photography by Pat Mazzera

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At Russell House Tavern in Boston, the Journey Through the Night is made with TRU Organic Gin, Plymouth Sloe Gin, lime and Maraschino liqueur.

Is Gin Still In?

A closer look at the bartenders' botanical.

By Kelly A. Magyarics

When the craft cocktail movement started to gain traction a few years ago, gin became the mixologists' darling, especially since London Dry and Old Tom style gins were ubiquitous in popular pre-Prohibition era libations. Today, these gins have been joined on back bars by New Western Style gins for use in both classic and contemporary sips.

But sales figures hint at a different story: total sales of gin in the United States were down 2.5 percent from 2009 to 2010, according to *Cheers*' parent company The Beverage Information Group. Still, bartenders and operators continue to praise gin's mixability and compelling character, and the spirit remains front and center on well-designed cocktail lists.

The top five brands led the category again this year: including Seagram's Gin, Tanqueray, New Amsterdam, Bombay Sapphire and Gordon's Gin. According to operators, both these leading brands, and their lesser-known competitors are mixing it up in both classic and innovative cocktails. They also had much to share about current artisanal and mainstream gin drinks, their take on the likelihood of vodka drinkers ordering them and the ways in which some newer offerings of botanically based spirits are evolving the gin category.

"Gin will always be one of our go-to spirits, as it is specifically formulated for mixing drinks," states Owen Thomson. "The botanicals in gin lend themselves to cocktails." The lead bartender for José Andrés' Washington, D.C.-based ThinkFoodGroup—whose concepts include Jaleo, Café Atlantico and Minibar among others—always puts several gin-based cocktails on the menu of the ten different venues he works for nationwide.

At the 140-seat, America Eats Tavern in Washington, D.C., a pop-up restaurant in partnership with the National Archives that celebrates the history of food and drink in the United States, Thomson lists six classic gin cocktails priced \$10 to \$14, including the 20th Century (\$14), made with gin, Lillet and Crème de Cacao. He notes that while the number of gin drinks on his menu has remained constant, consumer enthusiasm has swelled. "Guests today are ordering it on their own without

having to hand sell it." America Eats Tavern stocks ten gins priced from \$10 to \$12.

COMPLEXITY IS A PLUS

Gin's multifaceted flavor profile translates to more taste with less work for the bartender. "It allows for a broad range in both flavor and complexity, while still being able to maintain as few ingredients as possible," lauds M. Blake Morley, bar manager for Woodfire Grill in Atlanta. The 150-seat farm-to-table-focused spot releases a new cocktail menu every three months with at least two gin libations, and stocks eight gins priced \$8 to \$10.

Morley considers gin's flavor profile crucial when mixing bitter or artisanal cocktails like the Negroni (\$10) and the earthy, herbal Last Word (\$10), a combination of green Chartreuse, Luxardo Maraschino Liqueur and lime. Gin's list of inherent botanicals tends to eliminate the need for a bevy of bitters, infused syrups and liqueurs.

But gin is not only reserved for eclectic and at times esoteric elixirs. The gin and tonic is arguably the spirit's quintessential and best-known drink, but gin is also finding a place in other mainstream drinks in which vodka had typically been poured. Thomson notes that guests are increasingly reverting to the original version of the Martini—which uses gin, dry Vermouth and orange bitters. And at ThinkFoodGroup's 347-seat Mediterranean mezze restaurant Zaytinya in Washington, D.C.—which carries nine gins priced \$8 to \$13—gin drinks such as the Martinez (\$12) made with Ransom Old Tom Gin and Luxardo Maraschino are featured.

Bar patrons are also experimenting with their own gin-based concoctions. "I have had a few people ask for Gin Cosmos and Gin Bloody Marys," notes Aaron Butler, bar manager for the Russell House Tavern, a 220-seat new American tavern in Boston's Harvard Square. The bar's list of twenty-five cocktails priced \$9 to \$13 usually contains three gin drinks, like Journey Through the Night (\$10), made with TRU Organic Gin, Plymouth Sloe Gin, lime and Maraschino liqueur. "Gin is very



Tristan offers a twist on the classic Aviation.

versatile, so the drinks I make with it are either very refreshing or herbaceous.” He goes on to add that that while the drinks on his list haven’t really changed, the gins have. Russell House Tavern stocks eleven gins priced \$9 to \$12, and Butler’s favorite go-to bottles are England’s Oxley, TRU Organic Gin from California and Philadelphia’s Bluecoat Gin.

EXPANDING STYLES

Indeed, the release of so many new gins over the past few years has seen the category expanding and changing. “This ain’t your granddaddy’s London Dry’ seems like the new motto of the gin industry today,” declares Morley. “It’s a paradise for bartenders. Gin isn’t just about juniper anymore.” So-called New Western Style gins—represented by brands including Hendricks, Bluecoat and Aviation—tend to downplay juniper in favor of other botanicals, from cucumber and rose, to ginger and citrus. Morley gravitates to soft and bright Leopold’s American Small Batch Gin for The Napier (\$10), with Crème de Violette, Cocchi Americano, grapefruit and Luxardo Bitters; and Violet’s Vice (\$10), where Aviation Gin is mixed with a blueberry shrub, cream, maple syrup and Peychaud’s Bitters.

One major benefit of the increased availability of a wide assortment of gin brands is flexibility. “We have to know that not every gin is meant to be in a Negroni or a Martini,” explains Thomson. Taste is the final arbiter—there is room for all of the gins in our bag of tricks.” Sampling each gin neat (or cut with water), as well as in a Gin and Tonic and a Martini, is a great way to determine its style and flavor profile, and ultimately in what cocktails a bottle will—and won’t—work.

At Meat Market, the 180-seat steakhouse in Miami’s South Beach, beverage director Brijette De Bernadinis uses Noler’s

Gin from Holland in the Tangerine Dream (\$14), a French 75 riff with Champagne, lime and muddled kiwi and orange. “The floral notes from Noler’s really add a new element.” Meat Market stocks eight gins priced \$14 to \$18 a pour. While De Bernadinis appreciates today’s ample variety of gin brands, she hopes that the additional of other more overt flavors of some distillers don’t cover up the base product too much and make them indistinguishable from flavored vodka.

Speaking of vodka, these modern gins, which are often softer and less evocative of a freshly cut Christmas tree, can be used to appeal to aficionados of that *other* clear spirit. “With ‘lighter,’ more approachable ‘stepping stone’ gins on the market, like New Amsterdam and Hendrick’s, vodka drinkers are giving gin drinks more of a chance,” notes Ken Maciejewski, bar manager for Tristan, a 130-seat modern American venue in Charleston, South Carolina, which stocks nine gins priced from \$3 to \$5. Tristan’s menu lists eight cocktails, and always includes both a dry gin cocktail and a smooth “beginner” one. The Daisy (\$9) tames very juniper-forward Tanqueray with St. Germain, limoncello, Dolin Blanc Vermouth and grapefruit bitters.

But the trick, says Thomson, is not to push too hard. “You can’t just swap out their vodka martini for a gin one and expect results every time.”

Woodfire Grill often tempts vodka lovers with the Bartender’s Choice (\$10), a DIY-style drink where guests select “white or brown” and give the bartender free reign. “We see it quite often at the bar: [as in] ‘I want the Bartender’s Choice but I only drink vodka,’” Morley says amusedly. If the guest is game, he’ll mix up a classic gin cocktail to demonstrate that with the right proportions, the spirit will be in balance with the other ingredients. “If all ingredients are complementing each other, it will probably convert them.”

In both classic and contemporary cocktails, gin is here to stay, say operators. But that’s not to say that other formerly overlooked mix-worthy categories aren’t chomping at its heels. “There are many more spirits at the party for mixologist,” declares Butler. “Tequila, Mezcal and rum are dancing along with gin, but gin has not fallen off the charts.” As the expanding gin category has proven, more choices behind the bar—in all spirits categories—translate to more creativity and flavor on the menu. And that’s a win-win for the bartender and guest alike. ♦

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