

Gourmet gin makes a comeback to lift up London's sagging spirits

Fans claim gin is as complex as wine. **Zoe Strimpel** finds hidden depth in this notorious spirit

GIN was once known as mother's ruin for its dirt-cheap price and quick oblivion-inducing quality. The pinnacle of London's long love affair with gin is Hogarth's 1751 painting *Gin Lane*, in which sordid filth and deprivation are depicted as a direct result of gin-sloshing. These days, though the mother's ruin label has worn off, the spirit is mostly regarded as the essential, potent and often rather rough component of our favourite (and dangerously down-able) pre-dinner drink, the G&T.

Hardly the credentials for the gourmet's favourite new premium spirit, then. And yet, that's exactly what it has become. Joe McCanta, mixologist at Shoreditch vegan restaurant Saf, says: "Gin is the new vodka. It's long been a favourite with barmen but now the market is responding to wider interest in the spirit." He says that both Absolut and Smirnoff, with whom he works, are becoming increasingly interested in the spirit and watching it closely.

So what's up with gin? Its resurgence is based on more than branding, unlike that of vodka, which came into its own with arty bottles that cleverly hid the fact that vodka is the emptiest spirit out there. That's what all those boasts about "purity" come down to.

TOTAL GIN-O-PHILE

"I'm a total gin-offile," gushes McCanta, who is also director of drinks consultancy PurSip. "Every gin has something to offer. My background is in wine, and gin can be likened to wine. Every bottle has a unique flavour – it's a chance to show off form, unlike with vodka. Because of the use of botanicals [juniper berries, cucumber, coriander and so forth], you have a whole palette to work with, which is why bartenders love it for cocktails."

The pre-Prohibition era in America was the golden age for gin cocktails, and dozen of type of gin were used. It's a sign of the growing interest in the spirit that some of the US's greatest guides for early 20th century barmen have been reprinted by publisher and drinks enthusiast Greg Boehr. Among the reprints are 1899's *The Mixicologist* and Harry Johnson's 1900 *Bartender's Manual*, which includes an essential gin list that would stagger any modern cocktail connoisseur, and holds pride of place on McCanta's bar.

Still finding it hard to summon positive associations with gin, a fellow sceptic and I headed for a tasting under McCanta's supervision, so that he could explain the virtues of this most complex of spirits. He'd lined up over a dozen types in bottles so diverse and cool-looking I was sure some contained single malt whisky or boutique champagne.

HAND-PICKED

Gin is divided into several categories, each with its own rich history. There's London Dry (originating on these fair shores): distilled, like all gin, from a neutral grain spirit such as wheat, and based on coriander and juniper berries. It tends to be citrusy and dry. Plymouth gin's another homegrown type: it's a sweeter version of the London and hails from a distillery in



A range of gins on the bar at Saf restaurant in Shoreditch. Above: the Monkey Gland martini and left: the Martinez cocktail.

Pictures: Alice Hepple/CITY A.M

the town of Plymouth itself. Then there's Dutch or Genevre gin (Holland was the birthplace of gin the early 17th century) – heady and rich as a result of its malt mash base, and Old Tom, a lightly sweetened type that was particularly popular in the 18th century here in Britain because it was dirt-cheap. Then there's sloe gin, which is rather like a liqueur and a deep red colour, owing to the infusion of sloe or damson berries and the addition of sugar.

McCanta hand-picks representatives from each type – and we tried them all. Saf's house gin, which mixes well with almost anything, is a London Dry called Juniper Green Organic (available at Whole

Foods and Waitrose): the first organic gin in the world, made with Croatian juniper and Egyptian coriander. It hit us with angry citrusy clout and rather scared us. But with a London Bombay Dry we began to sense subtlety. It was muted and rounder, with less punch. The coriander was more discernable. And things only improved with another London-style gin, San Francisco-made Junipera, which came in an appealing champagne-shaped bottle – Joe's all time favourite. Cardamom and coriander, as well as vanilla and cinnamon (plus some secret botanicals the company won't release) came through on a brash citrus nose.

The diversity of the spirit was revealing itself to us: we tasted how producers can play with it and tweak it to get the dimensions they want. For example, the Whitley Neil we next tried was made to evoke Africa, with angelica and oris root, liquorice, extract of beobub tree, gooseberries and eucalyptus. Certainly the latter came through, making it a good one for martinis. Martin Miller's London came over all cucumber and sandalwood and pepper – "jumpy" (Joe) and like a "salad" (us).

BURGUNDY OF GINS

Some were blinding and not at all as you've known gin before. The Aviation, a small-batch US gin, was made specifically for the Aviation cocktail, a creme de violette and maraschino job, which came into play when air travel became hip and glamorous in the late 40s and 50s. It was loaded with cardamom and sassafras (the woody plant used in root beer) and tasted softly sweet. G'Vine, a specialist French gin, is made from grape flowers and tasted pepperminty and fruity while DH Krahn, a small-batch gin from New Hampshire, is what McCanta regards as "the Burgundy of gins – subtle and light, with numerous angles." Perhaps most surprising was Brockman's Premium, strongly infused with blueberries and raspberries and almost like a liqueur.

Now that we were gin converts and could spot a London Dry from an Old Tom, it was time to test drive some cocktails. I was left in no doubt that where possible, gin is superior to vodka in cocktail terms. The Julian was a herby, fruity salad in a glass: fresh blueberries, lime and blueberry-infused Juniper Green made for a winner. The Black Heart was a stunner: Brockman's Premium (the berry-infused one), with mint syrup, blackberries and mango puree.

McCanta's favourite is the Martinez, the original martini, which has fallen out of common usage. He's brought it back with a vengeance and served it up with Hayman's Old Tom (a sweet and cheerful gin), along with maraschino syrup, a 1786 Italian vermouth and angostura bitters, with a baby fig on top. Superb. Before Prohibition, gin was considered the king of spirits. Now it looks set to return to its former glory. Goodbye Gin Lane.

DRINKING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

DH KRAHN: Distilled only once, this is a mellow gin with citrus and fruit notes. A touch of Thai ginger softens it further. £24 from www.thedrinkshop.com

AVIATION: Batch-distilled US gin, with cardamom, anise and lavender. Made with the Aviation cocktail in mind. £26 from www.thedrinkshop.com

BOUDIER SAFFRON GIN: Based on a colonial recipe from the 19th century, it has eight botanicals, including saffron and fennel. £23 from www.thewhiskeyexchange.com

G'VINE: French gin made from Cognac grapes and infused with green grape flowers. Made with whole-fruit botanicals including cubeb berries, nutmeg and ginger root. £25 from www.thedrinkshop.com

JUNIPERO: Made by Anchor Steam in San Francisco, this is heavy on the juniper as the name suggests, but classic too. All-natural and a top dog in the premium gin world. £35 from www.thedrinkshop.com

