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Beyond gin and tonic

Different flavors, styles, new cocktails whet drinker's thirst for alcoholic drink

By Bill Daley, *Chicago Tribune*
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Gin has a point of view. And that's totally the point of it.

Gin is the Joy Behar of the bar because it can be as opinionated as the feisty co-host of TV's "The View." It has flavor, it has aroma, it has personality.

Unlike vodka, which is officially supposed to be odorless, tasteless and colorless, gin bursts with "attitude." Each brand has its own flavor story, which fits in neatly with today's growing thirst for drinks made with top-notch products, even items from the produce counter.



Bill Hogan/MCT

New styles of gin offer something different for summer.

"The cocktail world is 25 years behind the culinary world," said mixologist Toby Maloney of Alchemy Consulting in New York City. "Think of the culinary world in the mid-1970s. It was rather dismal. Then Alice Waters came along and started caring about ingredients. The cocktail world is now doing the same thing."

Depth of flavor is what counts now, he said, and that's why gin is becoming popular again.

"There are so many different kinds and flavor profiles," Maloney said. "Each brings something new to a cocktail. Compare the Aviation made with Tanqueray to the Aviation made with Plymouth. They are almost different drinks."

Gin is a spirit distilled from grain, like vodka, but it is then redistilled with flavor agents such as herbs, spices and, most famously, juniper berries.

That juniper flavor is dominant in the world's most popular style of gin, known as London dry gin. But there are other types of gin out there, gins that are lighter and more floral in tone.

These new generation of gins can offer tastes that include roses, cucumbers, pears, vanilla and cloves, writes Mittie Hellmich in her "Ultimate Bar Book." There are even gins flavored with bitter almond, apple, black currant and bitter orange, she notes.

Maloney describes the lighter-flavored styles as "gin with training wheels." Yet there's an important place for them at the bar, he said, especially with those turned off by an emphatically juniper profile.

"Their idea of gin is like eating a Christmas tree sort of thing," he said. "Lighter gins can be the gateway to bigger gin flavor. As Americans become used to a more sophisticated palate in cocktails, the gins will become bolder."

That's totally fine with him.

"I would have a hard time saying the new style of gin will ever take over from gins that taste unabashedly of gin," Maloney explained. "That tang is so quintessentially what gin is. It's in your face with juniper. It's standing up and being counted."

What gin goes best in what drink?

Gin's distinctive flavor is a blessing and a challenge. No two brands are really going to taste alike. That's not bad if you're a born brand-hopper, but there are those who want to find that one gin just perfect for their palate and cocktail.

The Ultimate Cocktail Challenge recently took up the task of matching gin to drink with an expert panel of judges. The tasting was blind. The competition was sponsored by the Ultimate Beverage Challenge, a New York-based beverage competitions and events company.

The matches:

Dry martini:

Tanqueray

London Dry

Gin and tonic:

Plymouth

Negroni:

Tanqueray

London Dry

Tom Collins:

Tanqueray

London Dry

"Awesome," is Toby Maloney's one-word response when asked how he feels about gin's resurgent popularity.

"It's about time people drank gin, not vodka. The liquor landscape over the last 15 or 20 years has been dominated by vodka, by a spirit inherently described as a tasteless, odorless liquid."

Maloney is a partner in Alchemy Consulting, a New York City company that advises restaurants, nightclubs and bars on their drink programs.

He is also a partner and chief mixologist for the Violet Hour in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood. He watches the trends and predicts that Americans will be drinking more gin cocktails with bitter flavors.

"I think this is a backlash to sticky-sweet cocktails from the days of yore," he said. "We crave that really dry, bitter flavor."

Southside Makes: 1 cocktail

A classic cocktail gets a new twist from mixologist Toby Maloney of New York's Alchemy Consulting. He recommends Tanqueray gin for "gin lovers" and the fuller-bodied Plymouth gin for "soon-to-be gin lovers."

To make simple syrup, mix together equal parts sugar and water. Bring water to a boil to dissolve the sugar. Let cool.

Ingredients

3 mint sprigs

2 ounces gin

3/4 ounce each: fresh lime juice, simple syrup

1 small dash Angostura bitters, optional

Directions

Bruise two sprigs of the mint gently in a cocktail shaker. Add ingredients. Add ice. Shake. Strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with remaining mint leaf.

Capulet Collins Makes: 1 cocktail

Mixologist Toby Maloney prefers to make this cocktail with Hendrick's gin, which has a crisp, cucumberlike flavor note.

Ingredients

3 slices cucumber, each 1/8-inch thick

1 tiny pinch salt

2 mint sprigs

2 ounces gin

1 ounce simple syrup

3/4 ounce fresh lemon juice

5 drops rose water, optional

Soda water

Directions

Muddle cucumber and salt thoroughly in cocktail shaker. Add 1 sprig of the mint. Bruise gently. Add remaining ingredients. Add ice. Shake. Strain into a Collins glass over fresh ice. Top with soda water. Garnish with remaining mint sprig.

Gin and Tonic Makes: 1 cocktail

The English classic that never goes out of style. And with good reason. "It's one of the greatest things you can do for those hot summer days," mixologist Toby Maloney said. Here's a basic recipe from Mittie Hellmich's "Ultimate Bar Book."

Ingredients

2 ounces gin

4 ounces chilled tonic water

1 or 2 lime wedges

Directions

Pour the gin and tonic water into an ice-filled old-fashioned glass. Stir well. Squeeze the lime wedges over the drink and drop them in.

Online at: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/06/30/1533697/beyond-gin-and-tonic.html>