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American Entrants in the Gin Game

By ERIC FELTEN

American gin makers have always labored in the shadow of their more eminent British rivals. In the 1930s, Fleischmann Distilling Co. tried to persuade Martini- and Tom Collins-drinkers that "Only an American Gin can make an American Cocktail." Thirty years later, the big U.S. liquor makers were still trying to make the case for domestic gin. "The martini (dry, dry, dry) is an American drink," ran the ad copy for Calvert gin in 1967. "And although British gin is very fine gin indeed, there is a goodly group of sensitive souls that questions whether it is as dry as a great martini could hope for."



Dylan Cross for The Wall Street Journal

Now there is a gaggle of new American gins, many of them craft-distilled in small batches. And for the most part they are no longer trying to out-dry their English cousins. The customers artisanal distillers are trying to woo are those Grey Goose and Ketel One drinkers willing to try something more interesting than the bland asceticism of vodka. This should be easy enough, given that gin is basically a vodka flavored with juniper and other botanicals, such as citrus peel, cardamom and orris root.

In a blind tasting of nearly a dozen American-made gins, I found that many these days are near-vodkas, with faint flavors that merely hint at gin's herbaceousness. Among the better of these are the gin from San Francisco's Distillery No. 209 and Death's Door Gin from Washington Island, Wis. Too bland for my taste is Cascade Mountain Gin from Bend, Ore.

In a category all its own is the strange TRU2 organic gin. Its weak-tea color is off-putting, but I might have put up with it had the stuff tasted anything like gin. A raisin and licorice liqueur isn't what I'm looking for in a bottle bearing the noble name "gin." Also to be avoided

is the New Amsterdam Gin from the E&J Gallo wine conglomerate. It is sweet to the point of being syrupy, dominated by an orange fruitiness that suggests juice more than astringent peel.

A Sampling's Standouts

Very Good

Leopold's American Small Batch Gin -- \$39.99

It may come in an apothecary bottle, but it isn't the least bit medicinal. Distiller Todd Leopold finds the sweet essence of the juniper berry and manages to avoid the pine-tree aftertaste. Complex aromatic botanicals and fragrant citrus (the flavorings include hand-zested oranges and pomeles -- a sort of large, mild grapefruit). The clean finish helps make this a terrific gin for Martinis.

Bluecoat American Dry Gin -- \$26.99

Bright and clear juniper embellished delicately with the scent of citrus and spice. Enough perfume to make it worthy of its cobalt-blue cologne bottle.

Good/Very Good

Junipero Gin -- \$32.99

Solidly in the London dry style, but with a Western directness. Bold, unapologetic juniper dominates a highish-proof spirit.

The most successful new American gins are willing to embrace complex flavors, but do so with a light, deft touch. If a traditional gin belts out its juniper notes like a Tony Bennett finale, the new gins sing with a Chet Baker softness. And though the best of these don't upstage the juniper that makes gin gin, they also let the more florid botanicals blossom.

The softest and most floral of these gins is the Aviation brand, made in Portland, Ore. Too flowery for a good Martini, it is best in sweeter gin cocktails, such as the Aviation, the drink after which the gin was named.

Proclaiming its perfume with what looks like a cobalt cologne bottle is Philadelphia's Bluecoat gin. The juniper is bright and clear, embellished delicately with the scent of citrus and spice. It strikes an admirable balance between the dry herbal qualities of a good gin and the embellishments exotic botanicals can provide.

But my favorite of the bunch came from the Leopold Bros. distillery, founded a decade ago in Ann Arbor, Mich., and recently transplanted to Denver. Leopold's American Small Batch Gin comes in a squat, clear apothecary bottle. The simple white labels with handwritten batch numbers contribute to the gin's lab-sample appearance. Yet Leopold's gin isn't the least bit medicinal. Distiller Todd Leopold has managed to get a true and robust juniper flavor without the hints of pine that many people find so off-putting about gin.

There is a trick to Mr. Leopold's process, one that requires a level of effort few competitors will be willing to make. The most common way to flavor gin is to add all the botanicals to the neutral distilled spirit, let them steep, and then do one final distillation. But Mr. Leopold distills each of the botanicals separately. By distilling the juniper alone, for example, he captures the sweet essence of the berry without the piney aftertaste. When he has distilled each botanical, he adds them all together with the neutral spirit and gives it all one final distillation.

Right now Leopold's spirits are available only in Colorado, California, Virginia, the District of Columbia, Georgia and Wyoming. But www.leopoldbros.com has links to Internet retailers able to ship to some other states.

Easier to find, and deserving of special mention, is Junipero, made in San Francisco by the Anchor Brewing people. Junipero pioneered craft-distilled American gin, and though it is solidly in the London dry style, it has a Western directness, with bold juniper dominating a highish-proof spirit.

Forty years ago, Calvert gin asked in its ads, "Will American gin ever make it big in America?" Given how well the tiny craft distillers are doing, it seems that American gin has finally come into its own because they're making it small.

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