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## The great gin experiment: What could the category's next invention look like?

**CHARLIE WHITTING**  
02 DECEMBER 2020

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### SPIRITS & COCKTAILS

*The gin explosion of the past few years is a phenomenon that doesn't seem to be slowing down. But to maintain momentum and stay relevant, what can the category do to continue its reinvention? Charlie Whitting investigates*

Out of all the sprits in the world, it is surely gin that has enjoyed the greatest surge in interest and innovation over the last decade?

The number of brands continues to climb, while consumption and overall popularity show little sign of slowing. Even if Covid has reduced the amount drunk in the on-trade in recent months, off-trade sales have more than made up any shortfall, with many consumers spending their lockdown experimenting and exploring the category and its possibilities even more fully. When people start coming back to pubs and bars, it is inconceivable that their interest for the spirit will have abated.

'We are obviously in an unprecedented time so it's difficult to really understand the effects right now, but before lockdown around one in every five drinks in a pub was a gin drink,' says John Logue, head of brand and customer marketing at spirits producer Atom Brands.

'What we do know is that the gin thirst has been growing and maturing during lockdown if our off-trade and e-commerce volumes are anything to go by, creating a more excited and courteous drinker ready to hit the bar scene as soon as they can.'

**“ You have to either shoot to the moon or sink to the ocean to have a really great story ”**

SANDER NOLEN

Much of gin's popularity has been built on its immense versatility as an ingredient in cocktails and other long drinks, bringing nuanced flavours ripe for mixing. Every new gin brand has thus been driven largely by botanical additions, with each distiller bringing a new fruit, herb or spice to add to the ubiquitous juniper and provide a point of difference. Despite the marketplace becoming ever more crowded and the competition ever fiercer, the number of gin brands continues to grow but to make an impact these days, distillers have to look further afield for something that will add something to their product and its story.



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That Boutique-y Gin Company's Spit-Roasted Pineapple Gin

New kinds of gin are arriving on the scene, as distillers look outside the box and draw inspiration from other alcoholic drinks, whether in terms of ingredients or methodology.

'Whilst the market has significantly grown over recent years, and even more so in recent months, we believe there is still room for the market to grow. Consider the rise in innovations in flavours, sources, botanicals, ways of distilling and the RTD market featuring gins for younger legal-drinking-age consumers, who begin their journey of discovery in the category,' says Jeany Cronk, co-founder of [Mirabeau Wines](#), which recently launched its own gin made from rosé wine.

## Blending ideas

The neutral spirit that traditionally forms the bedrock of gin can be distilled from the fermented mash of any number of materials, from grain to potatoes to sugar cane. Some distillers are now looking beyond those more traditional ingredients to build their gins from other sources, using bases as varied as milk and wine.

Last year, the first gin made from discarded grapes hit the shelves at Tesco, and it's unlikely to be the last. Brandy makers have been distilling fermented fruits for centuries, and now gin distillers are taking up the mantle.

**“ Distillers are now looking to build their gins from other sources, using bases as varied as milk and wine ”**

The meteoric rise in pink gin's popularity has seen distillers release gins that bring a bit of colour to the back bar. Pink gin has perhaps enjoyed a resurgence based off the rosé boom, and that has encouraged distillers and winemakers alike to bring these two

popular drinks together in ways that focus on the flavours and complexity as much as sweetness and a funky colour.

'Flavoured gins have done a great job of introducing and bringing new consumers into the category,' adds Cronk.

'Whilst they have often been on the sweeter side, they have been a great transition for many consumers to taste and explore gin. What has been exciting to watch, and now play within, is how the category has broadened out to include so many innovations on its original grain-based form.'

## Both barrels

Another approach that gin is borrowing from other alcoholic spirits is the use of barrels.

Barrel ageing has long been used in the production of wines and Ports, Sherries, whiskies and more. Now gin distillers are starting to use these time-honoured methods to add something entirely new to their gin.

Ageing a gin in a barrel not only lends a more premium cachet to the spirit – one only need look at the premiumisation of barrel-aged cocktails – but it also imbues it with a whole new range of flavours depending on the barrel's previous occupant.

Whisky, Port, Sherry – gin distillers are using all of these barrels to add another dimension to their product. The challenge is to entice customers to a gin style that strays so far from the normal flavour innovations of the recent past, but the potential to reach out to a whole new kind of gin drinker should not be ignored.

'Things like barrel ageing are not brand new concepts. They have been around for several years, but sometimes I don't think consumers really know how to react to them,' says Amit Joshi, co-founder of the Jones Family Project.

'To begin with, these kinds of products will find themselves in the kind of establishments

**“ Focus not on what one can add to the gin, but instead what the gin's**



that have time to explain new products or showcase them regularly. These kinds of places also attract the kind of customer that wants to experiment. If I was in the gin industry, I'd be looking at promoting them as sipping gins. I'd be talking about warmth, drinking them neat, products you could potentially market as super premium.'

flavours are ”

## Past inspirations

While some distillers are looking far and wide for ways to broaden the scope of what flavours can be found in a gin, some are looking to the past to find traditional and authentic edges onto which they can apply modern twists.

Jenever is the ancestor of gin and is still incredibly popular in the Netherlands. It was popular in the UK too until the development of the column still drove the evolution of London dry gin and jenever's decline.

But in an age when tradition and authenticity are as appealing as innovation and variety, delving deeper into the origins of the spirit itself, focusing not on what one can add to the gin, but instead on what the gin's flavours actually are, can also bring new opportunities. As Dutch jenever producers start to experiment and develop new varieties, there are opportunities to be explored from the spirit that became gin.

'I think the category is still growing but you have to either shoot to the moon or sink to the ocean to have a really great story about it,' says Sander Nolen, export director Europe for Bobby's Gin, which created a unique blend of jenever and gin for its fifth anniversary.



Bobby's Gin

'You have to have a really great story that's authentic. The gin category is so big, but no one knows how gin existed. They're finding out about jenever and that's a really interesting thing.'

'How many more flavours of gin can we create?' adds Jane Bulankina, marketing manager at Spirit Cartel. 'Why are we looking forward when we don't know what's in the past?'

These latest innovations provide opportunities for consumers and bartenders to experiment further themselves, whether with gin as a sipping spirit or within the long drink and cocktail market. The diversification of gin spurred the growth of varied tonic waters, as producers sought the perfect partner for each gin. These new incarnations could breed further invention [\[check out our feature on mixers\]](#).

'Gin continues to be a dynamic and diverse category for consumers to explore different styles and expressions,' says Debs Carter, marketing manager at Cotswolds Distillery. 'The spritz occasion is a growing area of interest in the on-trade, and the growth in cocktail making, especially at home in recent months, has also opened up new ways of enjoying gin.'

The gin category refuses to sit still, continuing to generate fresh ideas and approaches. And with its popularity showing little sign of waning, this innovation will likely need to continue if distillers are to find a way to grab people's attention and shelf space in such a crowded

market. Innovation in gin isn't finished yet by a long stretch.

'Every time I think we have reached peak gin I'm usually proved wrong,' concludes Joshi.

'There are still new gins coming onto the market from all over the world but actually getting on the back bar is getting tougher. In terms of growth, though, gin is such a versatile spirit that it will always get used in cocktails and mixed drinks, so it's not going anywhere soon.'

#### LATEST INNOVATIONS IN GIN

**Different bases:** Anything that can be fermented is now being considered as a base for distilling gin, bringing new flavours and textures, as well as new stories for distillers and bartenders to tell.

**Barrel ageing:** The romance of wooden barrels forms as a cornerstone for dark spirits like rum, whisky and brandy, but gins are now getting in on the action, using old barrels to bring familiar but new flavours to their premium gins.

**Jenever crossover:** The ancestor of gin has yet to receive widespread acclaim, but at a time when heritage and authenticity mingle with variety and innovation, blending jenever spirit and techniques can provide an interesting spirit and story.

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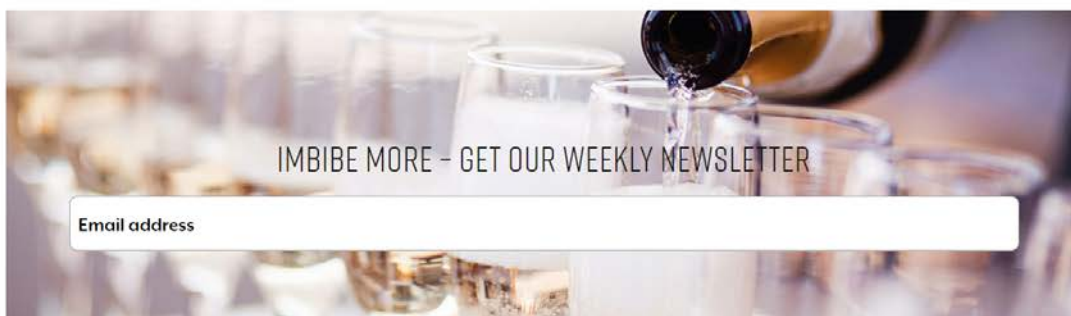
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