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The trend: Gin and tonic? Capital idea

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Published: November 13 2010 00:09 | Last updated: November 13 2010 00:09



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A number of London-based micro-distilleries, including Ian Hart's Sacred, are making gin

Something strange is happening in the leafy boroughs of London. The whiff of juniper can be detected in Highgate, Hammersmith and Wandsworth.

Gin, made famous in London by the ruinous amounts drunk by the 18th-century poor and depicted by William Hogarth, is once again being made in micro-distilleries around the city. New, aromatic gins are appearing in the freezers of the cognoscenti, while quinine-rich tonics, such as Fever Tree and Fentimans, chill in their fridges.

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Three of the new gins to catch the headlines are Sacred gin, SW4 London dry gin, and Sipsmith London dry gin. (Despite being made in the capital, they cannot be called London Dry Gin unless they conform to the method of production as defined by complex EU regulations.)

Sacred gin is the creation of Ian Hart, an ex-City headhunter. As a lover of gin, Hart wanted something fresh-tasting and set about experimenting with vacuum distillation at his home in Highgate. This allowed him to extract individual botanical flavours at a lower temperature than normal, imbuing the gin he launched last year with a light, sweet taste. Most gins contain about seven or eight botanicals, of which normally 40 per cent is juniper, 40 per cent coriander and 10 per cent angelica. Hart's contains 12 botanicals – some of the other new gins have even more.

SW4 London dry gin, also launched in 2009, evolved from Martin Price's love of gin and tonic. "I wanted to make a traditional style of gin in small batches, and London dry gin is the most puritanical and demanding way to make it," he says. Working in collaboration with Charles Maxwell, Master Distiller at Thames Distillers Ltd in Wandsworth (hence the postcode in the gin's name), Price settled upon a blend of barley and wheat spirit to produce a creamy, fragrant gin that is good enough to drink on its own.

Sipsmith's London dry gin, meanwhile, is made in a newly built distillery in Hammersmith with water taken from Lydwell Spring, one of the sources of the Thames. It packs a punch with its barley grain spirit and resinous, juniper notes. Interestingly, Jared Brown, who created the gin for owners Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall, did so by going back to the early 18th-century recipes.

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There are many other new small-batch, premium gins to taste, among the most notable is the delectable Fifty Pounds London dry gin and Beefeater's London dry gin Limited Winter Edition with its warming cinnamon, Seville orange and pine notes. Even Bacardi has joined the bandwagon and launched an experimental small-batch premium gin called Oxley, which is produced under very low temperatures to create fresh juniper and citrus notes.

So, how to choose which gin to drink at home? Desmond Payne, Master Distiller to Beefeater Gin, says that the best way to try a new gin is to compare it with two others. Add a little still (not tap) water to release the aromas. Those keen to refine their gin-tasting palate further could order Sacred's Open Sauce botanicals and sensitise their palate to individual distillates such as juniper, pink grapefruit or violet scented orris. They could even create their own gin with these, or add a botanical flourish to their gin and tonic by putting in a few drops before serving.

To make the perfect G&T use cold (to minimise the ice melting) gin and cold tonic poured over pure water ice cubes. Traditionally, you add double the tonic to gin, but keep it strong. Finally, add a slice of lemon. Time to reinstate the civilising influence of the gin and tonic hour.

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