

GIN'S NEW JUICE

AN OLD FAVORITE GETS A SECOND LIFE

By Molly Freedenberg
Photos by Melissa Barnes



BLACKBIRD

In recent years, gin has gotten a bad rap. A spirit seemingly popular only to alcoholic grandparents and the soon-to-be vomiting teenagers who steal it from them, the juniper-flavored liquor has been the ugly stepchild to alternatives like vodka, whiskey, and tequila almost since Prohibition.

"People remember drinking it, getting a headache, and their puke the next day smelling like pine needles," says Alicia Walton, a bartender at Elixir.

But lately gin seems to be making a comeback. New artisanal distilleries, like No. 209 on Pier 50, are making gin — rather than infused vodkas — as their product of choice. Existing companies, like S.F.'s Anchor and L.A.'s Tru, are adding gin to their offerings. Old-school gin manufacturers, like Tanqueray and Plymouth, are revamping their advertising. And in the Bay Area and New York City, arguably the cultural centers of American food and booze trends — it's not vodka, but gin (along with elderflower or ginger liqueur, absinthe, bitters, and chartreuse) that mixologists are reaching for when inventing new cocktails.

So why the recent return to tonic's classic twin?

Cocktail experts have several theories. Dale DeGross, author of *The Essential Cocktail* (Clarkston Potter, 2008) and famed bartender at NYC's Rainbow Room, points to recent trends toward classic cocktails — many of which just so happen to be made with gin. Indeed, a glance at *Cocktail Boothby's American Bar-Tender*, an 1861 cocktail manual recently reissued by Anchor Distillery, shows that most classic cocktails were made with gin, rum, whiskey, or brandy. Vodka, which was

considered a raw material unfit for consumption until distilled with other botanicals, isn't mentioned even once.

Others credit distilleries that are making new, more palatable gin, like Hendricks' cucumber variety. (Interestingly, the company's marketing campaign, which included a party at the Ambassador last winter, capitalizes on the popularity of speak-easy-themed culture and classic cocktail mixology.)

Another factor is a trend toward making gins in the pre-Prohibition genever style, identified more by secondary spice notes than juniper and, therefore, a possible vodka substitute. On the heels of this theory is what Distillery No. 209's Arne Hillesland calls "vodka fatigue," the phenomenon experienced by both bartenders and discerning customers who are tired of the same ingredients coming up in different combinations. Not only is gin a vodka alternative, but because of its makeup — neutral alcohol base, some amount of juniper, and any combination of additional spices, from lemon rind to cardamom to lavender — every gin is a bit different, presenting myriad opportunities to satisfy the increasingly sophisticated American palate.

This is especially so in San Francisco, which is the top market for Tru's 14-aromatic style. "In general, S.F. is just open to the gourmet experience," said Tru cofounder Litty Mathew. "People are willing to experiment."

Now, you'd be hard pressed to find a Bay Area bar that doesn't advertise at least one gin cocktail on its menu. Here are some of our favorites.

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BAMBUDDHA LOUNGE



GIN CONT>>

BLACKBIRD

In the past three years, this Market Street spot has gone from well-loved and well-worn dive bar (the Expansion) to ill-fated Castro transplant (Metro) to, now, the little corner's first attempt at an Elixir-style upscale-downhome cocktail haunt. And based on the regular crowds, it seems this new experiment is working — in no small part to the careful selection of small-batch liquors and fresh ingredients. Our favorite drink on the menu (written charmingly on brown butcher paper) is a classic take on the **Aviation**, a recipe made popular in the early 1900s that features gin, maraschino liqueur (not to be confused with maraschino cherries), and crème de violette. Blackbird's version is not only a lovely combination of sweet and complex, but glows a subtle periwinkle, probably thanks to the (real, not maraschino) cherry marinating at the bottom of the glass.

2124 Market, SF. (415) 503-0630, blackbirdbar.com

THE MOSS ROOM

Guardian reviewer Paul Reidinger loves the simplicity and sophistication of dishes like squid ink spaghetti at this eatery beneath the California Academy of Sciences. Tru's Mathew, however, comes here when she's in town for the bar's sustainable and creative approach to cocktails. We suggest trying the **Bee's Knees**, made with gin, acacia honey, and lemon.

55 Music Concourse Dr, SF. (415) 876-6121, www.themossroom.com

15 ROMOLO

The North Beach speakeasy, and sibling to nearby Rosewood and the Loin's Rye, is a favorite of Kevin Blum, whose City Dish Web site and newsletter directs 11,000 readers to drink and dining specials in the Bay Area. We recommend trying the cocktail that changed Blum's mind about gin: the **negroni**. "I'd had that one bad experience most people had with tequila," he said. "Then someone made me a negroni and I said, 'God! I like gin!'" Ask for a classic, with one ounce each gin, Campari, and sweet vermouth, or ask allow the expert mixologists to tinker with this Italian concoction.

15 Romolo Place, SF. (415) 398-1359, www.15romolo.com

BAMBUDDHA LOUNGE

Now that summertime parties around the pool have gone — DJs inside? Really? — the top reason to stop by this bar at the Phoenix Hotel is its stellar cocktails. Try the **Lycheetini**, a delightful, Internet boom-reminiscent drink made with Damrak gin, lychee juice, a splash of cointreau, and a lychee at the bottom of the glass (though I ask, how do you look at a disrobed lychee and not think of eyeballs?). Also worth mentioning is the **Ginger Snap**, whose ginger and cointreau combo is good with vodka, as the menu states it's supposed to be made, but even better with gin.

601 Eddy, SF. (415) 885-5088, www.bambuddhalounge.com

ELIXIR

With a building that's been home to neighborhood bars since at least 1858, superstar bartender H. Ehrmann, and a seasonal cocktail menu featuring fresh, sustainable, culinary-inspired ingredients, this Mission District favorite exemplifies the cocktail culture that's made room for gin's return. Order something off the ever-changing menu, or ask for our favorite: the **basil gimlet** with Damrak. The citrus-flavor of this genever-style gin from the Netherlands (said to be made from the same recipe used in the 1700s) blends so smoothly with fresh herbs, the uninformed might be fooled into thinking they're drinking vodka. In fact, bartender Walton sometimes serves this concoction as a "vodka-crossover," letting new customers taste and love it before admitting what's in it.

3200 16th St, SF. (415) 552-1633, www.elixirsf.com

DOSA ON FILLMORE

Mixologist Jonny Raglin, of Absinthe and Nopa fame, has almost single-handedly made Dosa's new outpost the talk of the tippling town with his spice-driven cocktails. We can't get enough of the **Bengali Gimlet**, made with Tanqueray Rangpur and curry (really) or the **Elephant Parade**, a sweet-meets-savory concoction of No. 209, pineapple gomme, ginger, and cilantro. Who needs dinner?

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