

Where drink comes from...

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London

Sipsmith gin

A small studio in Hammersmith is now home to a grand adventure in artisan distilling, where engineering and expertise combine to create a spirit with spirit

Popularised by the Dutch – hence the phrase ‘Dutch courage’ – and once thought to protect against the plague, gin is the tippie that refreshed the British Raj and reputedly ruined mothers. If there was one city that took gin to heart, it was London. So much so that a characteristic style emerged, London dry gin.

The style remains popular, yet today hardly any is produced within the city itself and, until last year, no new stills – the distilling apparatus – had been built for 189 years. Then Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall founded Sipsmith gin in a studio on a quiet street in Hammersmith. It took a tortuous 18 months to get a licence to distil – HM Revenue & Customs hadn’t issued one in a generation and no one knew exactly how to do it. The handwritten licence now sits framed on the wall. “We were expecting a scroll with a wax seal,” laughs Sam.

Sam and Fairfax grew up together and each went on to work in the drinks industry. Inspired by the boom in American micro-distilleries, they decided to start their own business. They were soon joined by master distiller Jared Brown and began producing small quantities of London dry gin and vodka. “We believe things taste better when made properly in small batches,” says Sam.

Perhaps the most important member of the team is Prudence, their one-of-a-kind copper pot still, designed in conjunction with Germany’s oldest

distillery producers. Into this goes the base spirit, which is heated to 78°C. The alcohol boils and the resulting vapour is captured and condensed back into a liquid, now with a strength of 90 per cent abv.

Having separated and rejected the harsh alcohol known as the ‘head’ and ‘tail’, the remaining liquid – the ‘heart’ – is poured back into Prudence along with the botanicals that add flavour: juniper berries, orris root, coriander seeds, angelica root, liquorice root, ground almond, cinnamon, cassia bark and citrus peel. The distillation is then repeated, and the new liquid captured and blended with spring water from Gloucestershire.

The taste lingers in the mouth and is incredibly smooth and dry, with the initial perfumed juniper taste giving way to citrus flavours. “It’s a gin you can actually sip neat,” says Sam.

A traditional use is in the classic G&T, for which Fairfax recommends Fever-Tree tonic water. “Pack the glass with plenty of ice – too little and it’ll melt, diluting the taste,” he adds.

Jared, however, suggests ringing the changes with a lady grey martini. For this, he steeps four tablespoons of lady grey tea leaves in a bottle of Sipsmith gin for two hours to impart their flavour. To 50ml of this heady infusion, he adds 25ml of lemon juice and 25ml simple syrup (made from equal parts caster sugar and water) and the white of an egg. He gives it a masterful shake without ice – to build up a frothy creaminess – before shaking again with ice, and serving in a martini glass.

The result is incredibly refreshing, and combines, in a new and exciting way, the traditional British love of gin and tea. The Sipsmith boys, meanwhile, are following that other great British tradition of men tinkering in sheds and lock-ups and creating wonderful, interesting things.

Sipsmith London Dry Gin is available in a limited number of Waitrose branches (E24/70c); also see waitrose.com/wine.



Jared Brown, Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall, opposite middle left, left to right, are proud of their shiny still, Prudence. Juniper, coriander seeds and cinnamon, centre, are some of the flavourings used. Jared rustles up a lady grey martini, bottom right