

Botanics in a bottle

Propelled by dynamic craft spirit makers and cutting-edge mixologists, the Australian gin scene is growing up

AUSTRALIA IS IN THE MIDDLE

of a gin renaissance. Driven by distilleries, boutique bars and mastermind mixologists, we are becoming more “gintrified” than ever. Our consumption of juniper juice is booming and our craft distilleries are collecting prestigious international awards.

The secret, it seems, is the Indigenous ingredients being used – native myrtle, Tasmanian pepperberry, finger limes and wattle seed – wielded with wizardry in sheds and wineries across the country.

Andrew Marks of the Melbourne Gin Company makes gin at his parent’s winery, Gembrook Hill Vineyard, in the Yarra Valley, 50 minutes from Melbourne. He takes a winemaking approach, distilling all 11 botanicals separately – including local grapefruit peel, macadamias and sandalwood – to better gauge the effect each has on the finished product. They’re then blended and cut back with filtered rainwater collected from the roof of the property.

“There’s no book on how to make gin so, for me, it was a journey of discovery; a journey into alchemy learning the botanicals,” he says.



“There’s a strong appetite for ‘local’ in a lot of facets of people’s lives; they’re trying to support farming and producers and this is just another avenue to do so,” says Andrew.

The West Winds Gin from Western Australia and Victorian-based Four Pillars have put Australian gin on the map. Four Pillars, also based in the Yarra Valley, scooped the San Francisco World Spirits Competition last year, winning double gold medals for its gin, which uses native Australian botanical ingredients and is distilled using a German-made custom copper pot and still.

Four Pillars’ Cameron McKenzie, a winemaker, and others such as Sacha La Forgia of 78 Degrees in the Adelaide Hills have been drawn to the craft by the opportunity to experiment with botanicals and flavour.

Oddly though, the story of Australia’s craft gin craze actually begins with whisky. Up until recently, small-scale distilling was illegal under the Distillation Act of 1901. But Tasmanian Bill Lark was eager to take advantage of the state’s pristine water, cool climate and barley fields, so he approached his local Member



GIN CITY
Main and right: Four Pillars, the art of making gin. Below: The West Winds Gin's copper still



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modern era, a new wave of gin that would become defined by the Australian botanicals used in the distilling process.

Caroline Childerley, founder of Australia’s most popular gin blog, *The Gin Queen*, also believes that the international accolades are linked to the Indigenous ingredients used. “Most of the producers are looking to native botanicals such as lemon myrtle and finger limes, so they’re

not just producing an Australian gin, they’re producing a gin that has ‘Australianness’ to it,” she says. Childerley also credits boutique bars for spreading the word about Australian gin, with mixologists educating customers on what’s available and how it’s made.

Shaun Byrne, who managed Melbourne’s Gin Palace for eight years before becoming a gin consultant to other bars and producers, and co-founding Maidenii Vermouth, agrees that bartenders’ use of gin has increased the drink’s reach. “It’s one of the most

of Parliament, who called the then-small business minister in Canberra. Hobart’s Lark Distillery opened in 1992 on the first license issued to distil spirits in Tasmania since 1839. Bill became known as “the godfather of Australian whisky”.

But behind every good godfather is a great godmother. “I feel like a bit of a fraud,” says Bill. “My wife Lyn was the one responsible for our gin.” Lyn began distilling botanicals when Lark Distillery first opened, resulting in their world-famous Godfather Pepperberry Gin. Their initial batch, released in 1996, was the first of the



SCHOOLED

Bass and Flinders' Victorian masterclass teaches the curious the art of gin making



versatile spirits. That's what bartenders want to use and drink, so that's what the customers are going to start drinking. There's usually a two- or three-year lag. Negronis are the perfect example; it's the drink of choice this year for sure," he says.

Support has come via crowd-funding campaigns that have kick-started local gin companies. Griffin Blumer and Thomas Kennedy took a native botanical leaf out of Four Pillars' book and launched a Pozible



campaign to get Poor Toms Gin off the ground in Sydney. Inspired by the success of Four Pillar's campaign two years ago, they pledged \$20,000 to produce their first batch. When the campaign finished in mid July, they were just shy of \$70,000. "It proved that a lot of people are really keen to try new gins and are excited about the sophisticated and diverse distilling scene in Australia," says Griffin.

He's right. Small-batch gin companies are even opening distillery doors to offer imaginative gin experiences for visitors keen to learn the craft. Bass & Flinders on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, Kangaroo Island Spirits in South Australia, McHenry & Sons in Tasmania and Sydney's Archie Rose all offer hands-on gin masterclasses. It's just one way that people are choosing to explore juniper juice.

"People want to know the story behind how something is made and I think craft gin offers that," says Griffin. "Craft isn't just a method of production - it's an attitude." ★

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VIC

Four Pillars Distillery

Tour the facilities, then head to the bar at this destination distillery.
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fourpillarsgin.com.au

QLD

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