The History of Gin

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Franciscus de la Boë (1614—1672), professor of medicine at Leiden University, Holland, is generally credited with being the originator of the botanical flavoured spirit known as gin. Some reference texts refer to Professor Franciscus Sylvius, but in fact this was a *nom de plume* for de la Boë. His product, pot-distilled from rye, and re-distilled with juniper and other botanicals, was called by the French name *Essence de Genièvre* owing to its strong juniper aroma. This later appeared as the Dutch 'Geneva,' and was finally abridged to 'Gin' in English.

'Juniper *Wine*' had been produced in France since the 16th century. Invented by Count de Morret, the son of Henry IV, it was known as the 'wine of the poor.' However, the new *spirit* was entirely different. De la Boë produced the spirit for medicinal purposes only, particularly as a remedy for troops suffering from East Indian fevers. His *essence de Genièvre* contained juniper for the kidneys, coriander for the stomach and calamus for colic.

English troops, who had only been accustomed to drinking *vin ordinaire*, discovered the beneficial effects of 'the burning wine.' On their campaigns in the Low Countries, under Sir Philip Sidney, many took to drinking the spirit and this is said to be the origin of the expression 'Dutch courage.'

> Meanwhile my friend, 'twould be no sin
> To mix more water with your gin
> We're neither saints nor Philip Sidneys,
> But mortal men with mortal kidneys.
>
> JOHN MASEFIELD—*The Everlasting Mercy*

Eventually, the spirit was brought over to England, when it was known as 'Hollands' or 'Geneva.' The English soon began to make it for themselves by distillation in pot stills and gin became extremely popular as an alcoholic beverage. (Some spirits were already being made in England from the dregs of beer or wine. The quality of the product, which was generally called 'Bleu John,' was very poor.)

Until the reign of Charles I, the manufacture of spirits remained uncontrolled. Dr. Thomas Cademan, Physician to Queen Henrietta Maria, suggested the formation of the 'Worshipful Company of Distillers,' and only its members were entitled to distil spirits in London. English grain was utilized extensively for the production of spirits.

Oliver Cromwell, Charles II and James II all gave permission for the distillation of spirits but, because of an amicable foreign policy with France, the importation of French brandy swamped the popularity of English gin.

A drastic change took place after 1688, when James II fled to France. William III and Mary succeeded to the English throne, and since William of Orange was himself a Dutchman, he encouraged the production of gin. In 1690, the importation of French brandy and foreign spirits was prohibited. William issued charters encouraging the use of surplus English grain for the production of gin, and it became 'patriotic' to drink the spirit. It was even supplied to some workers as part of their wages. The English had been transformed from a nation of wine drinkers to a nation of spirit drinkers.

No quality control was exercised in gin production at this time, and when Queen Anne (1702–14) cancelled the privileges of the Worshipful Company of Distillers, the situation became worse. Gin of extremely poor quality, containing such ingredients as turpentine, aniseed and sulphuric acid (added to give it a kick) was sold in the streets, on market stalls, by barbers and tobacconists and hawked from door to door. As one contemporary writer put it—'One half of the town seems set up to furnish poison to the other half.'

Drunkenness and deaths from alcoholism increased and gin became infamous as a cause of poverty, rise in crimes and ill-health. 'Gin-drinkers liver'—a term applied to atrophic cirrhosis of the liver caused by excessive alcohol—became a very common disease. Children were seen drunk in the streets, and apothecaries set up their own distilleries to cope with the demand, selling the product at about 1d. a pint. 'Gin-shops' became very common and notices such as that outside a Southwark shop—'Drunk for 1d., dead drunk for 2d., Clean straw for nothing'—led to an acute increase in the consumption of gin.

The situation at this time is suitably expressed in Hogarth's painting *Gin Lane* (1751), which shows the poor in a state of intoxication, famished and dying, while others, aided by the pawnbroker, are well on the way to similar fates; even the houses are falling to pieces from neglect.

The consumption of gin had increased tremendously in a generation, rising from 0.5m. gallons in 1690 to 5m. gallons in 1729. At this time, the Middlesex magistrates estimated there were 7044 regular 'dram-shops' in London, *ie*, one house in four sold gin.

Following petitions from Bristol, Salisbury, Rochester, Manchester and Norwich, an attempt to improve the situation was made in 1729, when a tax of 5s. per gallon was imposed on gin and retailers were obliged to purchase a licence costing £20 per year. Hawking on the streets was also prohibited. However, this act had no effect since distillers avoided the duty by issuing a flavourless, low-quality spirit which was not legally classified as gin. This was known as 'Parliamentary brandy,' and was described by one writer in 1729 as 'a fiery lake that sets the brain in flames, burns up the entrails and scorches every part within.'

In 1733, the Act was repealed and another introduced, which limited the sale of spirits outside dwelling houses. This immediately transformed every dwelling house into a spirit shop!

However, in 1736, a group of Middlesex Justices presented a petition to Parliament and Sir John Jekyll, then Master of the Rolls, pioneered the introduction of further legislation which prohibited the sale of gin in quantities of less than two gallons. The cost of a distiller's licence was increased to £50, and gin was taxed at £1 per gallon. Despite these laws, in the course of seven years only 2 licences were ever taken out.

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Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister at that time, was opposed to the Bill, and said that it would lead to unrest and turmoil in the working classes. His apprehension was quickly justified when the Gin Act was made law, and serious rioting broke out. The death of 'Madame Geneva' was mourned in drunken 'funeral' processions.

Bootlegging and smuggling thrived and hawkers attempted to evade the law by peddling a 'coloured' mixture which was actually a poor quality gin; chemists sold gin in medicine bottles and it also appeared on the market in the form of various medicinal remedies, *eg*, The Cure for the Blue Devils, Make Shift, My Lady's Eye-Water, Daffy's Elixir, Blue Ruin, Flash of Lightning and Old Tom (gin with sugar added).

Surprisingly, the consumption of gin rapidly increased following the Act, but much of the duty was evaded. In 1734, the amount consumed was estimated as 13.5m. gallons and rose to 19m. gallons in 1742. Eventually, despite some opposition from several bishops, the Gin Act was repealed in 1742.

Obviously, prohibition was *not* the answer to the problem. In 1743, a new policy was drawn up by Kent, a respected distiller of that period, which repealed the 1736 Act and imposed *reasonable* revenue duties on gin. (The retail licence duty was reduced from £50 to £1, and the duty of £1 per gallon on retail sales was abolished, while the duty on the manufacturer was slightly increased.) This legislation was adopted and led to higher quality gins, at the same time bringing respect for distillers—a situation which has remained to the present day.

The ten years following the 1743 Act witnessed a series of minor reforms. Licences were only granted at the annual 'Brewster sessions' of the courts; no justice who was himself a distiller could grant a licence; licensees were not allowed to carry on the trade of grocer, chandler or distiller, etc.

Gradually over this period, with many prosecutions, the indiscriminate sale of gin was put down, but the number of licensed premises increased steadily. In 1770, there were about 2000 licensed premises in London. The registered distillers took advantage of this reform and promoted their trade by obtaining retail outlets in many towns up and down the country. In 1785, lists of 'public houses' were required by law and licences were not issued so easily. In 1790, the number of publican's spirit licences in England and Wales stood at 33,000.

With the birth of the Industrial Revolution, improvements in social conditions saw the death of the murky 'gin-shops,' and 'gin-palaces' began to appear around 1830. Although a period of beer drinking was promoted by Parliament in 1830, gin drinking never really ceased. It was the new competition of the 'beer shop' that led to the creation of 'gin-palaces,' which were said to 'absorb the wealth and health and the life of the labouring classes.'

These 'palaces' were richly furnished edifices, lavishly ornamented with mirrors and polished brass, and provided a world of glamour and fantasy for the working classes. The multiple ten-feet wide glazed doors provided a much needed escape from everyday life. By the middle of the 19th century, there were more than 5000 in London alone. Gin had risen in reputation, and gin drinks mixed with soda and bitters increased in popularity. Hospitals even began to administer it medicinally in preference to brandy.

Much of this rise in the status of gin was due to the use of cleaner spirit in its manufacture. The introduction of the Patent still (Aeneas Coffey, 1830) provided a means of obtaining rectified spirit for re-distillation with botanicals. The product contained fewer congenerics derived from the carbohydrate source of the ethanol, and so the over-all flavour was lighter. This was the inception of 'dry gin.'

However, even now, not everyone was content with the situation. Carlyle in his book *Chartism* described gin as 'Liquid madness sold at tenpence the quarten.' Temperance societies were born and they strove for prohibition of alcohol in all forms.

In 1860, an Act was passed which lowered the duty on foreign spirits, particularly French brandy; yet, because the public liked their 'Old Tom' and preferred it to brandy, sales of gin did not fall. Temperance societies persisted in their campaigns and two further Acts were passed in 1869 and 1871, in an attempt to deprive the working classes of their drinking habits. However, public opinion triumphed, and the Acts were repealed. It was *not* prohibition that was required, but improved education and social conditions.

During the latter part of the 19th century, gin production became standardized by licensed distillers, each of which used a unique recipe for its production. People's tastes changed from sweetened gins of the Old Tom type to unsweetened London dry gin. This situation has remained to the present day.

With the birth of the 'cocktail,' America brought a social revolution to gin-drinking. The word cocktail is thought to be derived from the French *coquetel*—a mixed drink known in Bordeaux for centuries. Such complex concoctions as Alabama Fog-Cutters, Lightning Smashes and Thunderbolt Cocktails appeared in England, followed by the famous Gin-Sling (gin, soda, lemon and sugar). During the 1914–18 War, gin became scarce, but triumphed in the 1920s—the 'Cocktail Age.' Since that time gin cocktails have become even more popular and, thankfully, simpler in constitution (*eg*, gin and tonic, gin and lime). Gin today is regarded as a health-giving beverage, owing to its purity and the number of beneficial herbs used in its manufacture. It is the drink of all classes—rich or poor, young or old. Alcohol is now socially accepted, but drunkenness is not. Yet the basic problem of the 18th century arises in new forms as technology introduces new drugs with which society must learn to live.

One disturbing feature about gin remains—the duty. In 1729 the duty charged was 5s. per gallon. Today, a bottle of gin (750 ml = 0.165 gallon) costing around £2.50 owes 87% of its price to duty—a sobering thought.

METHOD OF PRODUCTION

Basically, gin is made by distilling spirit in the presence of a carefully balanced selection of botanical ingredients. The botanical formulation, which always includes juniper berries, is a closely guarded secret of any one particular distiller. Botanicals which may be used include coriander seeds, calamus root, cardamom seeds, cinnamon bark, cassia bark, caraway seeds, cubeb, angelica root, almonds, fennel, geranium leaves, grains of paradise, anise, liquorice root, orris root, orange or lemon peels, nutmeg and turpentine. These botanicals are rich in essential oils which are largely responsible for the flavour of most gins.

TYPES OF GIN

Several types of gin are produced throughout the world.

Dutch Gin (Hollands; Geneva; Jenever)

Geneva still resembles the original type of gin produced in the 17th century, in that its flavour, reminiscent of almonds, is derived from the botanical ingredients *and* the source of the spirit used to make it. Production of Geneva is centred around the town of Schiedam, near Rotterdam, where supplies of local grain are readily available. Methods of manufacture have not changed significantly over three centuries.

Geneva is still distilled in pot stills, usually heated by coal fires, and this method is referred to as the *oude systeem*. Barley grain is saturated with water in a malt house, and is spread out for germination. Diastase enzymes convert the barley malt into sugar. Fermentation of the sugar produces malt, which is quickly dried to prevent excess germination.

The malt is then ground in a mill and up to 30% is added to a mash of maize or rye or both, which is contained in vats. The mixture is left to ferment, by adding yeast. In 12 to 14 h a layer of white froth covers each vat. This is known as 'Dutch yeaste' and is skimmed off, pressed dry and supplied to local bakers.

The resultant liquid is distilled in a pot still, with *low* rectification. The process is repeated twice more to yield a spirit, *not* neutral in character, known as *moutwyn* or 'malt-wine'. The malt wine is then re-distilled with juniper berries and other botanicals to produce Geneva—which is still heavy in malt flavour, but now also flavoured with juniper. (An alternative method of production is to immerse the botanicals directly into the mash of cereals, prior to distillation.)

Geneva is distilled over at lower proof (94° to 98°) than London dry gin and is generally aged in bond. By law, it must contain 35% of alcohol by volume. It is generally sold in cruchons (stone jars), and is usually drunk neat and ice cold. Bols and De Kuyper are the best known brands in Britain, while Bokma is popular in the Netherlands.

Plymouth Gin

In 1793, a former refectory of the Dominican monastery (built ca. 1425) was first used as a distillery for the production of Plymouth gin. The Black Friars refectory is still in existence to-day, but is not now used for production purposes. J. B. Priestley described Plymouth gin as the gin 'with a suggestion of a fresh morning at sea about it.' The gin, which has a distinctive flavour, was very popular with the Royal Navy. Indeed, it was they who first added Angostura bitters (from Trinidad) to Plymouth gin to give the famous 'pink gin.' The production of Plymouth gin is very localized. Messrs. Coates & Co. (Plymouth) Ltd. are the sole agents for its manufacture (with the exception of New Zealand, Germany and Italy, where it is produced under licence).

The secret of the success of Plymouth gin derives from the soft pure water which runs from the river Meavy, through the granite of Dartmoor. Spirit is obtained from *grain* whisky distilleries in Strathclyde, or occasionally from a London grain spirit supplier.

During the war, molasses spirit had to be used, much to the disgust of the manufacturers. Eventually, however, the switch was made back to grain spirit, and this was commemorated by the following telegram sent from Glasgow—

> From the land of Scotch and Bonnie Lasses,
> We're glad you've given up Molasses
> and Plymouth Gin is once again,
> The very best and made from grain.

The grain spirit is pumped into the still and reduced with the famous water to ca. 25° over proof and the spirit is rectified. The spirit is then pumped into a pot still and the botanicals are added. The centre portion of the distillation is reduced in strength, taken into bond and bottled as Plymouth gin. 'Plym-Gin,' as it is affectionately called, is exported to 80 overseas markets.

London Dry Gin

This is the most famous and most popular English gin. The description relates to the process of production, and not to the geographical location of the distillery.

London dry gin is produced from rectified spirit, by re-distillation with certain botanicals. It can be clear (like Gilbey's, Gordon's, etc.) or straw-coloured (like Booth's).

The term 'dry', as applied to London dry gin, means that the over-all flavour content is low. This arises since the gin is distilled from extremely pure spirit and a low proportion of botanical ingredients. For a fuller description of the production process, see Simpson (1966).

Old Tom

The origin of the term 'Old-Tom' is somewhat vague. It was known as far back as 1730. Captain Dudley Bradstreet, a former Government spy, obtained the gin from a distiller, and sold it to the public. He rented a house, nailed the sign of a cat to his window, and inserted a flexible pipe into its paw. Passers-by were invited to put their money into the cat's mouth and say 'Puss! Give me 2d. worth of gin.' Bradstreet would then pour a measure of the spirit down the tube to the customer's bottle. Even though this practice was illegal, he netted over £200 per month.

Another explanation of the term was given by Boord's (Distillers) Ltd. of London (Est. 1726). They established that Old Tom referred to Old Thomas Chamberlain of Hodges Distillery. He was an experimenter in gin flavourings, and once added sugar syrup to London gin. One of Boord's ancient labels showed a picture of 'Old Tom' Chamberlain.

Old Tom is a gin sweetened, after distillation, to 3 to 6% w/v of sugar (or occasionally glycerine). Occasionally the sugar syrup is flavoured with orange flower water, and is known as *capillaire*. Old Tom is no longer popular in England, but is still exported.

Other Gins

Other lesser known 'gins' include the following—

Steinhager (Germany) or *Borovicka* (Hungary) is distilled from crushed fermented juniper berries. It is twice distilled to a final alcoholic strength of 70° to 85° proof.

Sloe gin is made by steeping the bruised fruit in finished gin, usually with the addition of a little sugar syrup. The berries used are obtained from *Prunus spinosa*, black thorn, and they have an acid tang.

Rue gin is gin flavoured with rue, an evergreen shrub with bitter, strongly scented leaves.

Orange, *lemon*, *apple* and *blackcurrant* gins are also produced by steeping the appropriate fruit in finished gin.

Pink gin is gin flavoured with Angostura bitters.

Wacholder, a German spirit of gin character, is made from juniper, spirit and sugar syrup.

Schnapps is usually made by flavouring a Dutch-style gin with aromatic herbs.

Golden gin is gin aged in sherry casks, colouring being extracted from the wood. Golden gin can also be made by the addition of caramel or Paxerette (very dark sweet wine) to finished gin.

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