



Is Gin The New Vodka?

**Vodka once replaced gin;
will gin now return the favor?**

By Hope S. Philbrick

“Look at any of the top bars in Tokyo or London. They use spirits that have some flavor to them, and gin has always been their choice. It’s always been one of the most cutting-edge and coolest of spirits.”

— Jamie Walker, global ambassador for Bombay Sapphire gin

A *vodka martini; shaken, not stirred.* If you are in the habit of ordering James Bond’s signature drink, you might be surprised to learn that plenty of people think you’re doing it all wrong.

First of all, “You should never shake a martini,” says Jamie Walker, master mixologist and global brand ambassador for Bombay Sapphire. “Shaking bruises, damages and dilutes the drink.” Because a martini “is so delicate and has such a subtle flavor,” Walker recommends stirring it with lots of ice.

Then there’s the issue of vodka versus gin. “Prior to World War II, there was no vodka in this country,” says Dale DeGross, author of *The Craft of the Cocktail*. Martinis were exclusively made with gin until Smirnoff began marketing the *vodka martini*, which made “serious inroads into gin sales,” he says. “By 1968, vodka supplanted gin as the favorite in martinis.”

Hollywood didn’t help. In Ian Fleming’s first Bond book, *Casino Royale* (1953), the main character orders a dry martini in chapter seven, specifying the recipe as three measures of gin (Bond preferred Gordon’s), one of vodka (Russian or Polish) and a half-measure of Kina Lillet (as vermouth). This concoction was named Vesper after the Bond girl du jour. But when Sean Connery ordered a cocktail in the movie *Goldfinger* (1962), the recipe was altered to replace the gin with vodka, due to Smirnoff product placements. The

drink caught on in popular culture.

But some gin fans (as well as others who are adventurous or less easily swayed by trends) have stayed true to the original martini recipe.

“In 2004, nearly 11 million 9-liter cases of gin were sold in the United States, generating over \$869 million in revenue for distillers,” says Shawn Kelley, public relations director for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. “At retail, this volume was worth around \$2.7 billion, including restaurant and tavern sales. Americans’ desire to drink better, super-premium brands drove growth, causing a 7.2% increase in both volume and revenue.” The growth in the super-premium category is critical, considering that overall gin product sales volume in 2004 was down 1.7 percent and sales revenue was down 0.5 percent compared to 2003. During the same time, vodka accounted for 25 percent of the U.S. spirits market, at 44.1 million cases and \$3.3 billion.

Of course, some say that a martini is a misconceived drink entirely. “It’s interesting that martinis have glamour and prestige, but the No. 1-selling drink overall is a gin and tonic,” says Dan Kelley, vice president of global brand development for Brown-Forman Distillers Co. To tap into the gin-and-tonic market, Kelley explains that his company’s new gin product, Stellar (which is currently being tested in the Atlanta

area), was designed specifically for mixing with tonic.

Gin and tonic was first popularized in India, when the subcontinent was still under British rule. Quinine, a “tonic” against malaria, is bitter; so to make the stuff palatable, it was mixed with gin, soda water and a slice of lemon or lime (citrus was chosen as the garnish because it can help prevent scurvy). While the medicinal benefits of the mixture are arguably limited, the refreshing beverage caught on.

Today, cocktails are enjoying a renaissance, and as a result, gin is enjoying a new spotlight. New drink recipes and books are popping up all over. Mixology “has taken a bit of a culinary bent,” says DeGross. “What you have is ‘bar chefs.’ The culinary revolution has left fertile ground for young people to move into alcoholic beverages in a similar way as the young chef movement.”

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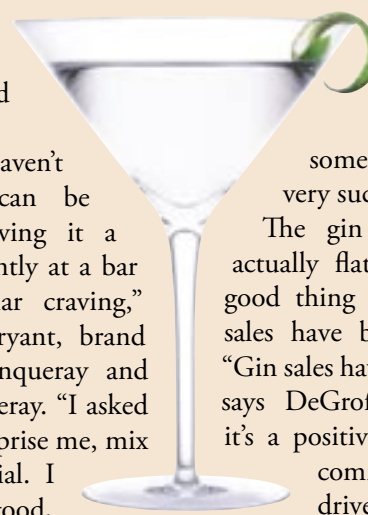
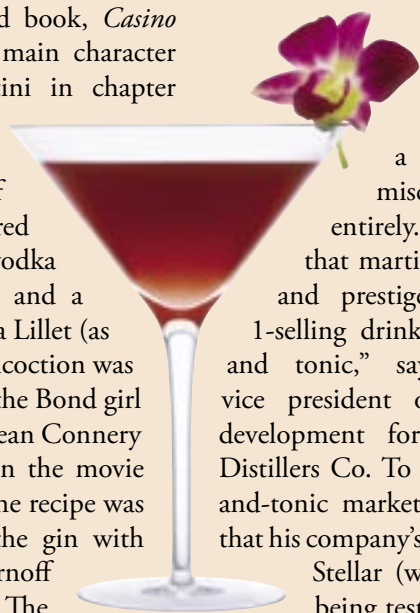
People who haven’t often tried gin can be surprised when giving it a chance. “I was recently at a bar without a particular craving,” says Sarah Beth Bryant, brand ambassador for Tanqueray and No. TEN by Tanqueray. “I asked the bartender to surprise me, mix up something special. I tasted and it was good,

but I asked him to add some No. TEN by Tanqueray. He looked at me like I was crazy, but he did it. I let him have a taste, and his eyes opened wide—he loved it! Gin is a product that people aren’t always as familiar with, but they’re discovering it.”

“Gin is high proof. It’s 94.6 proof, while a typical vodka is 80 proof,” says Bryant. That difference gives gin a hotter edge. And while vodka by definition is flavorless, gin is *supposed* to have a distinctive taste. Gin is a distilled spirit made from grain and flavored with juniper berries. From that basis, distillers vary their gin recipes by adding other botanicals.

“One of the trends we find in the beverage alcohol industry is flavors,” says Michael A. Venezia, corporate director of education for United Distributors, Inc. “We’ve seen all sorts of flavoring agents added to vodka, from citrus to vanilla. Rum has embraced that tack after seeing how successful the vodka category is. Gin has been very traditional, but producers are embracing flavoring agents to appeal to a more youthful consumer. They are trying to reinvent the category and in some cases are becoming very successful.”

The gin sales trend line is actually flattening—and that’s a good thing for a product whose sales have been on the decline. “Gin sales have stopped shrinking,” says DeGross. “In my opinion, it’s a positive step. New gins are coming onto the market driven by market research



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and an attempt by producers to find a gin that people in the 21-to-35 crowd will like. Distillers have changed the flavor profile so the traditional Christmas tree spice is a little buried, not out front signaling to the drinker, ‘This is the old stuff Grandpa drank.’ The new gins make great cocktail bases and are fun to work with.”

“Gin is poised to enjoy some growth as we move forward in this decade,” says Venezia. “Our research and the research our suppliers share with us show some upcurves in sales.”

“Gin has always been the most versatile of spirits,” says Walker.

“There are lots of different styles of gin. Bombay Sapphire flavors are subtle and layered.” The flavor of gin can be so delicate, he says, that different tastes can be achieved simply by varying the garnishes. As for Bond, well, “he must be held accountable for so many things, in my opinion,” Walker says. Like any gin fan, Walker adds that a vodka martini “is the bland sibling of the real thing.”

Hope Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

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