

A GIN RESURGENCE

Local drinks feature this old-fashioned liquor that has seen a recent rise in popularity.

By Eileen Keighley



The Lobby Lounge's Cool Cucumber cocktail

FROM GLAMOROUS PARTIES TO JAZZ JOINTS, GIN HAS HAD A HOME IN LUXURY NIGHTLIFE venues for ages. Its unique allure has lent itself to a strong history—upon signing paperwork to repeal prohibition, even President Roosevelt mixed himself a gin martini—and now, the sale of premium gin is growing globally, driven by millennials who are seeking quality and flavor, and fueled by a revitalized gin industry full of innovative craft gin companies.

“When most people think of gin, they think of juniper,” says Carl Nolet Jr., president and CEO of Aliso Viejo-based Nolet Spirits USA. “But with the evolution of the category, consumers are gravitating toward ... gins that feature exciting, nontraditional botanicals.” In fact, Nolet’s Silver uses signature botanicals such as peach, raspberry and even Turkish rose.

With the addition of these cutting-edge selections, gin drinkers have plenty of options available. The vast choices range from established names like Plymouth Gin and Tanqueray to versatile and more quirky contenders like D. George Benham’s Sonoma Dry Gin, distilled using flavors of California citrus, and Calamity Gin, which contains wildflowers like the Texas Bluebonnet.

Here in Laguna Beach, many bars and restaurants are following the trend as well. Try these local libations to sample this old-fashioned liquor for yourself.

MONTAGE LOBBY LOUNGE

Bursting with vibrant colors and ingredients, the Cool Cucumber, found in the Lobby Lounge at Montage Laguna Beach, is a gin-based cocktail served over ice with verjus, the pressed juice of unripened grapes, which gives it a tart freshness that is perfect for spring. The bar uses Plymouth Gin, a variety that is smooth yet spicy on the tongue with an earthy flavor. The resort’s beverage manager, Troy Smith, developed the cocktail and believes that the “Plymouth Gin gives it a silky texture and [a] slightly more savory character, which complements the slightly bitter notes of the cucumber and grapefruit essence.” Along with the gin and verjus, the drink contains cucumber juice, grapefruit peel, lemon juice, a sugar cube and egg white, then it’s finished off with soda. The Cool Cucumber is served in a typical Collins glass and topped with a cucumber ribbon garnish. (866-271-6953; montagehotels.com)



The Easy Brooklyn is crafted with Brooklyn Gin.

SPLASHES

One of the most innovative cocktails in town, the Easy Brooklyn, takes its name from Brooklyn Gin, which is made by hand in a small distillery in New York using fresh citrus and hand-cracked juniper berries. The award-winning gin is combined with yellow bell pepper, house-made lemon grass syrup and fresh lemon, then served in a classic martini glass at Splashes. “[Gin] is definitely making moves, and people are requesting it more,” says Matt Heinz, outlets manager for Surf & Sand Resort. “... It’s rare that I see bell peppers used in cocktails and, while most of our cocktails at Surf & Sand are more beach-themed, I feel like this is one of the more unique cocktails.” Heinz adds that many diners are seeking something different when they look at menus, and that this refreshing cocktail offers just that. (877-741-5908; surfandsandresort.com)

LEFT: COURTESY OF MONTAGE LAGUNA BEACH; RIGHT: COURTESY OF SURF & SAND RESORT



The gin used in the Tainted Saint is distilled with rose petals.

REUNION KITCHEN & DRINK

Few liquors are as famous as Hendrick's Gin, named the best gin in the world by The Wall Street Journal in 2003. Used locally in the Tainted Saint, a cocktail created by a longtime member of the Reunion team who passed away last year, this gin is distilled with rose petals and cucumber for a fresh and floral flavor profile. While martinis remain one of the most popular cocktails at Reunion, the Tainted Saint also has a strong following among locals. It has a simple serve: over a sphere of ice, featuring St-Germain elderflower liqueur along with muddled mint and cucumber. The muddling of the mint leaves produces flakes of green throughout the clear drink. Now that the Laguna location has a full liquor license, Bar Manager Lance Maccarthy likes to mix up the cocktail list. "Gin is making a comeback. ... In summertime, it's cool and refreshing," he explains. "Customers usually ask for [the] Tainted Saint when looking for something a bit different. ... Hendrick's has the right flavor profile to go with the elderflower." (949-226-8393; reunionkitchen.net)

DUTCH MULE

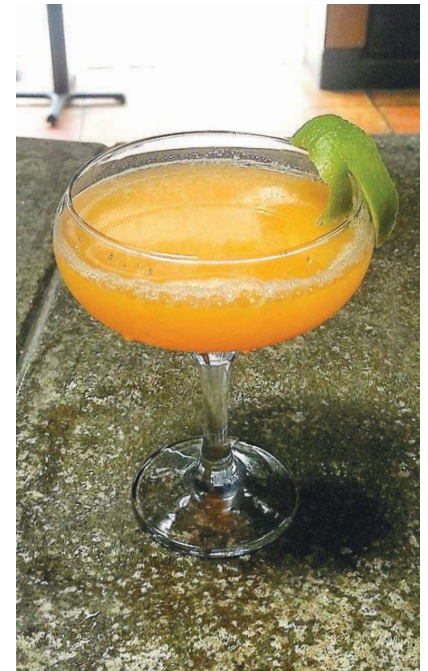
1.25 ounces Nolet's Silver gin
 4 ounces ginger beer
 1 grapefruit wheel
 1 mint sprig
 Build in a Burgundy glass with ice. First add a grapefruit wheel, then ice, Nolet's Silver and ginger beer. Garnish with a sprig of mint.



The Dutch Mule

THREE SEVENTY COMMON KITCHEN & DRINK

Known for its innovative food menu, Three Seventy Common also offers a wealth of unique drinks. One option is the On & On. Made with Burnett's gin, blood orange coulis, lemon juice and Pineau des Charentes—a fortified wine created with eau de vie (a brandy) and unfermented grape juice—this light and refreshing cocktail has an interesting flavor profile. It's finished with a lime twist and served in a coupe glass, making a perfect homage to the season. "[It features] tart, bright flavors," says Tyler Benson, the eatery's bar manager. "The tartness helps bring your palate back to life after the heavy winter season. It is served with Burnett's gin, which is smooth, fresh and a very easy-going gin." This classic brand offers strong notes of juniper with more subtle citrus flavors, but is still thin enough to taste the other ingredients in the drink. (949-494-8686; 370common.com)



Blood orange coulis and a fortified wine are among ingredients in the tart On & On.



Icy Gin, made with cinnamon simple syrup and a white wine aperitif

SELANNE STEAK TAVERN

The Icy Gin is a simple yet elegant cocktail. Its inspiration? Bar Manager Neil Matchko of Selanne Steak Tavern names the Vesper cocktail, made famous by James Bond in "Casino Royale." It is surprisingly smooth and flavorful, made with lemon juice for a refreshing twist. The drink also contains Nolet's Silver, cinnamon simple syrup and Lillet Blanc, a French white wine aperitif that is fruity but not overly sweet. To get the icy look, the mixture is vigorously shaken—not stirred, as Bond would say—with ice, then strained, leaving a smooth icy layer floating on top of the drink. Matchko explains that the secret to achieving the cocktail's smoothness lies in the aperitif: "Nolet's Silver is a true high-end gin with great flavor complexity, and the Lillet Blanc softens the gin." (949-715-9881; selannesteaktaavern.com) LBM

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF REUNION KITCHEN & DRINK; COURTESY OF NOLET'S GIN; COURTESY OF THREE SEVENTY COMMON KITCHEN & DRINK; COURTESY OF SELANNE STEAK TAVERN