



Gin o'clock

While the good old G&T has always gone down well, the slew of new gin brands on SA's shelves is giving the beverage a different, homely essence. **By Richard Holmes**

From Australia to the UK, craft gins have become the hottest bottle behind the bar and local distillers have been quick to catch onto the trend: in the wake of the craft beer revolution, burnished copper potstills across SA are bubbling away as distillers dabble in small-batch gins.

Like wine, craft gins are increasingly showing their "terroir", as African botanicals are blended into the traditional mix of juniper, citrus and herbs. Perhaps the most interesting examples come from the Western Cape, where fynbos flavours loom large, with distillers using everything from buchu to kapokbos and honeybush in a bid to create unique gins that are

distinctly South African.

"A lot of commercial spirits are one-dimensional, whereas craft gin has many ways of being made and appreciated," says Rolf Zeitvogel, Cellar Master of Blaauwklippen estate outside Stellenbosch. "There's more and more interest from consumers in how gin is made and where it's from."

"No two gins are the same, because the recipe is unique and the stills are unique," adds Lucy Beard, who started Cape Town's Hope on Hopkins distillery with partner Leigh Lisk. "Making a gin is more like being a chef than being a distiller, because the flavour components are so important to the product."

A wander through any decent

liquor store quickly shows the boom in the category, with over a dozen craft gins on the market, matched by a sharp rise in the number of premium tonic waters to help you craft the ultimate gin and tonic. Little surprise, then, that this classic cocktail has spawned a home-grown G&T Festival, which took place in both Cape Town and Johannesburg earlier this year.

It's the perfect cocktail for sultry summer days, so as the weather warms up, it's time to ditch that bottle of anodyne, mass-produced gin and pour a measure of local craft. Add a few blocks of ice, a splash of tonic and a twist of lemon peel and you have the perfect South African sundowner. Cheers!

INVERROCHE DISTILLERY, STILBAAI

This family-owned distillery outside the Southern Cape holiday town of Stilbaai is one of the pioneers of the local craft gin movement and botanicals from the Cape Floral Kingdom are a defining feature of its three artisanal gins, crafted in a wood-fired copper potstill.

The elegant Classic and spice-infused Verdant are well suited for sipping over a few blocks of ice, but for many locals, it's the fynbos-infused Amber that's most alluring. The recommended serve is over ice, with a splash of tonic and a sliver of orange peel. Tutored tastings and guided tours of the distillery are available.

Visit: www.inverroche.co.za



How gin is made

Gin is simply a neutral alcohol infused with botanicals. To qualify as a gin, one of those botanicals must be juniper and to be called a London Dry, juniper must be the dominant botanical. Producers then use a range of distillery skills and botanical blends to lend their product an entirely unique flavour profile.

Often, that begins with the neutral alcohol: many producers buy in distilled neutral alcohol, but the best craft distillers create their own base spirit. Cape Town distillery Hope on Hopkins uses malted barley, while

Distillery 031 uses molasses from local sugar cane. The neutral spirit is then re-distilled with the chosen blend of botanicals, either immersing them in the bottom of the still or suspending them in a wire basket in the neck of the copper still. As the alcohol vapours pass through the basket, they're infused with the flavours of the botanicals. The distilled spirit – redolent with flavour, thanks to the carefully chosen recipe of botanicals – is then diluted using purified water down to an average strength of 43% alcohol by volume and bottled.