



STEAM TECH: Pienaar & Son distillery in Cape Town Picture: SUPPLIED

Reshuffle your (drinks) cabinet

What better use could there be for fynbos than to flavour a range of uniquely South African craft gins? Be your own ratings agency and try them all. By **Mart-Marié du Toit**

In his big cabinet reshuffle, President Jacob Zuma took action against those who have been critical of him. Goodbye Pravin Gordhan, hello junk status. In light of these momentous developments, the time has come for you to take a long, hard look at your drinks cabinet and do some reshuffling of your own. The South African gin movement has taken on a life of its own. It's a revolution in all its fynbos-, rooibos-, clemengold- and spekboom-flavoured beauty.

A quick history lesson reveals that gin dates back to 17th-century Netherlands, although some believe that the Italians made gin before that. In the Netherlands it was produced as medicine to treat gout, gallstones and stomach complaints. The Dutch started to flavour it with juniper to make it more palatable. British troops fighting in the Low Countries during the 30 Years' War took these little bottles of "Dutch courage" back to England, where gin quickly became a firm favourite of the poor.

Much has changed over the centuries in terms of flavour profiles, distillation methods and

price — it is more of a high-end consumer product than a poor-man's helper. We now speak about gin using the same vocabulary that we use when tasting wine... but there is no snobbery attached to the drink, only fortified memories. As TS Eliot once said when asked about his inspiration: "Gin and drugs, dear lady, gin and drugs."

The gin revolution Kurt Schlechter, bar and beverage consultant, says the gin revolution started in Spain about 15 years ago. "The reason it came to South Africa started with local gins, Inverroche in particular, with fynbos flavours, and it's also part and parcel of the whole craft movement in the world."

In South Africa this movement started with artisanal coffee and craft beer and continued on to other products like gin and artisanal tonics. Gin is a popular



drink because it is so versatile, appeals to both men and women and allows for flavour experimentation. "In Spain, gin is served in a large wine glass," says Schlechter. "It is a tapas-style serve, which means that the condiments are on the bar counter — rosemary, thyme cucumber, star anise, cardamom pods, mint, lemon peel, orange peel, grapefruit, and so forth. You would get your gin and tonic — with a specialised tonic — and you'll actually serve yourself."

Distilling with heart

South Africa's gin distillers are going at it with gusto. According to most local distillers it all started with Lorna Scott from Inverroche in Stilbaai, who began distilling gin after experimenting with 150 different fynbos botanicals for three years. Scott explains her journey of

exploration: "I never set out to make three gins, but while experimenting with the different botanicals and the gin flavour wheel, it was almost a natural selection that took place — florals from one place, citrus from another area, and woody flavours from a third place. The gins made themselves and knew I had a story to tell."

Scott has never marketed her gin overseas, yet she exports to many different locations: "The people who come to Stilbaai on holiday effectively spread the word. Every single one of my exports have come from people receiving my gin as a gift."

It takes time

The legendary distiller Helmut Wilderer died last year but his son Christian is keeping his legacy alive, making Wilderer spirits in the Paarl region. "Worldwide, gin is most probably the biggest thing that's in fashion now. In Germany, they now have 225 gin producers. South Africa has about 20 at the moment. Spain and Belgium are the biggest consumers of gin," says Christian.

It took almost three years to launch Wilderer Fynbos Gin, with Helmut opening and emptying

every bottle to re-distill the contents. The finished product, with 27 botanicals, has been awarded gold at the Meininger International Spirits Awards in Germany.

"We tried to compose a recipe with a very complex and wide spectrum of flavours like African potato, renoosterbos, wild dagga, buchu, honeybush... A very herbaceous flavour profile." Wilderer is also South Africa's most awarded craft distillery.

Andrew Rall, from Distillery 031, says it took him about two years to get his commercial distiller's licence, and his was the first craft distillery in KwaZulu-Natal. He distilled for home use from 2008, and perfected his craft over the years. Distillery 031 also made the first barrel-aged gin in the country.

"South Africa is experiencing a craft spirits revolution and gin is the first spirit to get mainstream appeal," Rall says. "I predict that in two to three years' time other craft spirits like rum, whisky and agave will also become very popular. South Africa is an ideal country for gin production because we have an abundance of natural raw materials which allow distillers to produce interesting

GIN O'CLOCK: GET YOUR GIN FIX HERE

- Mother's Ruin** City Bowl, Cape Town
- Workshop 55** Parktown North, Johannesburg
- The Gin Bar** (behind Honest Chocolate), City Bowl, Cape Town
- Wiltshire and White Horse Company** Noordhoek, Bloemfontein
- Daddy Cool** City Bowl, Cape Town
- Social on Main** Bryanston, Johannesburg
- Carbon Bistro** Brooklyn, Pretoria



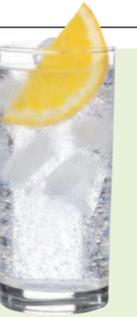
Carbon Bistro

SHAKE IT UP

A great G&T will make you forget about other spirits. Gin can be the best clear spirit in your drinks cabinet — its herbal flavour lends itself to refreshing cocktails like gimlets, smashes, martinis and punches.

An experiment by 200 mixologists (on behalf of Miller's gin) found the following: The bartenders overwhelmingly chose ice cubes over crushed ice, but they were more divided on the question of the best tonic, with 33% choosing Schweppes, 23% preferring Seagrams, 22% opting for Canada Dry and 5% going for Perrier.

When asked about proportions, 44% of the bartenders said the ideal drink is one-third gin to two-thirds tonic, with 24% opting for a stronger ratio of 40% gin to 60% tonic. And the perfect garnish? The slice of lemon (half a wheel) came out on top with 48%, followed by the lemon wedge (21%).



SA'S GIN CABINET

Kurt Schlechter, award-winning mixologist and creative drinks consultant, has weighed in with his choices for South Africa's Gin Cabinet.

"If I have to name three ministers to be part of my gin cabinet I would choose Wilderer as the minister of finance. It has a nice bold flavour, very strong, and very well made. The minister of tourism would have to be Inverroche, because they started the whole craft gin movement in South Africa. And for the minister of home affairs I would definitely choose Hope on Hopkins, they are integrated in the city of Cape Town, they are really trying to move with the people, and it is a really well-made gin. These three have three different attitudes, and will serve the people well."

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THE GREAT TONIC DEBATE

Craft tonic waters are also booming in South Africa, but not everyone is as enthusiastic about them as the makers.

"I think there is a great market opportunity for craft tonics, but they can and often do overpower the gin. Tonic should always be the supporting character," says Lorna Scott from Inverroche.

Lucy Beard, from Hope on Hopkins, agrees: "If you're spending so much money on a craft gin, make sure you get the best tonic that goes with it, because some tonics are too flavoured."

There is a range of tonics,



Lorna Scott



Lucy Beard

from commercial to artisanal, but make sure you buy an all-natural tonic that is made with spring water — otherwise your mixer could contain too much sugar and artificial products, which defeats the purpose of buying an artisanal gin.

The best tonic is the one that works for you. Craft tonic brands available locally include Swaan Tonic, Barker & Quin, Fitch & Leedes, Woodstock Tonic, Fever Tree, Socks Craft Tonic and 031 Tonic Cordial.

Not all of these craft tonics are made in South Africa, so check the label if you want a truly homegrown G&T.



and distinctive gins."

Worldly knowledge and local love

Lucy Beard distills gin, with her partner Leigh Lisk, in two stills called Mildred and Maud — the first stills licensed by the City of Cape Town — at Hope on Hopkins in Salt River. All their gins have a smooth juniper flavour but with a punchy, increasingly aromatic nose.

Beard and Lisk, who were both lawyers, saw the rise of craft gin in England and decided to make a career change. They started experimenting with different flavour profiles for their gins. Their Mediterranean Gin is salty

G&T you can enjoy at work without raising your colleagues' eyebrows. The Duchess is a pre-mixed virgin cocktail that is sugar free, calorie-free and hangover-free. On a visit to the Netherlands, Le Roux noticed that there was a movement towards sugar- and alcohol-free drinks, and knew that this would be the next big thing.

He also noticed that every restaurant he visited had a dedicated gin menu, and decided to bring the two trends together. The Duchess doesn't use artificial gin flavouring, but re-distilled juniper berries and botanically infused tonic water.

Le Roux feels gin is becoming increasingly popular because "the taste profile suits the current consumer very well".

"It has moved from sweet to complex, and the consumer now enjoys a more complex, bitter taste."

The various flavours of gin

The combination of climate, terroir and creative distillers is at the heart of South Africa's various flavours of gin. From coastal fynbos to Karoo botanicals, we have it all.

Six Dogs Karoo Gin gets its distinguishing botanicals from the Karoo, handpicked and



with hints of olive and rosemary, while their London Dry has hints of citrus. The Salt River Gin is a South African ambassador with juniper, hand-picked kapokbos and buchu from a farm in the Winterhoek Mountains and organic citrus peel from the Cederberg.

Drinking at your desk Johannes le Roux makes alcohol-free gin and tonic. Yes, you read that right, a

grown on the farm near Worcester where the distillery is based. Its Classic Dry Gin is blended from water sourced high in the nearby mountains.

Black Horse Distillery uses local grains, potatoes and pure spring water from the Magaliesberg to create a range of whiskies, gins and vodkas.

Natural sun-ripened oranges from the Eastern Cape, as well as Stellenbosch-grown organic lemons, lend their flavours to Triple Three's Citrus Infusion Gin made on the Blaauwklippen wine estate.

Spicy juniper, harvested in Paarl from South Africa's only juniper plantation, is the cornerstone of Jorgensen's Gin, distilled in Wellington.

Bloedlemon Gin, made at Hope on Hopkins, has a nose of angelica root and blood orange — perfect for warm-weather sundowners.

Red Stone Craft Gin is an orchard-to-bottle gin, with apples harvested a stone's throw from the distillery in Clarens in the Free State.

All in all, plenty of reason to expand your cabinet to Zuma-esque proportions. **LS**