D ID Y OU K NOW?

Gin was created in the 1600s in the Netherlands, but the martini is all-American, invented in the late 1800s in California.

In 2007 I met Charles, Milan Hy-Vee’s wine and spirits manager, during a trip to Illinois. He recommended Martin Miller’s London dry gin. He said that he always kept a bottle in his freezer. After a day of hard work, a small sip of ice cold Miller’s gin would mellow him.

A small sip of a fine gin sounds civilized to me. It’s a new adventure for Tara, however. Drinking gin without olives? Tara was intrigued. One weekend we blind tasted six different gins. Charles is right about the exquisite taste of Miller’s gin.

There have been more blind tastings since. In fact, blind tastings have become an essential part of our bridge game. Now my taste buds are trained to recognize the differences among various brands of gin, a spirit that I now much more respect.

Gin behaves differently when it’s sipped neat and when mixed with other ingredients. Fine gin is best for sipping, not for mixing. The exotic nuances in a fine gin are lost in mixers. For sipping, my personal favorite gins are Miller’s and Hendrick’s.

Inexpensive gins are too harsh to be drunk alone, yet they mix well. Gordon’s is a good example. Tara and I have mixed gins with many things—one time with lemon sorbet in the blender. Gordon’s always tasted best with different mixers.

There are some gins that offer satisfactory results for either sipping or mixing. If you want to give gin as a gift but are not sure of the recipient’s preference, some mid-price range ones are a safe bet; my votes go to Bombay Sapphire, No. 209 and New Amsterdam.

In addition to martinis, gin makes great refreshing highballs. For this issue, we will feature a few New Amsterdam’s cocktail recipes that are delicious and easy to make.

Wine, spirits and beer are fun and diverse. So are many of my friends. Tara and Charles are two very different persons yet amazingly special in their own ways, just like gin. Shaken or stirred, neat or on the rocks, whatever you prefer. Here’s a toast to Tara and Charles, in gratitude for their friendship. As for myself, I prefer one small sip of a beautifully crafted gin and let the moment freeze in time.

Written by Yalun Tsai, CSW, West Des Moines

S H A K E N  O R  S T I R R E D?

My appreciation for gin should be credited to Tara and Charles, two individuals I met at different points in my life.

Gin was the everyday drink of Tara’s parents when she was growing up. We played bridge every weekend. Our bridge game wasn’t anything to write home about, but Tara’s martinis and gin tonics were the best in town.

In the United States, gin was the martini of baby boomers. Now, Vodka is popular with generations X, Y and Z. In the good old days, there were many celebrities associated with gin martinis—Sir Winston Churchill and James Bond were quite the martini connoisseurs, to name just two.

Legend has it that in Churchill’s martini, there was no room for vermouth. He would only glance at the vermouth bottle while he made his martinis. James Bond created the “Vesper” martini, named after the first woman he loved. Shaken, not stirred, Bond insists.

Tara’s martini is in the fashion of Churchill’s. Tara doesn’t like her martini shaken because it would bruise her valuable gin. Twelve years and counting, together we have explored many variations of gin and have learned that not all gins are created equal.

The process of making gin is similar to that of vodka. The addition of herbal and botanical flavors to gin separates gin from vodka. The most common ingredients are juniper berries, coriander seeds, anise seeds, caraway seeds, orange peel, cardamom, licorice root, cinnamon, fennel, ginger and almonds. The chosen herbs vary among distillers. Each distiller guards its recipe with maximum secrecy and security.

The stage of production in which these herbs are added also results in the uniqueness of each gin. Some submerge the herbs in spirits in the still. Some have the vapor pass through the herbs instead.

A GREAT FIND

I am very impressed with New Amsterdam gin, made in the United States. In a taste test of 12 different gins, it stands out with memorable characteristics. It shows abundant botanical fragrance and sweet melon finish. Sipped neat or mixed with tonic water is equally enjoyable.

R E C I P E S

**ELECTROLYTE**
2 slices fresh watermelon (or 2 oz watermelon juice)  2 1/2 oz New Amsterdam gin 1 teaspoon sugar 1 oz pineapple juice  A splash of lemon juice

Muddle the watermelon slices and combine all ingredients into a cocktail shaker. Add plenty of ice. Shake vigorously for eight seconds. Pour contents into a highball glass and garnish with a watermelon slice.

**PARK AVENUE PENTHOUSE**
2 oz New Amsterdam gin 2 oz ruby grapefruit juice (fresh- squeezed preferred) 1 oz Triple Sec 1/2 lime, squeezed 1 lime wedge


A HY-VEE NEWSLETTER

enjoy life, drink sensibly
The Benziger family and I go back to October 2000 when I visited their winery on a large bus tour. Two Greyhound buses carrying 104 people showed up at the winery in early October amidst the vineyard’s harvest.

I had sent word through the winery’s web site that I was bringing 10 of my wine club members on a tour arranged by a travel agent. But somewhere along the line, our messages got crossed. Their marketing sales manager, Chris Benziger, assumed I was the one bringing my entire wine club in two big buses!

They brought out the red carpet and notified the entire family of the date and time of our arrival. The Benziger family began making plans; general manager and winemaker Mike Benziger planned to make an appearance that morning. Customer relations director, Bob Benziger, cancelled his morning appointments to be there. Joe Benziger, founder and general manager of Imagery, Benziger’s sister company, cancelled his appointments to be on hand. Chris Benziger, who is the national sales manager, postponed his travel plans to meet the person who was bringing an entire wine club of 104 members to their winery for a big tour.

Not aware of the frenzy of planning at the winery, I opted to get on the second bus, which would not arrive until later in the day. The tour company didn’t want to send both buses at the same time because of the number of people. When the Benziger personnel learned that the second bus would not arrive till 1 p.m., they reluctantly went about their busy schedules. Only Chris Benziger was left to hang around.

That afternoon, our group went on the tour, which was very interesting, by the way. The tram slowly made its trip around the vineyards—from the hilltop to the gardens, down to the caves, to the barrel room off the tasting room.

Our guide explained the Carneros Cool effect that I had read so much about. He talked about the unprotected rising slopes of the Sonoma Valley up from San Pablo Bay and how the evening fogs drifted up into the Russian River Valley, settling in each night and bringing cooler temperatures with them. It’s those cooling temperatures that make the Chardonnays more rich and complex and give the Pinot Noirs their finesse. After the sun warms the vines during the day, the night fog seeps into the valley, soothing the grape bundles and keeping the natural moisture intact.

After the tour we were inside the tasting room when in walked a shabbily dressed, rough-looking man with sandy-brown hair and a goatee. He wore a long-sleeved white T-shirt with grape stains and his hands were completely grape-stained as well. He shouted to no one in particular, “I’m looking for Dennis Connor!”

Had I touched something I wasn’t supposed to or was I in the wrong place? I slowly raised my hand and walked toward him. He reached out to shake my hand. Imagine my surprise when I learned he was Chris Benziger, the owner of the vineyard.

Chris walked toward the back wall, motioning me to follow. When the others looked away, Chris shouted for them to follow. “I’d like to take your group to our winemaking facilities and show you the grounds, tanks and maybe do some tastings!”

“Ahhhhh, OK!” I replied. It occurred to me during the extended tour that my message was misinterpreted. Still, I really got to know Chris and all about the business.

We stayed at a country estate outside of Glen Ellen, CA. There was a wondrous view of the valley. The flowers were in full bloom. Temperatures, though chilly at night, reached into the 70s during the day.

One evening we saw the Carneros Cool effect in action. Our group gathered on the deck to enjoy a bottle of Benziger’s Cabernet Sauvignon, cheese, crackers and some fruits. The fog crept in slowly as if it was alive. Seeping through the valley, it overpowered every crest and basin, seizing control of the dell, possessing every living thing in its path. The fog drew closer as we enjoyed the evening, engulfing us and everything around us.

Since then, I have gone back every season to visit the Benziger family and taste wines with them. They truly have the passion for making great wine.

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