

Gin is the tonic for a creative boom in the drinks business

By Mike Wendling BBC Radio 4



A new generation of bespoke gin distilleries is leading to a creative boom in the drinks business. Four centuries after gin was introduced to Britain, a new generation of boutique distilleries - some in residential homes - is driving a British gin revival. Behind an anonymous door in an office block in north London, serious-looking women wearing white lab coats are pouring and measuring liquids. A machine spins away on a counter, and off to the side something white and viscous is bubbling away in a flask. The din of machinery and hushed whispers in technical language bring to mind medical research or nuclear science. But all of this activity is dedicated to the art of the cocktail - and much of it is devoted to finding the perfect companion to the queen of spirits, gin.



The Drunkard's Children by George Cruikshank depicts the seedier side of London's infamous gin palaces of the mid-19th Century

Domestic distilleries

London is in the midst of a craft distilling revival.



Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall, founders of the micro-distillery, Sipsmith and their distiller, Prudence

New micro-distilleries can be found in residential houses - such as Sacred Spirits, based in London's sedate Highgate. And they're tucked away in terraces - such as gin and vodka makers Sipsmith in Hammersmith. These new distillers are a far cry from the back-street operators who turned out rough booze in the 19th Century. The gory excess of London's spirit craze at that time was gruesomely portrayed in the artwork of George Cruikshank and William Hogarth - who's print *Gin Lane* depicts dead babies, binge-drinking children and starving alcoholics.

"People are really sick of mainstream mass-produced brands"

It is not exactly a refined image of alcohol - but despite this, some of today's gin makers still take a measure of inspiration from the past. "We try to reflect the old school way of distilling, which is known as one-shot," says Sipsmith co-founder Sam Galsworthy. He proudly shows off Prudence - distillers traditionally give their stills female names. She is an impressively gleaming room-sized copper machine, but she could easily fit several times over in just one of the stills used by bigger spirits brands.

"We do not blend, we do not make a concentrate," Galsworthy says.

"People are drinking less, but they are drinking better. If they're going to have a gin and tonic, they're going to have a better gin and tonic. They're just going to have it less frequently. "That is one of the indicators that will happen in a recession."

Next big gin

And since gin is often mentioned in the same breath as tonic, perhaps it is no surprise that other business people have opted to remix the mixer.

Co-founder Charles Rolls used to work for Plymouth Gin, but he grew to hate the metallic flavour and bitter aftertaste of saccharin - the dominant sweetener in most tonic waters today.



"I was always frustrated by the fact that when we could show the differences between these great gins - the way they smell with the different botanicals - when you went to mix them, they always just smelt of the tonic."

Fever Tree, established in 2005, now produces a range of soft drinks, and Rolls says the company shipped 30 million bottles in 2011.

These new companies are operating in a tough economic climate, but even more surprising is that some are thriving in a stable-to-declining market for gin, one that is dominated by big brands with marketing clout.

Spiros Malandrakis, drinks analyst at marketing research firm Euromonitor, thinks craft gin could be the next big spirit, even though **he notes the overall global gin market** posted a 1% decline in total volume sold in 2010.

"While the top-line figures might look sobering at first, if we dig a bit deeper we know that there are segments where we can see optimism and buoyancy," he says.

"People are really sick of mainstream mass-produced brands. They want something different, they want something with character.

"They want something to reflect where they're coming from and what their values are," he says.

Since Sipsmith opened up the first new copper-pot distillery in London for nearly two centuries - requiring the issuing of a special licence - at least half a dozen more distillers have opened up elsewhere in the capital, some in the most unlikely places.

"I just found out recently that a small distillery will be opening up in my building in Hackney Wick," Malandrakis says.

"It's weird... and wonderful."