



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 kopokbas 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. Toured 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 O31 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.



HOPE ON HOPKINS, CAPE TOWN

Although it's dabbled in vodka, rum and tequila, Hope on Hopkins remains best known for its three superb gins.

The stills – named Mildred and Maudie, after Beard's and Lisk's grandmothers – turn out small batches of London Dry, Salt River and Mediterranean gins.

The classic London Dry gin brings notes of rosemary and citrus to the underlying juniper base and is best enjoyed as a G&T with good tonic, a sprig of rosemary and a curl of lemon zest. Hope on Hopkins' Salt

River gin, however, turns to local fynbos for inspiration.

"I call it the 'Western Cape in a glass'," laughs Beard. "We use buchu and kapokbos and it's far more floral than our other gins. The buchu is the dominant botanical, while the kapokbos adds a sweet earthiness."

Breaking the mould completely is the unusual Mediterranean gin. Made from a grape-based spirit – the others use a spirit from malted barley – that's distilled with olives, cardamom, orange peel and fresh herbs from the Franschhoek Valley, it's ideal for a "dirty martini". Visit: <http://hopeonhopkins.co.za>

BLAAUWKLIPPEN TRIPLE THREE, STELLENBOSCH

Blaauwklippen is famous for its Zinfandel red wines, but Cellar Master Rolf Zeitvogel recently turned his hand to craft gin and today distils three distinct ones.

Blending the freshness of organic lemons and oranges, the former grown on the estate, the Citrus Gin marries classic juniper flavours with pure citrus notes. The Juniper Berries Gin is a classic London Dry: made to a more traditional recipe, this blend of neutral alcohol and juniper berries is ideal for cocktails.

However, as with many local producers, it's their hyper-local offering "where the magic of gin comes out – where we really see different flavours coming together", says Zeitvogel.

Made with a bespoke blend of African botanicals, the team starts with local

buchu and rooibos, adding coriander, galangal root and liquorice notes along the way.

"It's a mosaic picture created around two elements

of rooibos and buchu. They need a little garnish to make them round and full, but it's always carried by the juniper berry," he explains.

Visit: www.blaauwklippen.com



Gin styles

When most people think of gin, they're typically referring to a **London Dry**. Made in a "single-shot" distillation, London Dry must be dominated by juniper and its dry profile makes it ideal for cocktails and those ever-popular G&Ts.

Modern gins trace their roots to the Dutch **Genever**. The key difference is that Genever's made from a base of distilled malted barley, not neutral alcohol, lending it a richer flavour profile.

Old Tom boasts a similar malty sweetness. This old-school gin forms the heart of a Tom Collins cocktail, but can be hard to find. Look out for limited releases from the likes of Tanqueray, Hayman's and, locally, Time Anchor.

The wave of craft producers has reignited interest in so-called **new-wave** or **international-style** gins and these genre-busting bottles allow craft distillers to blaze a tasty new trail of flavour infusions.