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There is no single best time of year for a gin and tonic

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As summer inevitably winds down we can find at least a modicum of comfort in the fact that it's still gin and tonic season. There are, of course, those who believe strongly that there is no single best time of year for this classic cocktail — it's just that most of us associate a great G&T with warmer weather.



MITSU YASUKAWA/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bottles of gin, from left, Magellan, Citadelle (foreground), Tanqueray, Bombay Sapphire, Hendricks (black).

When the herbal, medicinal spirit that would eventually be known as gin was first formulated in the Middle Ages, who would have guessed that it would eventually become one of the most popular and versatile spirits in the world? According to the *Liquor Handbook* published by the Beverage Information Group, gin ranked No. 5 in U.S. distilled spirits consumption in 2011, behind vodka, the broad category of "whisky," rum and tequila. The name comes from *genever*, the Dutch word for juniper.

Cognac firm making gin

The regulations governing the production of cognac in France require that distillation can occur only between Nov. 1 and March 31.

Rather than allow their valuable "charentais" copper pot stills to sit idle the rest of the year, the producers of Pierre Ferrand Cognac decided to keep them busy by making gin.

Some of this gin, branded Citadelle, is aged for several months in "old oak" barrels, becoming Citadelle Reserve. The aging gives the Reserve a pale straw color and subtle flavors from the oak.

It's a remarkable gin and one that, because of its limited production, can be difficult to find. The next vintage should be available in New Jersey in November and is well worth keeping an eye out for, or asking your local spirits purveyor to order for you.

To be called "gin," juniper must be the primary flavor added to grain-neutral spirits. From there, however, almost anything goes, and gin producers add a wide range of herbs and spices to differentiate their product. For purists, a "real" G&T is just gin, tonic water and a squeeze, muddle or garnish of lime or cucumber.

Even within this strict interpretation, though, a variety of flavor profiles can be created and, if you relax the rules a little, the possibilities appear endless. To explore this variety in a little more depth, we asked several local mixologists to provide their views on gin and share their methods for creating the iconic cocktail we most closely associate with it.

Kara Sullivan, longtime bartender at Oceanos in [Fair Lawn](#), is one of those who believe that the classic gin and tonic is truly a year-round cocktail. Sullivan reports that the drink is more popular in the summer but that she sees steady demand, regardless of the season.

Brand loyalty

She added that people are extremely brand-loyal when it comes to gin and that there is little call for Oceanos' house brand. "People usually specify their favorite gin, and we currently serve seven — Tanqueray, Bombay, Bombay Sapphire, Magellan, Hendricks, the 'house' gin and our newest, Citadelle from France."

And what's Sullivan's favorite G&T du jour as summer 2013 comes to an end? "In a rocks glass, I muddle three large basil leaves and six slices of seedless mini cucumber with a couple of ice cubes to really bring out the flavors. Then I add 1 1/2 ounces of Citadelle gin, a splash of simple syrup and top with tonic water. The fresh flavor of the basil blends beautifully with the cucumber and the gin for a truly unique taste." It's delightful.

Andrew McIntosh, mixologist at Park West Tavern in [Ridgewood](#), is a gin purist. (He believes that "vodka martini" is an oxymoron.) He also thinks that the increasingly popular practice of enhancing the drink with other spirits or liqueurs may result in a great cocktail, but it's not a true G&T.

McIntosh says he "drinks gin seasonally" and prefers a different one for each time of year. Spring calls for Tanqueray 10 with its "wonderfully citrus and less juniper-y flavor," he says. He'll garnish with grapefruit. Hendricks with a cucumber slice garnish yields the requisite refreshing summer version, while Plymouth gin is "more mellow and relaxed" and seems more suitable for fall.

Lastly, McIntosh prefers to use regular Tanqueray in the winter. "There's just something about it," he says, "that reminds me of walking through a pine forest in winter snow." He also prefers Q Tonic, one of the new breed of fine small-batch tonic waters that also includes Fever Tree.

Finally, J.R. Gurrieri and Matt Milczarski, bartenders and cocktail specialists at Esty Street in [Park Ridge](#), are clearly passionate about gin and tonic. While they admit that there are many very good better-known gins available, they prefer to use small, boutique brands such as Junipero, Plymouth or Citadelle. "We like to find ways to make G&Ts that will accentuate and enhance the special blend of botanicals and aromatics that these gins offer," Gurrieri said.

He and Milczarski mixed several exceptional examples — moderately sampled, of course. Their excellent "Esty Street G&T" paired Plymouth gin and rosemary, but equally good were those G&Ts prepared with Junipero gin, lime and Schweppes tonic and one that combined Citadelle, tarragon and the sweeter, less-acidic Meyer lemon.

So thanks to these experts for their insight and advice, and here's a toast to the end of summer and the cocktail that will ease us nicely into fall.