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“From the unexpected origin of France we get Citadelle [...] made with wheat and, in the case of its 88-proof Reserve marque, revives the tradition of slightly aging gin.”

## Gin & Tonic Exploration

Jack Bettridge

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It may sound like a simple drink, but summertime's signature cocktail refresher—the self-named Gin & Tonic—offers a season's worth of variation and experimentation.

The possibilities start with a wide range of gins—from venerable classics to laudable upstarts—and moves onto refreshing choices in tonic. (And if you really want to get technical, you can trick out this cocktail standard by varying the ice you use. But that's a subject for another story.)

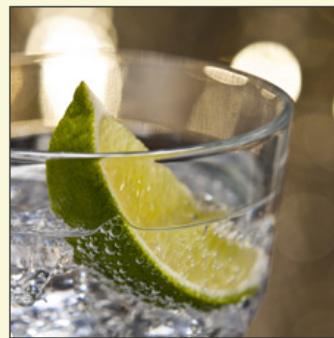
It should come as no surprise that the G&T is evolving. It's a drink that has been in flux throughout its entire history. In fact, its roots don't even include gin. Before this drink was the picture of hot-weather refreshment—its sparkling [bubbles](#) ascending through luxuriant, icy clouds to effervesce in tiny explosions at the drink's surface next to a floating wedge of lime—it was a murky, hard-to-swallow medicinal tincture. In the 17th century, it was learned from the Incas that the ground bark of the cinchona tree treated the symptoms of malaria. It was some pretty bitter stuff, however, and to make the medicine go down more easily wine and sugar were mixed in.

The 18th century brought improvements to this tart prescription. John Jacob Schweppe invented a way to bottle sparkling water. When he moved his business from Switzerland to London, he used a recently developed method for extracting cinchona's active ingredient—quinine—to make the first soft drink: quinine water.

In the meantime the British had tamed their own national drink, gin, using the column still and other production standards to resolve purity issues. By the early 19th century, United Kingdom expats, stationed in fetid, tropical outposts, put the two clear choices together for something that was not only remedial for their malaria, but refreshingly delicious.

By then the only thing working against the G&T was the expense of quinine. Development of a way to synthetically produce the drug gradually brought down the price of tonic, and by the 1930s, recipes for the Gin & Tonic were starting to appear in American cocktail manuals.

Sadly, the cheapening didn't end there. Corn syrup replaced cane sugar in most popular tonic brands, which became markedly sweeter than what had been a decidedly tart soft drink. Worse for the drink was that bane of all mixed drinks, the soda gun, which became common in bars around



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the 1960s. It was a weapon of mass cocktail destruction that gunned down an otherwise beautiful cocktail by spraying it with a blast of gummy, saccharine and markedly flatter liquid. Furthermore, if your local watering hole used bits of machine-made chipped ice prone to quick melting, your cocktail was fated to be a disaster.

Happily, our current cocktail resurgence is remedying much of that. In-the-know bartenders have ditched the soda gun in favor of small bottles of tonic, which favor strong carbonation. They also use large redoubtable ice cubes that don't melt within minutes.

Equally important is the choice in quinine tonics now available. Brands such as Fever-Tree, Fentimans, Stirrings and Q Tonic have revived natural quinine, derived from cinchona bark. The first three are once again using cane sugar, and the last is sweetened with agave syrup. They all come in small bottles that, while more expensive than the two-liter behemoths that Michael Bloomberg would revile, guarantee better carbonation. They're all worth trying, but for my [money](#) Fever-Tree is the most old-school with a big blast of brisk, tart flavor. Q tonic is the sweetest of the bunch.

Of course, in today's cocktail climate, the nerd factor can always be amplified. Making your own tonic is viable alternative if you have a seltzer charger—like a SodaStream—and access to quinine, lemongrass and citrus juice. You'll find those ingredients on the Internet when you're searching for likely recipes. An easier avenue for the DIY-mixologist is Jack Rudy Small Batch Tonic, a concentrate that you add to soda water. The directions suggest 3/4 ounces, but I ratchet it down to a tablespoon.

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Not to be ignored, of course, is the huge spectrum of gins now available. For small brands and microdistillers, making a great whiskey takes a lot of maturation time, but some have made very interesting gin right off the bat.

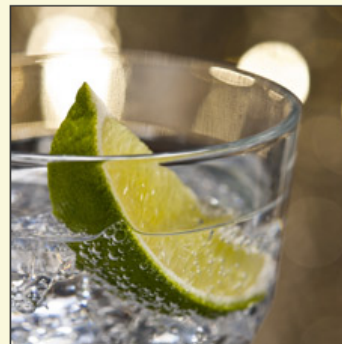
Think of Death's Door gin, which has a recipe pared down to juniper berries, coriander and fennel, all sourced from its native Wisconsin. Ransom revives the far sweeter profile of Old Tom Gin, a type that was almost as common as London Dry Gin a century ago. Professor Cornelius Ampleforth's Bathtub Gin is made in a pot still and smacks of orange, cloves and cinnamon.

From the unexpected origin of France we get Citadelle and G'Vine. The former is made with wheat and, in the case of its 88-proof Reserve marque, revives the tradition of slightly aging gin. The latter is not only grape-based, but involves the infusion of flowers from the Ugni Blanc grape used to make Cognac.

Fifty Pounds revives an 18th century recipe and is quite warming. The organic and patriotic Bluecoat has earthy notes and Old Amsterdam is a sweet concoction that fools you with a spicy nose. Hendrick's has distinguished itself with the addition of cucumber flavor, which since has become very popular in cocktail making.

My favorite is Nolet, a dry gin made in Holland by the same maker that produces Ketel One vodka. The Silver edition is elegant and full of roses. The Reserve, probably the most expensive gin in the world at \$700, is probably best appreciated in a very dry Martini.

Lest we forget, the most familiar brands are all known for their ability to play well with tonic. Beefeater is the quintessential juniper-heavy gin and makes a very bracing cocktail. Tanqueray 10 already has huge citrus notes with other fruits, and its Rangpur ramps that up with the taste of lime. One of the fruitiest (particularly in the orange direction) is Bulldog. Spicy, but less junipery, Bombay Sapphire has perhaps been foremost in reviving the gin category in recent decades. Its new Bombay East alluringly adds lemongrass and pepper to the mix. Plymouth, a gin category unto itself, is one of most balls-out examples, with plenty of cardamom, orange and juniper.



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If none of those gins fit your fancy, you can always pursue the DIY route by getting a bottle of vodka and some of the dozen or so botanicals and aromatics that typically inform gin (e.g. Juniper berries, orris root, fennel, angelica, licorice, cinnamon, coriander, cassia bark, orange peel) and infusing the flavors for a couple days.

But please don't use the bathtub.