

From the slums to the lap of luxury

GIN HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE THE DAYS WHEN LONDON BINGE-DRINKERS MADE IT IN THEIR BATHS

Gin's journey through time has been a rags-to-riches story, and here we were among the riches. The Dorchester sparkles with that glittering light that comes from hard cash rather than speculative bubbles and the rich sprawled about the promenade are, as the narrator of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* says, different. Eerily different.

In a function room out the back Tom Aske, Diageo's luxury brands ambassador, was bringing a selection of the hotel's bartenders down to earth by handing round photocopies of William Hogarth's print *Gin Lane*. This was gin in rags in 1751, the baby falling from the leering woman's arms in the centre foreground still shocking. Mother's Ruin indeed.

It might have been a skeleton that Diageo, maker of the world's leading gin Gordon's, the premium Tanqueray and the super-premium Tanqueray Ten, would want to keep shut in the closet. Instead, the back-story satisfies that craving for authenticity, and contributes to the sense that gin has come from somewhere, has fled Hogarth's lane and made something of itself, made it all the way to the Dorchester.

So Tom's gin masterclass dwells on the seedier side of the story, all the better to heighten the impact of its latest glorious chapter.

He starts with the first written reference to gin, made in Holland in 1572, an eau de vie flavoured with

medicinal 'genever' or juniper berries, the ingredient that makes gin gin. The English were introduced to the drink when it was brought back by mercenaries fighting in the 1618-48 war between Holland and Spain, where genever was the original 'Dutch courage'. Then, at the end of that century, the production of gin was deregulated and taxes removed so it could replace brandy, banned because England was at war with France.

The effect was dramatic. In London one house in every four became a gin shop making its own 'bathtub gin' from leftover grain flavoured with juniper essence and sweetened with sugar to make it palatable, a drink which became known as Old Tom.

Soon the English were drinking three litres of the stuff per head a week. Things were getting out of control and a series of five Gin Acts sought to rein in consumption by reintroducing taxation and licensing, putting the current government's hand-wringing over binge-drinking into perspective.

The price of a licence to distill gin became so expensive that few could

afford it. Among those who could was Alexander Gordon, who established Gordon's in Southwark in 1769. He led the way in developing an improved-quality gin in which the ingredients, or botanicals, were macerated in the spirit rather than being added as essences.

Gin took another step forward in 1827 with the invention of continuous distillation which produced a purer 'rectified' spirit. "It was like using a clean canvas to paint a picture on," explains Tom. "You need high-quality colours and an artist, and a good gin requires high-quality ingredients and the equivalent of an artist in the distiller."

Different gin styles emerged as distillers made use of other botanicals in addition to juniper.

Charles Tanqueray set up his Bloomsbury distillery in 1830. Using a wheat-based spirit and travelling the world to find his botanicals – coriander, angelica root and liquorice as well as juniper. It was, as Tom says, always an upmarket gin, the pineapple logo denoting exclusivity, pineapples being



In the Dorchester, Diageo's luxury brands ambassador handed round photocopies of Hogarth's engraving *Gin Lane* to emphasise just how far the spirit has moved up in the world





hard to come by in 19th-century England. And the quality was taken a notch higher this century with the creation of Tanqueray No. Ten.

Ten is different because it's the first gin to use fresh fruits. Half grapefruits, oranges and limes, plus camomile flowers, are macerated in the small number 10 still at Diageo's Cameron Bridge plant and the distillate is then distilled once more with the regular Tanqueray botanicals.

"I don't want to say Tanqueray Ten is the best gin in the world," Tom says. "This is about different styles." Which is a clever way of saying he does believe it's the best gin in world, but you can make your own minds up. ■

Plymouth uses seven botanicals to add sweetness, while Bombay Sapphire is made by the vapour infusion method



PLYMOUTH
Using seven botanicals to add sweetness, Plymouth is viscous and full-bodied, giving off an aroma of boiled sweets, with citrus flavours coming through on the palate.



BOMBAY
Bombay Sapphire is made by the vapour infusion method. The 10 botanicals are placed in a basket at the top of the still and the flavours are absorbed by the steam, creating a lighter, softer gin that evokes a dry spice rack on the nose and rye bread, pepper and liquorice on the tongue.



TANQUERAY
Tanqueray's 43.1 per cent ABV is reckoned to be the optimum to bring out the aromas in the glass. The angelica root brings earthy undertones to the nose and adds sweetness, the juniper is pronounced and a taste coats the whole mouth with fresh, clean flavours.

TANQUERAY TEN
Fresh citrus fruits are immediately apparent on the nose while on the palate the juniper contributes a subtle background. Greater complexity develops with each sip, the 47.3 per cent spirit locking the flavours in.

THE TASTING

"Nosing a spirit is like bumping into an ex-girlfriend," says Tom, as we move into the tasting part of his training session. "You don't go straight up and kiss them, you ask them some questions like 'how are you?' and 'what have you been up to?'."

After 're-setting' our olfactory organs by sniffing the backs of our hands, we nosed and tasted four different styles, including two rivals to Diageo's brands.



THE ROAD TO THE TOP...

Attending training sessions like the one at the Dorchester is the first step, along with devising their own cocktail recipe, that qualifies bartenders for Diageo's World Class international cocktail competition.

Sixteen finalists from the heats win trips abroad where they can learn more about the drinks they work with, and the winner of the UK final in July 2009, to be judged by an expert panel headed by top chef Marco Pierre White, will compete against winners from 24 other countries.

The global winner will have their own cocktail book published by Diageo.