

# imbibe

The magazine for on-trade drinks professionals

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## Life is a Cabernet

Top New World Bordeaux blends put to the test

## Booked out!

Great tips to help you pull in the punters

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# LONDON GIN

It's a classic style, but London gin only legally became a category less than a year ago, and new brands are still arriving all the time. Joined by a panel of top bartenders, **Clinton Cawood** went on a journey into the spirit's outer-limits, to see what London gin means today

**G**in as a category, and London gin in particular, bears little resemblance to what it was just a few years ago. For one thing, it is now a recognised EU spirit category with its own regulations. At the same time, a raft of new brands has lately entered the category, many attempting to make their mark with novel botanicals and distillation techniques.

Ever on the lookout for an excuse to dose up on juniper, we at *Imbibe* decided it was time we got a panel of bartenders together to assess the new-look London gins, and see how they rated against the old-guard.

While the definition that entered EU

law in May last year regulates quality quite tightly, it specifies very little in terms of taste or style, meaning the newcomers have had a long leash in terms of flavour. This tasting brought an extensive selection of London gins to the London Cocktail Club, where they were presented blind to a panel of experts. Tasters described each gin, and also rated various characteristics in each spirit. A final, 19th contender was included – an illicitly distilled spirit marked Ottery's Gin – which had been created from spirit distilled from a sugar wash fermentation, and made with the intention of refining a prototype before beginning production of a legal small-batch spirit.

In addition to this array of 19 glasses, a set of six botanical distillates including juniper, mixed fresh citrus and liquorice, created by Sacred Gin distiller Ian Hart, were available for tasters to use to calibrate their palates.

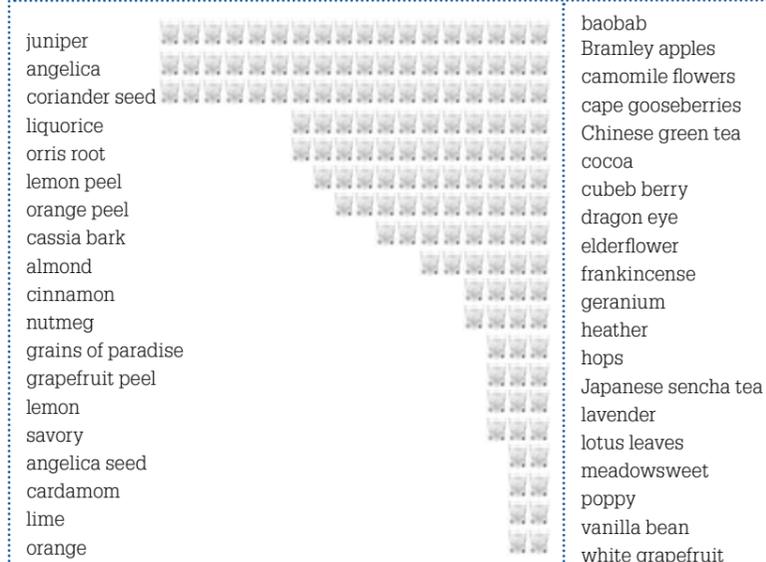
## ON THE MAP

The average scores allowed each gin to be placed on a flavour map (p.119). The gins clustered near the centre of the map, but towards the sweeter, lighter spectrums, were mainly traditional brands. At the core of these were the gins most described by tasters as classic examples of London gin – Beefeater

PHOTOS: CHARLIE NELSON, ROB LAWSON

## Trade secrets

Botanicals used in the 18 London gins tasted (of those disclosed by distillers)



and Beefeater 24 primarily, along with Tanqueray, Bombay Sapphire, and newcomer-in-an-old-style, Oxley. Jensen's Bermondsey Gin was also part of this group. Perhaps unsurprisingly, almost all of these passed muster with those judges who (quite rightly) insisted on a proper hit of juniper in their gin.

The gins slightly further afield from these were all new entrants: Sacred, SW4 and No.3. These ventured out in both sweet and savoury directions. Further away, the truly controversial gins of the tasting were those described as too pungent or floral – those that drifted to the south of the map.

In discussions after the tasting, it was gins such as these that raised questions about the creation of the London gin category in the first place. An interesting contender among these was Tanqueray No. Ten which, judging by comments and its placement on the map, is a gin that's well-liked, but clearly isn't a typical London gin. More experimental brands in terms of style were newcomers Geranium and Heather.

The difficulty, it seems, lies not so much with the gins themselves, but with categorising them all together. There are at least three, maybe four, distinct styles here, and panellists mused about the usefulness of the London gin distinction. Edwin Atkinson, director general of the Gin & Vodka Association, commented: 'It has not caused

## Capital gins

These are all the gins that were tasted, listed in order of botanical intensity, as rated by the panel  
*Prices are RRP for 70cl unless otherwise stated*

- No.3**, £30, Inspirit, 020 7739 1333
- Williams Elegant Crisp Gin**, £29.99, Mangrove, 020 8551 4966
- Geranium**, £29, Coe Vintners, 020 8551 4966
- Tanqueray No. Ten**, £29.99, Diageo Reserve Brands, 0845 751 5101
- Hayman's**, £14.99, Love Drinks, 020 7501 9630
- Whitley Neill**, £17.49, Halewood International, 0151 480 8800
- Tanqueray**, £17.29, Diageo, 020 7927 5200
- Beefeater 24**, £21.65, Pernod Ricard, 020 8538 4501
- Oxley**, £50/litre, Bacardi-Martini, 01962 762100
- Beefeater**, £14.50, Pernod Ricard, 020 8538 4501
- SW4**, £16, Park Place Drinks, 01259 743848
- Heather Gin**, £24.99, Knockeen Hills, www.heather-gin.com
- Sipsmith**, £23.99, Sipsmith, 020 8741 2034
- Fifty Pounds**, £34.99, Eaux-de-Vie, 020 7724 5009
- Bombay Sapphire**, £16.95, Bacardi-Martini, 01962 762100
- Bulldog**, £25, Venus, 020 8801 0011
- Jensen's Bermondsey Gin**, £23.49, Speciality Brands, 020 8838 9367
- Sacred**, £25.95, www.sacredgin.com



## The panel

### CLINTON CAWOOD, *IMBIBE*

'Tasting this many London gins blind confirmed that there's a distinct classic style, and a fair amount of experimentation outside of that. That these all fit within one definition obviously has implications for how the category is seen, by both trade and consumers.'

### PHIL DUFFY, THE PLAYER

'A lot of gin cocktails contain lemon juice, so producers are maybe aiming towards the floral spectrum because of that. But I think if they wanted to define a style, they could have specified acceptable botanicals instead.'

### JULIAN DE FERAL, LUTYENS

'I was expecting a lot more citrus, but there was a lot of floral character. But I don't mind different styles. We have to look at gin less in categories, and more in terms of flavours. I don't think the new definition has made things clearer – there's a danger of confusing consumers with the word "London".'

### MARK JENNER, THE COBURG BAR

'There were a lot of intriguing characters that combined aromas and tastes along more of a savoury route rather than light, fresh and citrus zesty styles. I like the idea being batted around at the moment for a "New World Style" which could allow for more singular expressions and enable better evolution of the category without it stagnating.'



### ALICE LASCELLES, *IMBIBE*

'While the newly-defined London dry moniker may tell you something about how a gin was made, based on this tasting at least, it tells you diddly-squat about how it will taste. I think it's also extremely confusing for consumers. Perhaps highlighting key botanicals, in the same way that wines highlight varietals, might be more helpful. Just look at that amazing list of botanicals in this line-up!'

### ANDREA MONTAGUE, CALLOOH CALLAY

'Overall, I prefer bigger juniper character. When I'm drinking gin I want to taste gin. With these, it's about knowing the individual products. Having a style is confusing – there are few gins here that belong in the same category.'

### TIM OAKLEY, RISING STAR LEISURE (THE ESTABLISHMENT)

'There were some traditional London gins, and then some very modern, floral gins. They're far away from London dry. I think some have gone far too far.'

### LEE OTTERY, LONDON COCKTAIL CLUB

'The ones I liked the most were the style of gin that I'd want in my Martini. Those likely designed for that purpose, with high strength, spicy finishes and fresh whole citrus fruit notes had a sweeter flavour. You could argue that these gins probably shouldn't be classed as London dry at all.'

significant change by producers, trade, or consumers. Rather it has sought to set the quality required for the longer term.'

It certainly does this, but does far less, if anything, to define the category stylistically. The definition is of value to distillers, but it means little to anyone working in the on-trade, let alone consumers. To communicate anything of any practical value, London gins need to be talked about in terms of botanicals and flavour. The way the London gin distinction is promoted will be significant for the future of the category. As panellists commented, even the word 'London' in the name is potentially confusing to consumers, given that it can be produced anywhere.

As those gins on the outskirts of the map remind us, 'London Gin' on a label implies little about flavour. There may be a classic flavour profile, but outside of this, it's a broad church. 🍸

*Many thanks to the London Cocktail Club for hosting the tasting and for all of their help on the day.*

## The definition has application to distillers, but it means little to anyone working in the on-trade, let alone consumers

### London gin defined

London gin is made in a traditional still by re-distilling ethyl alcohol in the presence of all natural flavourings used

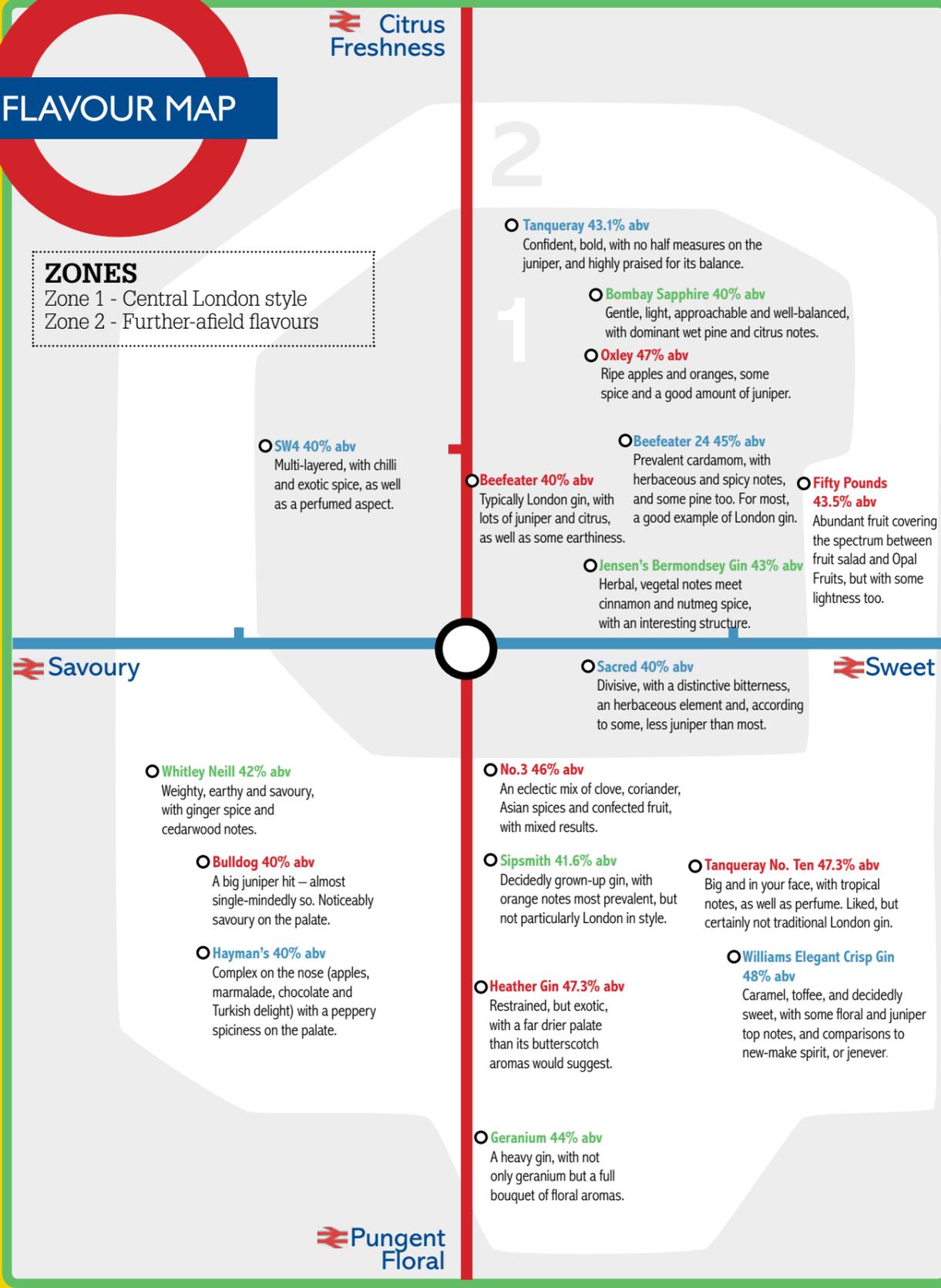
- The ethyl alcohol used to distil London gin must be of a higher quality than the standard laid down for ethyl alcohol. The methanol level in the ethyl alcohol must not exceed a maximum of 5 grams per hectolitre of 100% volume alcohol.
- The flavourings used must all be approved natural flavourings and they must impart the flavour during the distillation process.
- The use of artificial flavourings is not permitted.
- The resultant distillate must have a minimum strength of 70% abv.
- No flavourings can be added after distillation.
- Further ethyl alcohol may be added after distillation provided it is of the same standard.
- A small amount of sweetening may be added after distillation provided the sugars do not exceed 0.5 grams/litre of finished product (the sugar is not discernible and is added to some products purely for brand protection purposes).
- The only other substance that may be added is water.
- London gin cannot be coloured.

Source: [www.ginvodka.org](http://www.ginvodka.org)

## FLAVOUR MAP

### ZONES

- Zone 1 - Central London style
- Zone 2 - Further-afield flavours



## Time for a change in the heather

As our gin tasting on p.116 shows, London gin is a category that

now includes more flavour profiles than ever – the latest one to push the envelope is Heather 'London Cut' Dry Gin from Knocken Hills. It's only got five botanicals (juniper, coriander, angelica, heather and the sage-like savory – all organic) but it's herbaceous and aromatic on

the nose, a little like walking into a steamy hot house full of exotic plants. On the palate an initial fresh blast of juniper, garden mint and green chilli quickly softens to more hay-like and slightly earthy characters that are prettied up by some subtle floral notes. Very well balanced with a refined finish that belies its 47.3% abv. It's produced in small batches at the Thames Distillery.

RRP £26.30/70cl.

Available from

[www.thedrinkshop.com](http://www.thedrinkshop.com)

