

Gin is new spirit of Entente Cordiale

'Mother's ruin' is a new beverage of choice in France. **Jane Hanks** meets a passionate British gin maker with deep distilling heritage

After a huge comeback in the UK and Belgium, gin is now seeing a revival in France. As it is quintessentially British, English-born spirit specialist Simon Thompson, based in the Bordeaux region, jumped at the opportunity to create his own gin.

He calls himself an Englishman in Bordeaux and has created a range of whiskies, vodkas, brandies, Fine Bordeaux and now gin, taking the best of British and the best of France, and the Aquitaine in particular, to create his drinks.

"My favourite tippie is gin and tonic and I wanted to create a gin for the perfect G&T", says Mr Thompson. "I have created it for the French market. I have added my British origins to produce a genuine Bordeaux product which is a mixture of the two cultures."

The base spirit is a distillate from white grapes from local vineyards. It is distilled twice and then matures in oak barrels. It contains 15 macerated and distilled natural botanicals, including caviar from Aquitaine and *pêches de vigne*, the peaches that are so called because they ripen around the same time as the grape harvest.

There are also rosebuds, which are a reminder of the roses that are traditionally planted in vineyards to act as an early warning system for black rot, mildew and aphids as they attract these diseases before the vines. Juniper is there, of course, and there is angelica from France. Some



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of the other more exotic flavourings come from ginger, cinnamon, Jamaican pepper, green cardamom and cubeb from India.

"My aim was to create balance and harmony.

I was not seeking an overwhelming one-note symphony but a complex taste. I would say it is floral on the nose, very busy, well-balanced and elegant."

It took Mr Thompson a year to get it right:

"I tested with seaweed which was nice until I added the tonic and then the taste became too fishy. I also tried Piment d'Espelette as a typical product from the



Basque country, but that didn't work. Caviar may seem an unusual choice but I wanted to use it because it is prestigious as well as local."

He has had rave reviews for his gin. Andreas Larsson, who was voted Best Sommelier in the World in 2007, gave it 92/100 in a blind tasting and he won bronze medal at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Simon Thompson came to France aged eight when his father got the job of looking after the Hine cognac distillery. He inherited his father's passion and studied for a master's at the Eaux-de-Vie University in Segonzac, where he has been teaching on a master's course for many years.

While he was there he discovered that there was one Fine Bordeaux distillery left in the area which had not produced anything for 20 years, and which was about to lose its AOC rating in 2015. Largely due to his efforts he managed to save the distillery and so started his interest in producing spirits himself. "It is a passion. It is a lifestyle choice. I like the creative side. For

the gin I employed a laboratory to do the tests and then I did a great deal of soul searching to decide on the final result. I know how to distil but I get somebody else to do that for me. What I do is to make the recipes, and make the

Simon Thompson proudly displays his gin, whose key ingredients include rosebuds (inset)

decisions about blending and ageing.

"It's alchemy, and in the end, just like writing a book, you have essentially at one moment or other got to publish. And I am really pleased with the results."

Normally gin is not aged, but the latest experiment involves gin resting in oak barrels, which have been used for Sauternes, for two months to see what difference that might make.

Other spirits he is producing are vodka made from a double distillation of Bordeaux grapes, brandy distilled from grapes and aged in oak barrels, blended Scotch malt whisky with a two year's Sauternes cask finish, and just 1,700 bottles of a 1996 Isle of Arran whisky his father bought when he was alive and which has been aged in Sauternes barrels from the Château la Bouade.

These are high end products and a bottle of his gin costs €45. He sells most of his products in cocktail bars, wine merchants and restaurants in the Bordeaux area, in the UK and other export markets. He hopes to continue producing more spirits Made in France, maybe a French whisky, but with a British twist. www.thompsons.fr



What is gin?

2008 European regulations state that gin is "a juniper-flavoured spirit drink" made from ethyl alcohol (ethanol) of

agricultural origin and that "the taste is predominantly that of juniper."

Distilled gin not only contains a distilled base alcohol with a strength of at least 96% volume, but its flavourings are also distilled. It clearly says that "Gin obtained simply by adding essences of flavouring" is not distilled gin.

The most prestigious gin is London Dry Gin, which has its own classification in the European regulations. It is a distilled gin with distilled flavourings of "natural plant materials", and which does not contain added sweetening exceeding 0.1 grams of sugars per litre of the final product, no colourants and the only other permitted ingredient is water. The final bottled gin must be at least 37.5%.

Though it no longer has to come from London, the gin originated there after the invention of a new style of still called the Coffey, which enabled the production of a nearly pure spirit. This removed the unpleasant flavours found in earlier gins, so they could be sold unsweetened or dry.

You can buy other distilled gins, which do not reach the European requirements to be classified as a London Dry Gin. Simon Thompson's gin is one of them only because caviar is not of plant origin.

Gins which do not have 'distilled' in the name are a neutral spirit with flavourings added and are very quick and easy to make, and usually cheaper in the shops.

The original gin did not come from the UK, but from the Netherlands and was called genever from *jeneverbes*, Dutch for juniper. There has been some debate as to the difference between gin and vodka, which are both based on neutral, distilled spirits. The difference is mainly in the flavourings, juniper in particular.

Other French gins

Spirit producers in France are beginning to produce their own gins, each with their own, original mixture of spices and flavourings to add to the juniper. They can be found all over the country and often reflect the region they are in.

Distillers seem to relish the chance gin gives them to be creative with flavourings. Below are a small selection.

Gabriel Boudier in Dijon, Côte-d'Or, Burgundy produces a Saffron Gin, according to an old recipe rediscovered in their archives and the saffron addition gives it a yellow colour.

Organic distillery, Awen Nature in Rennes, Bretagne produces Gin Mist, flavoured with lemon balm, coriander, angelica and hops. The name Mist was chosen because instead of being a clear liquid it is cloudy in aspect. It won a Gold Medal in the Spirits Selection Concours Mondial de Bruxelles in 2016.

Pink Pepper Gin is the flagship of Audemus, based in Cognac. The final recipe took months to create and is a mixture of nine botanicals, independently distilled in a pure, neutral grain alcohol.

The main flavours are pink peppercorn, cardamom and juniper and the base notes come from locally sourced honey and vanilla and tonka bean infusions, together with three secret ingredients. It has been successful in the UK.

La Grappe de Montpellier produces a gin based on a neutral alcohol from the *marc*, which is the residue from the grapes used to make wines and is distilled five times. It is flavoured with juniper and Mediterranean plants, including lemon zest, bitter almonds, coriander and lavender.