

The Book of Gin: A Spirited History from Alchemists' Stills and Colonial Outposts

Richard Barnett

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Tracing gin's history back to ancient times, Richard Barnett launches this intoxicating, astringent tale with an exploration of the age-old culinary and religious associations of its primary flavoring, juniper. Burned during purification rites and added to meats as a central feature of Germanic cuisines, this coniferous plant featured prominently in alchemic and medicinal processes. Once juniper met alcohol, the resulting clear liquid became both curative medicine and recreational pastime. However, it was only with Britain's and the Netherlands' rise to international prominence that gin truly acquired its real and lasting global significance. Trade routes and colonialism eventually spread gin to every corner of the earth—where it has woven itself into the fabric of widely varying cultures.

Supposedly popularized in England with the arrival of the Dutch King William of Orange in England, gin was dubbed “mother's ruin” during the Industrial Revolution when it was the only affordable panacea against the hopeless misery of English working men and women. Gin became entrenched as a synonym for debauchery and dissolution. The tiple's popularity was blamed for everything from infanticide to tuberculosis. The popular spirit moved dramatically upmarket when, combined with quinine-laced tonic water, it was deployed to combat widespread malarial outbreaks in the British Raj. Back in “good old Blighty,” returning colonials incorporated the gin and tonic into the daily routine of the ruling—and the aspiring—classes, where it has remained ensconced to this day.

As Barnett puts it, gin has largely been associated with the “virtues and vices of urban life.” The racy and forbidden connotations of “bathtub gin” lingered long after the demise of the Prohibition speakeasy. Later, the postwar cult of the dry martini enshrined gin's status as the ultimate badge of chic sophistication. More recent times have seen the rise of micro-distilleries as part of a growing gin connoisseurship that values handcrafted individuality over corporate branding and mass production.

With an instinctual storyteller's sense for fascinating detail and an encyclopedic knowledge of arcane social history, Barnett deftly covers all these many chapters of gin's complex history, drawing us into the worlds of commoners and kings, whores and debutantes, all of whom sipped of this intoxicating elixir. The text covers vast swaths of knowledge, incorporating the seemingly diverse and unrelated fields of gender relations, manufacturing processes, high finance, and taxation shenanigans, as well as the evolution of food standards and colonialism. Like its subject, this volume goes down easy. Yet after reading it, this reviewer felt surprisingly clear headed! Definitely a welcome addition to every civilized library and liquor cabinet.

SEAMUS MULLARKEY (Winter 2013)

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