



REPORT FOUR PILLARS, OLD YOUNG'S & WEST WINDS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIVE BOTANICALS ARE SHAPING A NEW KIND OF GIN

BY KRISTEN MARANO
PHOTOS BY SABINE ALBERS



Distillers have a back pocket full of native botanicals, perfect for making modern gin: flowers, seeds and roots produce bright and earthy tastes that can't be copied anywhere else in the world.

Like a crisp glass of Chardonnay on a hot summer day, Australian craft gin is a spirit to be desired. It's refreshing, citrusy and smooth, but more than anything, it's unique. From the subtropical forests of Queensland to the wine-rich valleys of Victoria and the riverbanks of Western Australia, distillers have a back pocket full of native botanicals, perfect for making modern gin: flowers, seeds and roots produce bright and earthy tastes that can't be copied anywhere else in the world. The global resurgence of craft gin is completely changing how we enjoy the spirit, whether that means sipping it neat, creating new cocktails or requesting our newly preferred gin brand at the bar. And in Australia, gin's potential is at a peak for distillers, bartenders and customers alike; there are no limitations on their imaginations or the spirit's possibilities.

"There are no particular laws telling us what we can and can't do, and there's no expectation about what we might do," says Stuart Gregor, president of the Australian Distillers Association and cofounder of Four Pillars Gin in Victoria. "At the end of the day, we can do whatever we bloody want."

Gin is a neutral white spirit made with juniper berries, a seed cone that tastes sharp and piney. Global gin brands like Tanqueray, Gordon's Gin and Plymouth have been made since the late 1700s, well

before the invention of the column still around 1826, which enabled the mass production of spirits around the world. While the Australian craft gin industry is only getting started, with just roughly 70 distilleries distributed across the entire continent, the movement is gaining steam. And having established this base, distillers are focusing on how to evolve the spirit to exhibit a true "Down Under" character using local flora.

Australian distillers rely on imported juniper berries from Macedonia or Tuscany and take advantage of botanicals commonly used by global gin brands like lemon, cardamom, orange and angelica root, but recent experimentation with traditional and natively grown botanicals has opened up new possibilities. The local availability of herbs and plants like coriander, sea parsley (celery) and bush tomato is giving rise to uniquely Australian gin. Lemon myrtle, for example, is one of the most noteworthy and widely used local botanicals among Australian distillers; grown in Australia, it's a potent source of citral, a fragrant compound great for citrus-flavored gins. Two other particularly Australian botanicals that produce earthy-tasting cocktails are wattlesseed and Tasmanian pepperberry — the former has a nutty aroma like fresh coffee and was once used by Indigenous peoples to make bush bread; the latter has a

sharp taste and lavender aroma.

When Cameron Mackenzie, distiller at Four Pillars Gin, took a trip to the United States to visit other gin distillers, he had an idea for a gin evolved from the traditional. He noticed American distillers weren't making London Dry gin. They were making something new: modern American gin. He realized that his access to native botanicals, land in the Yarra Valley wine region and chefs and restaurateurs in nearby Melbourne would allow him to draw on Australia itself to make a new kind of spirit. "We came back thinking there's quite a compelling story in Australian gin," he said. "We're not obliged to make the London Dry style. [There are] fascinating native botanicals, and Australia is very much a part of Asia, so we can draw these incredible spices from Southeast Asia and even the Middle East. Mates of ours — chefs, winemakers, people who were reflective of modern Australia in the style of food and wine they were making — they all had kind of a similar theme: modern Australia is quite multicultural. It draws its inspiration from around the world."

Mackenzie worked in the Australian wine industry for about 15 years before venturing into what he calls his *Breaking Bad* phase. For 18 months, using a small glass still, he experimented with 100 traditional and native botanicals, looking for

the same qualities he found in wine: does it smell good, taste good and feel good, and is it drinkable? He settled on 10 botanicals for the distillery's first gin, released in 2013: Rare Dry Gin, the only Australian gin to win Double Gold at the 2016 World Spirits Competition. It features Macedonian juniper and Western Australian coriander seed — which Mackenzie prefers for its bright and citrusy flavors, a deviation from most of the world's coriander — as well as cardamom, Tasmanian pepperberry, cinnamon, lavender, angelica, star anise, lemon myrtle and, importantly, fresh organic oranges.

At the end of a distillation, Mackenzie used to throw the oranges in the garden for mulch, but one afternoon, on a whim, he decided to bite into one from the batch and noticed a spicy character. With a little work, he concocted Breakfast Negroni, a marmalade to be used in food or cocktails. (Mackenzie describes the marmalade as a three-part elixir: “hangover cure, hangover, or cure,” all in one.) “Distillation is hardly the most sustainable pursuit in the world,” says Mackenzie, “so if we can use our most spent ingredients, it can only be a good thing.”

While Mackenzie's creative process is driven by pursuing reusable ingredients, for the founders at The West Winds, one of the first gin distilleries to launch in Australia in 2010, experimentation is influenced by the bartending industry. West Winds CEO Paul White said he and cofounder Jason Chan produced “about forty-five distillations” before they got what they wanted: a great spirit to mix in cocktails and G&Ts. In 2011, they introduced a classic citrus gin called The Sabre and a modern, savory gin called The Cutlass. Three weeks after launching, The West Winds received gold medals at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, one of the most respected accolades a distiller can receive in the spirits industry.

Three years ago, White handed



Cameron Mackenzie, distiller at Four Pillars Gin, is determined to create a distinctly Australian spirit using native botanicals.



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distillation over to Mitch Keane, who had bartended around the world for the prior decade. For Keane, distilling is all about the pursuit of flavor, “the stuff of a bloody good time,” in his words. “Heritage and history are for the label on the bottle. We cut our spirits by taste. So I like to hold onto that artistry. We’ll never follow timings, books or temperatures.” The Broadside 2.0, at 57% ABV, is strong on taste and mouthfeel. It was the first gin Keane produced for The West Winds, packing umami notes of sea parsley and a dash of sea salt sourced from the Margaret River in Western Australia — incidentally, a world-renowned surf spot.

Gin production starts before distillation, says Keane. “We take wheat alcohol and we steep the botanicals for sixteen to eighteen hours, [then] make an alcohol-soupy mess and add a big lot of juniper and our native Australian botanicals, and we put it all in the still.” Once the process is underway, with a big glass of water in hand to cleanse his palette, Keane starts to taste. He sees flavors as colors — dark, earthier browns as he tastes angelica root; as the flavor drops off, a more lavender, soapy taste.

And yet it isn’t all taste. Some of the distillation process is entirely visual. When distilling another of the West Winds gins, called The Sabre, citrus oil, always the first botanical to surface, must be collected and discarded. Keane explains: “We actually saw that the citrus oil would fall out of solution and the bottles would be cloudy at twenty-four degrees Celsius. As delicious as the citrus oil is, people won’t pick up a cloudy gin.”

The West Winds and Four Pillars Gin were just two of just a handful of distilleries to kick start the craft gin market in Australia, and while they consider themselves small distilleries, most of the industry is made up of even smaller shops. The West Winds and Four Pillars Gin use 600-liter stills to produce 150,000 to 300,000 bottles of gin per year, respectively; Old Youngs, a vodka and gin distillery nestled in Swan



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Valley, one of the oldest wine regions in Australia, opened its doors in 2016.

There, distiller James Young runs a one-person show. He distills, batches, caps and boxes every bottle in a 36-meter shed, using two stills, one of them 250 liters and the other 300; in the past year, he produced about 3,600 bottles of gin. In 2016, Young released three gins: 1827, 1829 and Six Seasons Gin, each sharing a balance of traditional and native botanicals. He sources juniper from Tuscany, while the lemon peel, lemon myrtle and desert limes is sourced from the Swan Valley.

Six Seasons Gin, Young's latest release, is an earthy tribute to the Noongar people — Indigenous Western Australians — and their native flowers. He sat down with Noongar chefs and people to chew through different botanicals and get the flavors right. For Young, every gin has a philosophy and purpose; there is a place, moment or time to enjoy gin. "You'd use Six Seasons in a martini, or if you were to do something special for a guest," he explains; 1829, meanwhile, is intended to be more accessible, and what he calls "a hot-summer-day gin."

Young attributes his creative process to the need to maintain a spirit of innovation. He's driven to contribute to the history of family-run wineries, distilleries and farms of the Swan Valley. "I feel a great

responsibility to ensure I'm making a good product, because that's what Swan Valley is renowned for," says Young. "If I don't, then I'm not paying enough respect to their legacy as families that have been here for one hundred fifty to one hundred seventy-five years."

The same holds true for The West Winds. "Australia is our home," says White. "Australia should always be our strongest market. Australia will always be the most important to us, of our markets. We want to be able to continue to focus on building great gins, servicing the Australian market really well, and then look at opportunities for growth outside of that."

Australian spirit production has long been limited to rum and whiskey, making the upstart gin movement even more significant; it has some native competition. And yet, the unifying goal among the distillers I spoke with is obvious. It's to share with the world a modern gin that distinctly represents the spirit of Australian life and its people — a modern gin that will guarantee a good time.

"We're trying to send a message that Australia has an interesting story to tell in gin," says Mackenzie. "If bars in London, New York or Ho Chi Minh City are serious about having a gin portfolio on the shelf, they should have one from Australia." ♦

Bottles to Look For

Walk into a grocery store in Australia and you'll find heaps of locally-grown fruit and vegetables — the Mediterranean-like climate of Western Australia creates an ideal setting for citrus, vegetables, herbs and seeds to prosper all year long. Coriander, lemons and desert limes grow healthily and quickly in the hot, dry heat common to the continent. Lemon myrtle, a medicinal herb used in the late 1700s by Indigenous Australians, grows in the warm and wet subtropics of Queensland, while Tasmanian pepper berry, a warming, partially savory spice, best grows in the cool climate of South Australian rainforests. Experimentation with growing local juniper has begun, but to grow and propagate a healthy amount to meet the growth of gin production will be challenging. Still, the combination of outsourced and local botanicals creates the flavors unique to the new wave of Australian gin — exactly why you should seek out a bottle or three. — *Kristen Marano*

The Cutlass - The West Winds

ABV: 50%

BOTANICALS: bush tomato, cinnamon myrtle, lemon peel, lime peel, licorice root, coriander seed

The Cutlass manages to produce a refreshing taste despite its lack of citrus ingredients relative to its sister gin, The Sabre. Bush tomato, cinnamon myrtle and coriander seed create a pleasant, herbal palette that hides the strength of this gin. Best enjoyed in a dirty martini or with tonic and a slice of red or green pepper. *\$60 (not yet available in USA)*

Six Seasons Gin - Old Young's

ABV: 50%

Botanicals: bush mint, desert lime, juniper myrtle, sea parsley, thryptomene flowers

Six Seasons is a special-occasion gin, and combines more of the unique botanicals around Australia. Bush mint creates an aroma of spearmint, while the combination of sea parsley (celery) and juniper myrtle give off earthy, musky and herbal notes “almost resembling eucalyptus,” says distiller James Young. *\$63 (not yet available in USA)*

Rare Dry Gin - Four Pillars Gin

ABV: 41.8%

Botanicals: orange, Tasmanian pepperberry leaf, star anise

Rare Dry Gin draws on spices from Australia and Southeast Asia: Tasmanian mountain pepperberry leaf creates a warming, herbal spice note, which balances with rich, herbal-leaning tones of Vietnamese star anise, which “gives the effect of nutmeg, allspice, mace and cinnamon with just a hint of licorice,” says distiller Cameron Mackenzie. *\$35+*





A Hearty Gin Cocktail

In one of his many poetic life reflections, Bob Dylan said, “People seldom do what they believe in. They do what’s convenient, then repent.” When you tuck in and contemplate big goals and dreams — things you believe in — sip slow on this one drink over an entire evening and save yourself from having to repent too much the next day. It’s a boozy blend of epic proportions concocted by Darcy Travers, purveyor of big cocktails and co-owner of Strange Company, a sleek seaside cocktail bar in Fremantle, Western Australia. - *Kristen Marano*



BIG DOG'S CAKE HOLE

Ingredients:

45mL West Winds Sabre
10mL Pierre Ferrand
5mL Massenez Peach Liqueur
10mL Lemon juice
90mL Moon Dog Cake Hole Black Forest Stout
Fresh lemon to garnish

Instructions:

Mix The West Winds Sabre, Pierre Ferrand, Massenez Peach Liqueur and the dash of lemon juice in a cocktail shaker.

Shake and strain into a double old fashioned glass over crushed ice.

Top with Moon Dog Cake Hole Black Forest Stout (or another sweeter-leaning stout).

Garnish with a fresh lemon wheel.