

THE STILL LIFE

When the financial sector crashed at the end of 2008, one former derivatives trader and headhunter realised he needed to look for another source of income. So Ian Hart started distilling gin in a spare room. *Neil Gerrard* went to meet him

Ian Hart doesn't look like your stereotypical, cold-blooded Wall Street trader. Then again, he doesn't seem like the kind of man who would distil industrial quantities of award-winning gin from a children's playroom either. But his unusual career has taken him from one role to the other.

Hart has been producing Sacred Gin from an unassuming, well-to-do family house in Highgate, London, for around a year. In that short time, 50 high-end restaurants, hotels and small retailers have taken on the spirit. That includes Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Fortnum & Mason, and Dukes Bar at Dukes Hotel in London, where the gin is said to be a particular favourite of legendary bar manager Alessandro Palazzi. If that wasn't enough, the drink has also been ranked as the overall category winner (microdistillery) in the Ginmasters 2009 competition, scoring 98/100, and Hart was nominated for Spirits Producer of the Year.

But perhaps more unusual than the accolades is the way in which the gin is actually made – using a process that Hart claims is unique in the UK, and rare across the rest of the world.

Instead of using a traditional pot still, where botanicals such as juniper are “cooked” by being heated to 90°C, he distils under vacuum at much lower temperatures, using what he calls “rotary vacuum microdistillery apparatus” – the type of laboratory kit used by the likes of Heston Blumenthal and American mixologist Tony Conigliaro.

The idea is that lower heat prevents the molecular composition of the various botanicals Hart uses in the gin – particularly citrus flavours – from being “bent out of shape”. The result, Hart claims, is a gin with a “lusher”, “fruitier” flavour than gins distilled in pot stills.

BACK ROOM

So keen is Hart to show off this unusual process that he launches into an immediate demonstration as soon as *Caterer* arrives at his microdistillery. It is located in a back room of Hart's house, looking out on to the garden. The room is part well-appointed lounge, complete with wide-screen TV, and part mad scientist's laboratory. A surprisingly small contraption made up of glass coils, bulbs and chambers sits on what was clearly once a dining room table. The table now bears a few bat-



Ian Hart started trying to improve the quality of claret, but soon turned his attention to making gin

“No one else in the UK is using vacuum distilling techniques, as far as I can tell”
Ian Hart

tle scars (easy to see why when Hart later spills fizzing liquid nitrogen on its surface). Meanwhile pipes snake across the room and out of a window, under which squats an enormous barrel of gin. And the walls are ranged with a mixture of expensive spirits, Bordeaux wines, and semi-redundant scientific equipment.

At the flick of a switch, the apparatus gurgles and hums into life. Apparently it runs for between four to five hours a day. Unsurprising, when you consider that nearly 10,000 bottles of gin have been produced in the space of just a few months.

Doesn't it annoy the teenage children, who still have at least a nominal claim over the room? “My kids watch telly and sometimes they end up having to turn the volume up. But they have to put up with it really – this is what I am doing for an income,” Hart says.

Gin became Hart's main income not long after the international banking system went into meltdown. Hart, who studied natural sciences at Cambridge and mathematical finance at UC Berkeley in California, had spent several years as a derivatives trader in New York before setting up his own business as a headhunter in the same field. By his own admission, the type of people he was recruiting were “the main

culprits” in the ensuing financial crisis. And unfortunately for him, his biggest client was Lehman Brothers. Hart quickly realised he was going to need to make a living some other way.

That led to a flirtation with the incredibly complex-sounding “microwave engineering”, as Hart tried to uncover the secrets of cordless rechargers and microwave radar for weapons detection systems. The evidence of that short-lived venture is still dotted around the house in the form of huge tesla coils which look like something from a *Doctor Who* set. Hart explains that when operated, the coils, which transmit electricity through the air, will turn on all the fluorescent bulbs in the house and once resulted in a large pot plant catching fire. “I wouldn’t operate those things with the amount of spirit I have in here now,” he says calmly. He soon realised that he didn’t have the experience to make a living out of microwave engineering anyway.

So Hart, an avid collector of Bordeaux wines in his days as a financial whizz-kid, switch to “re-engineering” Bordeaux wines and attempting to turn those of a poor vintage (where the water content of the wine was too high because the grapes were rained on shortly before harvesting) into something better. This involves deconstructing the wine, distilling out its watery “fraction”, and then putting it all back together again.

“I started with a Château Cos d’Estournel 1983 because I had a magnum of it,” Hart says. “I knew it was a bit on the watery side and I wanted to send it in the direction of a 1982. You can’t heat wine up because you will cook it. The only way to distil it is under a vacuum,” Hart says.

EXPERIMENTATION

That led him to buy the vacuum distillation equipment. And while the experimentation with wine worked, he didn’t pursue it. “I realised that people were not going to want to buy wines that had been tampered with in that way, however interested they might be. But I knew that at some stage over the next 12 months I was going to have to do something that would generate some money.”

And that’s when Hart – who clearly has alcohol on the brain, so to speak – decided to break out the juniper berries. “I thought: right, now is the time to do something that had been brewing in my mind for decades. Which was: I bet I could make a gin.”

So he studied a 17th-century encyclopaedia, *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*, which was commissioned by the Dutch East India Company



The perils of too much gin... William Hogarth’s view

GIN – A SHORT HISTORY

The name gin is derived from the French word *genièvre*, or the Dutch, *jenever*, both of which mean “juniper”. From the 11th century Italian monks were distilling crude spirits using juniper berries, which were recognised as possessing medicinal properties. But gin really took off in Holland and England in the 17th century. In England the government allowed unlicensed gin production at the same time as imposing heavy import duty on foreign spirits. As a result, gin was blamed for a variety of social and medical problems, and inspired William Hogarth’s engraving, *Gin Lane* (pictured). Later, in the 19th century the London Dry Gin style was developed and used to mask the bitter flavour of quinine in tonic water – the only effective anti-malarial compound.



to chronicle the spices discovered at the height of the spice trade. Hart somewhat modestly claims to have read only half of the twelve 300-page Latin volumes that make up the encyclopaedia, doing so using only what he describes as “pidgin Latin”. But it was enough for him to discover the 12 botanicals that he ultimately chose to use, including juniper, cardamom, nutmeg, and the *Boswellia Sacra* that gives Sacred Gin its name.

But how did someone with no prior experience of making the spirit garner so many accolades so quickly? The unlikely answer is that Hart used a small army of tasters – none of them expert. “I had probably 20 or 30 people who had a regular interest and would give me a pretty honest appraisal, including the cleaning lady. Basically it allowed me to develop my hunches,” he says.

The breakthrough came one Sunday evening in his local pub, the Wrestlers in Highgate, where he had a totally unanimous decision on the 28th attempt at a blend – what is now Sacred Gin. The pub’s landlord, Martin Harley, immediately offered to make it the main gin at the establishment.

Hart then began marketing the spirit himself to restaurants, hotels and retailers, mostly within the M25. But the gin’s reputation is taking it further afield – Hart said he was especially pleased when Alain Desenclos, restaurant director at Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons called him up out of the blue to order some. And bottles have even found their way as far as the famous Bristol gin bar in Madrid.

“I am very keen to emphasise that this is a proper, locally-made product,” Hart says. “There are only four stills operating in London nowadays and they are all copper pot stills. No one else in the UK is using vacuum distilling techniques, as far as I can tell.”

A vodka, flavoured with nutmeg and cubeb now follows, and Hart has already distilled 1,000 bottles, with enough botanicals hidden away in his house to make another 9,000 if required.

He isn’t fazed by the question of what to do if demand grows, either – he reckons he can operate at least one other set of distillation apparatus without hiring any staff. At which point, the children may well have to decamp to the garden.

ALESSANDRO PALAZZI’S “MARTINEZ COCKTAIL”

Alessandro Palazzi, manager of the Dukes Bar at Dukes Hotel in London, says he chose Sacred Gin for his bar because he liked the fact that it was local, exclusive produce, made by a small company. Here, he shares the recipe for one of the first martini cocktails he ever created – the “Martinez Cocktail”.

INGREDIENTS

- Few drops of orange bitter
- 5ml of Martini Rosso
- 70ml of Sacred Gin, from the freezer
- Few drops of Maraschino
- A maraschino cherry
- Large wedge of lemon

Serve together in a frozen glass.