



# BEAUTIFUL

Small batch, craft, artisanal... call them what you like, but this year has seen the launch of a number of small UK distillers. **Clinton Cawood** gets out his magnifying glass and takes a look at a mini revolution

**B**ehind closed doors in the suburbs of London, there's a quiet revolution taking place. In residential areas – in kitchens and living rooms – people are distilling vodka and gin. No, this isn't a description of Hogarth-era London, the date is not 1750, and these spirits are not being produced in bathtubs. This is high-tech, high-quality production of artisan white spirits in limited quantities.

In Highgate, north London, Ian Hart is producing Sacred Gin in his home, using what looks more like complex laboratory equipment than a traditional still. He distils under low pressure at low temperatures, making just a few hundred bottles a month.

Meanwhile on the other side of the city, on a quiet street in Hammersmith, lives Prudence, a gleaming new copper still (pictured, left), and the first of its kind in London in 189 years. She

is the property of the Sipsmith Distillery, which is run by Sam Galsworthy, Fairfax Hall and master distiller Jared Brown, who use this 300-litre still to produce small batches of barley vodka and London Dry Gin.

Further afield, there's Chase Vodka in Herefordshire, an outfit on the larger end of this UK movement, but still decidedly small when compared to the big players in the spirits industry. The brand was created by William Chase, the man behind Tyrells Potato Chips. Following the success of Chase potato vodka, launched in February this year, the range is now expanding to include an apple vodka and a gin.

## INTERCONTINENTAL INSPIRATION

The US definitely beat the UK to the punch on this one, and almost everyone involved in small-scale distillation on this side of the pond will acknowledge this. William Chase was in the US buying crisp-related equipment a few years ago when he came across a micro-distillery producing vodka from potatoes, and the idea for Chase Vodka was born.

Sam Galsworthy also recognises small US distillers as an inspiration for Sipsmith. 'Fairfax and I were in the States, and laws were beginning to lift on distilling, allowing the craft to thrive again. You could feel the passion, see the art, and we found this infectious,' he says.

Galsworthy uses the word 'craft', but it's not his only term to describe Sipsmith. 'It's hand-crafted distillation. We like to think of ourselves as premium artisanal.' He adds: 'When you strip us bare we're a micro-distillery.'

There's clearly very little consensus as to which term best describes these new UK spirits producers, and the terms that are used are vaguely defined. Jamie Baxter, distiller at Chase,

says, 'We've used the term "artisan distilling", but we quite like "boutique distilling", which is used in the US. It's more glamorous.' Hart is clear about the description of his gin – the Sacred label reads: 'microdistilled in small batches.'

Caorunn, a small-production gin made in Balmenach whisky distillery in Speyside, is even more tricky to define. Brand manager Iby Bakos isn't too keen to associate with any micro-distillation movement, saying, 'On one hand we're small-batch distilled, but we'd still like to be a brand. We're making 1,000 bottles in a batch, so we're not really micro-

volume.' She adds: 'We do say it's hand-crafted, though. Craft means something that's made by hand to the highest standards, so Caorunn is hand-crafted.'

No matter what you call it, it's not particularly easy to get a licence from HM Revenue and

Customs to distil in small quantities. Officially, a still with a capacity of at least 1,800 litres must be in use to be granted a distilling licence. To get an exception to this was 'pretty challenging', says Sipsmith's Galsworthy. 'They needed to know who was behind it, what our ambitions were... it took two years,' he says. 'There's more red tape than there needs to be.'

## SMALL BEGINNINGS

For Hart, this process was relatively easy, as his operation doesn't require a distilling licence, but only one for rectifying and compounding. Chase's Jamie Baxter adds that 'once you've got a big still, they'll happily grant you a licence for a smaller still.'

Licensing issues aside, there are undoubtedly benefits to producing in small quantities. 'Being small means we can make one-off batches, and we run research batches all the time,' says Galsworthy. For some, such as Sacred and Bacardi-Martini's new top-end gin Oxley, the production method makes small-batch distillation an inevitability. Oxley is distilled in a near-vacuum, in batches of about 23 litres at a time.

And if the response from the on-trade is anything to go by, it's the right time for these small, UK-produced spirits. For Galsworthy, there's been a change in consumer perception as well. 'People now care about what they're drinking, where it comes from, who's making it... Hopefully this will be the beginning of a wave of new distilleries,' he says.

'I think we'll definitely see more of this,' says Hart. 'I think even the bit of publicity I'm getting will encourage people, and it will be nice to break some of the dominance of the big players, just to get some variation,' he says.

'You wouldn't want Lafite every night,' Hart smiles. 'You'd want a Pichon-Lalande, maybe, and a Margaux the next...' >>

**A still with a capacity of at least 1,800 litres must be in use... to get an exception to this was 'pretty challenging'**



Fairfax Hall, Jared Brown, Sam Galsworthy – Sipsmith

## SIPSMITH

West London distillers who are making some quintessentially English barley-based spirits on a small scale

**First bottled:** June 2009

**Location:** Hammersmith, London

**Size of still:** 300l

**Distiller:** Jared Brown

**Product range:** English Barley Vodka (RRP £22.99/70cl, 40% abv) and London Dry Gin (RRP £23.99/70cl, 41.6% abv), both with an English barley spirit base. Botanicals include Spanish almond powder, Chinese cassia bark and Italian liquorice root.

**Distributor:** Sipsmith, 020 8741 2034

*'Sipsmith's been a good product to work with. We've given our guys a few key facts, soundbites about the brand that they can relay to customers, and people find the story really interesting – the fact that it's a London brand, and the first licence to be issued in so many years... It's a part of this craft distilling movement that's been predominant in San Francisco. The product's really versatile, with a good mouthfeel, and they've not veered too far from traditional botanicals.'*  
**Ian Goodman, Oxo Tower**



Simon Buley – Caorunn Gin

## SACRED GIN

Really small production in a living room in north London, using low-pressure, low-temperature distillation

**First bottled:** May 2009

**Location:** Highgate, London

**Size of still:** 6l and 2l (Rotavapor)

**Distiller:** Ian Hart

**Product range:** Sacred Gin (RRP £25.95/70cl, 40% abv), made using a secret recipe including botanicals such as nutmeg and hougary frankincense.

**Distributor:** Coe Vintners, 020 8551 4966

*'Sacred's unusual, and something interesting to offer customers – a spirit that you can't find abroad. It's a truly London gin. And it's a beautiful gin, which makes a Martini that's a bit more floral, a bit sweet. I quite like not always supporting the big guys, but the small guys too. I took on six bottles of Sacred and I've finished them already. I need to buy some more.'*  
**Alessandro Palazzi, Duke's Hotel**



Jamie Baxter – Chase Distillery

## OXLEY GIN

Owned and developed by Bacardi-Martini, distilled in small batches, in a near-vacuum at -5° Celsius

**First bottled:** May 2009

**Location:** Thames Distillers, London

**Size of production:** 120 bottles per run

**Distiller:** Oxley Spirits Company



Ian Hart – Sacred Gin

**Product range:** Oxley Gin (RRP £48/1l, 47% abv), made with botanicals such as cocoa, meadowsweet, grains of paradise and liquorice.

**Distributor:** Bacardi-Martini, 01962 762100

*'I love the idea of bringing more distillation back to England. Oxley's distilled in a different way, so the expression of the botanicals is different – a tangent of what you'd expect a gin to be. It's very enticing on the nose.'*  
**Mark Jenner, Coburg Bar at The Connaught**



## CHASE DISTILLERS

Potato vodka from the farm in Herefordshire where Tyrell's crisps are made, with slick packaging and marketing

**First bottled:** February 2009 (as Chase Vodka)

**Location:** Rosemaund Farm, Hereford

**Size of still:** 2,300l (vodka) and 450l (gin)

**Distiller:** Jamie Baxter

**Product range:** Chase Vodka (RRP £32.95/70cl, 40% abv), from potatoes; Naked Chase (RRP £39.99/70cl, 42% abv), apple vodka; William Chase Gin (RRP £29.99/70cl, 48% abv), made with apple spirit as a base, and including hops and elderflower as botanicals; Chase liqueurs (RRP £17.50/50cl, 20% abv)

**Distributor:** See [www.chasedistillery.co.uk](http://www.chasedistillery.co.uk) for details

*'I tell people the story about Chase Vodka and it really enthuses them. I think they should play more with the story. I also think the fact that it's English will do them more favours with consumers than the fact that it's a microdistillery. The vodka has excellent flavour, with real creaminess. We've stocked it as an option for people who drink vodka neat. And I tried their new gin the other day – it's excellent.'*  
**Paul Mant, Quo Vadis**



## CAORUNN GIN

Small-batch, hand-crafted Scottish gin that's distilled in a whisky distillery in Speyside using typically Scottish botanicals such as bog myrtle

**First bottled:** June 2009

**Location:** Balmenach Distillery, Speyside, Scotland

**Size of production:** 1,000 bottles per run

**Distiller:** Simon Buley

**Product range:** Caorunn Gin (41.8% abv). In addition to traditional botanicals, it includes five uniquely Celtic botanicals: rowan berry, coul blush apple, dandelion leaf, bog myrtle and heather.

**Distributor:** International Beverage Holdings, 01236 769377

*'What I really like is the liquid. It's a subtle mix of flavours – it's very mixable. I think consumers ultimately care about the taste.'*

**Tai Altman, bar consultant**

