

Where to Eat

THE ONLY BANGKOK RESTAURANT GUIDE
TO TELL IT HOW IT REALLY IS

IMAGE asia

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Gin: Winning the Battle for Respectability

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To my father, low class bars were 'gin mills', and mother looked askance at anyone who drank gin. To be sure, gin has had more than its share of ups and downs, particularly in Great Britain.



During the 17th century, when taxes made beer prohibitively expensive, Britain's poor and downtrodden quickly made gin their beverage of choice. With more alcohol for the same penny, many of the masses turned to alcohol, causing a host of problems and providing the grist for numerous novels. Critics and reformers loudly demanded changes, but attempts by the government to control the supply and price of gin resulted in wholesale smuggling and illegal distilling.

Eventually, improved social conditions and a reduction in taxes brought the British back to the beer they now love so much and gin was left to wallow in ignominy. But in the mid 19th century, gin began a long and slow climb back to respectability. Eventually what was once the drink of

London's wretches had become a beverage for the upper classes, particularly when served as part of a gin and tonic. And in North America, gin became the prime ingredient in the fashionable martini cocktail.

Eventually what was once the drink of London's wretches had become a beverage for the upper classes, particularly when served as part of a gin and tonic.

There are two principal styles of gin: the type enjoyed by the British and the version preferred by the Dutch. British gin is far more popular and is found in bars and liquor

stores throughout the world. It is the principal ingredient in a variety of cocktails. Dutch gin, although a splendid beverage, is rarely seen outside of Europe and is usually drunk neat.

British gin is made by distilling a "beer" made from malt and corn in a column still until it reaches 90 or 94 percent alcohol. At this high a distillation, the resulting liquid is clear and virtually without any of the flavours found in the original ingredients. This alcohol is then mixed with juniper berries and a mixture of other additives — the composition of which is always a trade secret — and distilled for a last time in a pot still. Water is then added so that the final brew has an alcohol content of about 45 percent.

The Dutch were the first to make and drink modern style gin. Around 1650, Franciscus Sylvius, a physician at the University of Leiden, began treating patients with stomach and kidney disorders with a distilled spirit infused with juniper oil. The brew did nothing for people's stomachs, but his patients sure liked the taste. A short time later, gin was being consumed for pleasure rather than medical reasons. And by 1685, Holland was exporting 11 million gallons of gin a year, with, as you might have guessed, most it going to Britain.

The Dutch make gin differently than the British and the result is a spirit with a decidedly different flavour. They distill malt, corn and rye in a pot still (like Scotch) to a much lower proof than British gin. This means it retains many congeners, and as a result, the tastes and body are from the original ingredients. After being distilled two or three times, juniper berries are added and it is distilled a last time so that the alcohol content is about 48 percent. The Dutch love of gin is vividly illustrated by their proclivity for drinking it straight.

No discussion of gin would be complete without considering the martini, the most famous of all cocktails. Many places claim to be the birthplace of this prominent concoction, but the arguments are pointless. The original 'martinis' were made with sweetened gin, sweet vermouth and sugar syrup, a far cry from the drink we associate with the word "martini." Around 1900, people started asking for 'dry' martinis, similar to those consumed today, but this happened in many places at the same time.



One of the most famous martini drinkers of all time was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man who was immensely happy when prohibition was repealed in the United States. He liked his cocktail made with British gin and a teaspoon of olive brine. James Bond, as everyone seems to know, likes his martinis 'shaken not stirred', a practice many people espouse as it results in a colder drink. The martini, which was extremely popular up to the 1960's, suffered a decline in popularity in the 70's and 80's. In the 1990's it made a comeback, and even though many people now prefer the cocktail to be made with vodka, many still prefer it with gin.

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likes his martinis 'shaken not stirred'.**

Interestingly the martini is often a drink associated with business and after work drinking. The martini was extremely popular up to the 1960's when being a businessperson was an occupation widely admired. Then came the Vietnam War, hippies and an anti-business sentiment with college students. At the same time, the martini suffered a marked decline in popularity. In the 70's and 80's it wasn't popular at all, but



in the 1990's when college students again decided that having an occupation such as a businessperson wasn't so bad, it made a comeback. Today it is an extremely popular cocktail even though many people now prefer it to be made with vodka.

Although many cocktails are made with gin, more use vodka or rum as an ingredient. The reason for this is the assertive character of

gin. Many people enjoy the taste so they go no further than a martini where gin is the dominant ingredient. In the venerable gin and tonic, the tonic water has an intense flavour

of its own and is able to stand up against the spirit. Most other

*A martini and a good
read from the 007
author.*

gin cocktails feature the essence of gin or mask it by using a large number of other ingredients.

Internationally, the most popular gins continue to be those made in Britain and are what one will usually see on the shelf behind a bar.

Gin has fought hard to gain respectability. It has achieved this status and now stands proudly alongside the other spirits consumed throughout the world. The Dutch enjoy it straight, but most people blend it with something else. But it matters not how you decide to drink your gin, it is obviously here to stay.



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asia

62/10 Soi Prompak, Sukhumvit 49/6 Klongton, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand Tel/Fax +66 (0) 2712 9410
Editorial: +66 (0) 8 4914 0776 / mm@wheretoeat-bangkok.com
Sales: +66 (0) 8 6633 6933 / yu@wheretoeat-bangkok.com
Administration/Accounts: Tel: +66 (0) 7626 4491, Fax: +66 (0) 7626 4454, Email: nit@image-asia.com