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## Let's be-gin 氈氈自喜

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This juniper-flavoured liquor has experienced a meteoric rise in popularity, thanks to the craft spirits movement and an explosion of botanical experimentation. Now, with a first distillery set to open in Hong Kong, the trajectory points ever higher. 手工精釀烈酒的熱潮, 加上專家不停進行各種草本植物配方的試驗,造就了近年以杜松子調味的氈酒人氣急升。今天,香港也迎來 首間氈酒蒸餾廠, 氈酒的火紅程度可謂一時無兩。By Alice Franklin

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Meet friends for an after-work aperitif and the chances are high that at least one gin and tonic will be ordered. What's more, the gin won't be the house standard, as in years past, but will instead be selected from a menu of carefully curated options: Tanqueray, Hendrick's, Four Pillars and more. It's indicative of a renewed interest in the spirit, which has translated into a global growth in gin sales – the total UK spend hit £1.4 billion in 2017, according to the Wine and Spirit Trade Association – and that's not expected to slow down any time soon.

"There are a number of factors contributing to the rise of gin over the past five years," says Jared Brown, Master Distiller of London's Sipsmith distillery, which, when it opened in 2009, was the first new distillery in the British capital since 1820. "First of all, we're seeing gin return to an equilibrium it held in the past. Although it seems normal to us today for a bar to have three or four gins and 40 whiskies, this wasn't always the case. There was a time when you could find an almost equal number of whiskies and gins."

In a simple sense, gin comes from steeping vodka – a neutral spirit – in aromatic botanicals (especially juniper) as it passes through a still, to impart a rich aroma and taste. It fell out of favour over the years, a result of poor recipes, limited production and bad publicity, but today's increased global appetite for the spirit correlates with, among other things, the diversified use of herbs and spices in the small-batch distillation process.

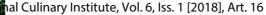
"Gin is a particularly good spirit for showing off hand-crafting," says Brown. "With such a broad and intriguing palate of botanicals to work with and so many traditions built up around it over the centuries, there are a lot of different roads for producers to follow in bringing a good gin to the market."

下班後跟三五好友到酒吧喝一杯,差不多每次都至少有一個人會點氈湯力。還有 就是,今天氈酒的選擇已不再獨沽一味,酒單中精心挑選的氈酒種類多得讓人眼 花瞭亂,Tangueray、Hendrick's、Four Pillars等任君選擇。氈酒熱潮重臨,全球 銷量節節上升,據葡萄酒及烈酒貿易協會的統計數字顯示,單在2017年,英國人 便花了14億英鎊購買氈酒。這股上升趨勢似平短期之內沒有放緩跡象。

Sipsmith是2009年於倫敦開業的蒸餾酒廠,也是自1820年以來第一間在英國 首都開業的蒸餾酒廠,其釀酒大師Jared Brown表示:「促使氈酒在過去五年捲 土重來的原因有很多,首先是,氈酒的種類回到風光時,再次跟其他烈酒平分春 色。酒吧只供應三、四款氈酒,但威士忌卻有40款的情況,在今天的人看來似乎 尋常不過,但其實許久以前並非如此。曾幾何時,酒吧中的氈酒和威士忌數量不

簡單來說, 氈酒是將各式草本植物 (特別是杜松子, 氈酒又名杜松子酒) 加入中性 的伏特加重蒸而成,這些草本植物會為原本無色無味的烈酒注入濃郁的香氣和味 道。氈酒曾經因為用來釀酒的草本植物配方欠佳、產量少、宣傳差等原因,一度失 寵。今天, 氈酒在全球各地再掀熱潮, 全賴酒廠大膽選用各式香草和香料釀酒, 此外精釀模式的興起也居功不小。

Brown指出:「氈酒最能夠展現釀酒師的工藝,因為可選用的草本植物種類極多, 加上數百年來累積的各種各樣的經驗和方法,釀酒師可從中擷取所需,釀造出優 質的氈酒。」





Gin is a particularly good spirit for showing off hand-crafting.

With such a broad palate of botanicals and so many traditions built up over the centuries, there are a lot of different roads for producers to follow

- Jared Brown





Daniel Szor, who founded the Cotswolds Distillery in the English countryside, attributes this rise in experimentation to a handful of key players who paved the way in the world of gin. "I would argue that we all owe a great debt to the folks at Bombay Sapphire," he says, "because they took gin away from its traditional reputation as a rather one-dimensional flavour experience – essentially just a lot of juniper and alcohol. They were one of the first to have multiple botanicals from exotic places prominently listed on the label, which was never the case in the past."

As a host of botanicals have become the backbone of different gins, no longer is it simply the all-powerful juniper that soaks through when you pour a shot – just look at Germany's Monkey 47, which boasts the same number of fragrant additions. Aromatic herbs offer a complex and unique array of flavour profiles, and it's up to each distiller to decide the recipe and process that will produce the best bottle and gain them a new legion of fans.

Step into Steven Newton's Kowloon distillery – the first such home-grown space in Hong Kong – and you'll find not only a specially commissioned copper still built by hand, but boxes of fragrant botanicals that have been tried and tested in the four years that he's been working to obtain his distillery licence. Newton has mixed some of gin's better-known friends – the likes of juniper, angelica root and cloves – with some less common botanicals, such as ginseng.

"I wanted to go for something that was very smooth with a bit of a floral flavour," Newton explains. "A lot of the time I was trying to control the ginseng, so it didn't overpower everything. It tastes of Hong Kong."

This leads to the significance of provenance in production. Along with the use of carefully selected botanicals that seek to offer consumers something deeper than – and different from – what they've experienced before, there lies the question of how spirits can be influenced by the regions in which they're made. During the last few years, the fascination with origin of goods has grown, and this extends to the world of gin. People nowadays are keen to buy local, to support businesses close to home and enjoy something appreciably inspired by the community. Cue Hong Kong Distillery and its Handover Gin.

Cotswolds Distillery設於英格蘭郊區,創辦人Daniel Szor認為,全賴幾位舉足輕重的釀酒師勇於嘗試,氈酒才會有今天的地位。他說:「我認為Bombay Sapphire 的釀酒師居功至偉。他們把氈酒從杜松子味烈酒的單調味道中解放出來,一洗大眾對氈酒的刻板印象。他們率先在氈酒中加入多種異國草本植物,開風氣之先。」

今天·草本植物已成為氈酒的靈魂·氈酒不再只有杜松子的味道。以德國Monkey 47為例·顧名思義·就是以47種香料和香草來釀製。不同的香料和香草為氈酒帶來層次豐富、獨一無二的味道·酒廠可從中找出自己的草本植物配方·再配合不同的醸酒步驟,釀出自己最佳的氈酒·吸引更多酒迷垂青。

踏入Steven Newton設於九龍的蒸鰡酒廠(全港首間氈酒蒸鰡廠),你不單會看到一個特別訂製的人手打造銅蒸鰡器,還有一箱箱的香草。過去四年,申請牌照的同時,酒廠便以這些香草來釀酒,嘗試找出釀造美酒的最佳草本配方。Newton試過把釀製氈酒常用的香草如杜松子、歐白芷根和丁香等,配搭一些不常用的植物,如人參。

Newton解釋:「我想釀造出口感幼滑,帶一點花香的氈酒。我花了很多時間調校人 參的分量,以免它蓋過其他味道。人參是富有香港特色的味道。」

這帶出一個信息,那就是產地因素的重要。除了要斟酌草本植物的配搭,帶給消費者更具層次、與別不同又前所未有的口味,釀酒師也要考慮如何加入本土元素。過去數年,大眾開始留意商品的出產地,氈酒市場也一樣。今天,大家都喜歡購買本土商品,支持本土小店,欣賞具本土特色的東西。本地氈酒蒸餾廠Hong Kong Distillery及旗下產品Handover Gin正好乘勢而起。

Newton深明,作為香港蒸餾酒廠的先鋒,自己正在為後來者開路,就像當年倫敦的Sipsmith:當地現時已經有20多間氈酒蒸餾廠。在香港開設酒廠需要有不屈不撓、永不言敗的精神。Newton談到他在香港開設蒸餾酒廠的決心時表示:「當初每個人都不看好,大家都認為不可能在香港開蒸餾酒廠,但我沒有放棄:這裡碰壁,我便用其他方法再試。」他希望自己的堅持能讓香港消費者更懂得欣賞本土精釀的氈酒。看來他成功在望了。

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Cotswolds Distillery in Warwickshire, England; Hong Kong Distillery's Handover Gin; London distillery Sipsmith's Balloon Wall This page: Gin making under way at Cotswolds Distillery 對頁上圖起順時針: 位於英格蘭和域郡的 Cotswolds Distillery; Hong Kong Distillery; 釀製的Handover Gin; 倫敦蒸餾酒廠Sipsmith 的Balloon Wall

本頁: Cotswolds Distillery的工作人員 正密切注視釀酒過程



Newton knows that as Hong Kong's pioneer in distillation, he's paving the way for others to follow, much as Sipsmith did in London, where there are now more than 20 gin distilleries. "Everyone said it was impossible, you can't build a distillery in Hong Kong, but I wasn't going away – if you turn me down here I'll just come from another angle," Newton says, of the perseverance it has taken for him to launch in the city. His is a passion that he hopes will lead Hong Kong consumers to a deeper appreciation for small-batch gin production, made as locally as possible. All the signs point in the affirmative.

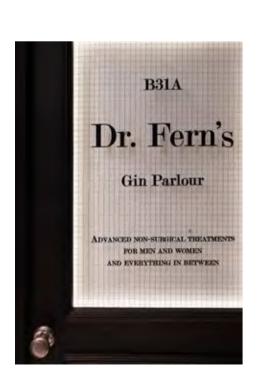
Beyond botanical experimentation and provenance, the recent gin resurgence can also be attributed to the parallel ascendance of mixologists in the popularity stakes, both in Hong Kong and further afield. As they become more prominent ambassadors of the drinks industry, it's fair to say the tipples they create will only rise to be more in demand, and gin is top of their list when it comes to building mixed beverages.

"Gin is a versatile and universal spirit that has the ability to be a binding base that doesn't overpower other ingredients, as most brown spirits tend to do," explains Himson Lam from Dr. Fern's Gin Parlour, a Hong Kong bolthole that was named one of Asia's 50 Best Bars in 2017. "The culture behind cocktail making has now expanded to include using gin in a variety of forms, not just in the classics, like martinis."

This "ginaissance", as it's been affectionately coined, shows no signs of burning out, especially with the arrival of Hong Kong's very first local distillery set to fan the flames. As small-batch businesses continue to take root, filling bottles with a spirit that is as unique as their communities, so those tending bar will find new and innovative ways to use gin on the menu. We'll raise a glass to that.



Gin is a versatile and universal spirit that doesn't overpower other ingredients 藍酒是靈活、萬用的基底烈酒,不會蓋過其他材料的味道 555 — Himson Lam





除了草本配方和產地因素,近年調酒師在香港以至世界各地冒起,也是促使氈酒 復興的主因。由於調酒師作為美酒推廣大使的影響力益發重要,他們調製的創新 飲品也會更受歡迎,而氈酒正是他們調製雞尾酒時喜用的烈酒。

位於置地廣場的Dr Fern's Gin Parlour獲選為「2017年亞洲50間最佳酒吧」之一,酒吧調酒師Himson Lam解釋:「氈酒是靈活、萬用的基底烈酒,它能夠結合不同味道,又不會像大部分棕色烈酒般蓋過其他材料的味道。雞尾酒文化與時俱進,今天氈酒的用途已變得非常廣泛,不只用來調製傳統雞尾酒如馬天尼等。」

名為「氈酒復興」的熱潮不僅毫無減退跡象,隨著香港本地首間蒸餾酒廠開業,相信熱潮更會再度升温。當精釀酒廠打穩根基,釀出別具本土特色的氈酒後,帶領潮流的酒吧自然會發揮創意,利用這些美酒調製飲品。來,為氈酒乾杯! 😂

Opposite page, clockwise from of top left: Eden Mill distillery's pale pink Love gin, hailing from St Andrews in Scotland; the wide range of gins on offer at Dr. Fern's Gin Parlour in Hong Kong; the entrance to the award-winning bar

This page: A selection of the varied gin-based cocktails available at Dr. Fern's Gin Parlour 對頁左上圖起順時針: 設於蘇格蘭聖安德魯斯鎮 的Eden Mill蒸餾酒廠生 產的淡粉紅色氈酒Love; 香港酒吧Dr. Fern's Gin Parlour叫人眼花瞭亂的 點酒選擇;這家得獎酒吧 的大門

本頁: Dr. Fern's Gin Parlour各種以氈酒調製 的雞尾酒