

NATIONAL POST

Happy Hour: Another year, another batch of artisanal gins

ADAM MCDOWELL | May 19, 2013 | Last Updated: May 17 4:39 PM ET



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Artisanal gins in time for Victoria Day

In what's become an annual tradition around here, Happy Hour celebrates Victoria Day with a roundup of fancy-pants renditions of London-style dry gin, a spirit that conquered the world during the latter part of Queen Victoria's reign. This year, our entries hail from small craft distillers in England and Canada. Availability varies across the country.

Gilead 66 Loyalist Gin

Bloomfield, Ont.

From the first whiff, this is much sweeter than what most 21st-century drinkers expect from a gin. The wheat-based spirit that serves as its base is wet, malty and candy-like; it reminds me very much of the kind of newly distilled spirit that you age for a few years in a barrel to make whisky. So don't be surprised if you see a new whisky from Prince Edward County, Ont., in the future. Loyalist Gin meanwhile serves as a reminder that juniper is a berry; it comes through as jammy and plummy here. I don't know if this eccentric product truly succeeds as an everyday gin, but it's interesting neat or with tonic and it will make for a delicious Collins.

Sipsmith London Dry Gin

London, U.K.;

Long Table London Dry Gin

Vancouver, B.C.

These classy and classically styled gins have plenty in common. Both start with a fresh, minty juniper and citrus peel aroma; both exhibit herbal coriander and pepper notes; both finish quite dry. The Long Table — which enjoys a small edge over Sipsmith, for my money — adds a thirst-quenching saltiness in the finish. Sipsmith and Long Table are a little too dry for my palate, but fans of Tanqueray and Bombay Sapphire ought to try them. They will work in anything.

Hayman's 1850 Reserve Gin

Witham, U.K.

Few distillers are as dedicated to the story of gin as Hayman's of England. The 1850 Reserve is just one of Hayman's six historically informed gin products. It's aged for a few weeks in whisky barrels in order to evoke what was consumed in the "gin palaces" of the mid-Victorian era, when gin was shipped to bars by the barrel and took on some of the spicy character of the wood. With a big, clean, floral juniper flavour, slippery-smooth mouthfeel and spicy finish, Hayman's 1850 arrives dressed for a date with tonic.

Victoria Oaken Gin

Victoria, B.C.

Victoria Spirits, already known across Canada for its outstanding gin, has released this hybrid spirit — an aged gin — in the B.C. and Alberta markets. The flagship Victoria Gin is aged in French and American oak barrels until it takes on an amber hue and the flavour of the wood. The enticing aroma carries a surprising campfire note as well as vanilla, candied orange, caramel and angelica root. The rose scent I adore in Victoria Gin seems to have been lost in the aging process, but on the other hand a negroni cocktail using the Oaken Gin is spectacular.