

BY JACOPO MAZZEO

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

During economic uncertainty in Lebanon, the time was ripe for a homegrown gin brand to capture the hearts of the country's gin drinkers – and Faouzi Issa was the man to seize that opportunity



Protests in the streets. Road blocks. Savers holding up banks to demand access to their own deposits. Over the past few years, Lebanon has been experiencing increasing civil unrest as a result of a paralysed financial system – a prolonged economic depression that the World Bank has deemed one of the worst globally since the mid-19th century.

While it only became fully apparent in 2019, Lebanon's current economic instability traces its roots back to the late 1990s, in the aftermaths of the country's 15-year-long civil war.

In 2020, Lebanon's financial emergency was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 outbreak and, shortly after, by a devastating explosion at the Port of Beirut. Besides the terrible human cost, the latter tragedy reportedly caused more than US\$15 billion in damage to property and infrastructure.

In times of crisis, people often find escape in affordable luxuries, but the increasingly weakening Lebanese pound made all imported goods – including alcohol – unreasonably expensive to the local population. In Lebanon, affordable luxuries such as international beer, whisky, and gin brands are no longer that affordable.

"In the past two years we dramatically lost the power of our currency," says Faouzi Issa, winemaker and distiller at Domaine des Tourelles. "That badly affected imported goods. We used to get a lot of international gin brands like Bombay Sapphire and Tanqueray. These were dominating 99 per cent of the market but eventually became 15 times more expensive than they used to be."

However, the unfortunate circumstances offered Lebanese entrepreneurs some silver linings. "Just a few years ago, gin was an old-people drink, with the average drinker being 60 or 65. Now it's crazy, gin is the country's go-to spirit," says Issa, who decided to capitalise on people's growing demand for gin by developing a locally produced liquid



These pages, clockwise from left: A bottle of GinBey; Amphora jars, in which the gin is rested before bottling; Faouzi Issa, winemaker and distiller at Domaine des Tourelles

at a fraction of the increasingly expensive imported brands' cost. When Covid hit and travel restrictions were imposed, he found himself stuck at the Domaine des Tourelles winery, in the Bekaa Valley, in Lebanon's fertile east, with an unusually copious amount of spare time on his hands. "We make arak, which is Lebanon's anise seeds-flavoured national drink, so we were already familiar with distilling," he explains.

"Gin was always something that I wanted to do. I love it." It took Issa several months to develop a gin recipe that could work on his distilling equipment. Then, in autumn 2021, he launched GinBey.

GinBey's recipe uses wheat spirit imported from the Netherlands as a base and features some 14 botanicals, the majority of which are locally sourced.

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"In Lebanon, we are surrounded by botanicals: flowers, fruits, and lots of [aromatic herbs]," Issa explains. GinBey features citrus fruit such as mandarin peel and kumquat, pomegranate seeds, liquorice, cassia bark, tilia petals from the winery's garden, rose petals, coriander, fennel, anise seeds, angelica root, and, of course, juniper. "Sometimes I even use a little honey, mostly for texture," says Issa.

Some of the botanicals are steeped a whole day before distillation in Tourelle's 400-litre copper still, which is heated by a steam jacket to regulate its temperature. The more volatile botanicals such as pomegranate seeds and the tilia and rose petals are placed in a basket for a gentler extraction.

"The pomegranate likes to be squeezed a little before I put it in the basket alongside some of the citrus," says Issa. "The acidity and sugar of the pomegranate are very important because they have a positive impact on the gin's texture and because they give it softness."

Angelica root, which does not grow in Lebanon, is imported from Italy. Locally grown juniper is available in Lebanon, but Issa imports his leading ingredient, too. Earlier attempts with Lebanese juniper were deemed unsatisfactory and the craftsman opted for berries from Macedonia.

"I did try our Lebanese juniper, but I found it very oily," Issa explains. "The resulting liquid tastes like mastika [a resinous liqueur]. That flavour ruins all the balance... It is too dominant, and I like to keep international standards of flavour for my gin."

Alongside most of the botanicals, the final stage of the production process lends the gin an extra sense of place. Mirroring a practice that is common in the production of Lebanese arak, the liquid is rested in traditional amphora jars for six months to mellow the spirit's texture and round out the taste.



These pages, clockwise from bottom left:
The Domaine des Tourelles distillery; Taking a spirit sample; Issa with a selection of botanicals; Issa at the distillery



The gin's name and packaging help to affirm a strong Lebanese identity. 'Bey' is short for Beirut, while the very word 'gin' translates as 'go crazy' in the local lingo. The name's Arabic spelling is repeatedly depicted on the label to fashion an elegantly patterned frame that recalls Lebanon's traditional mosaic tiles.

With his ingredients showing significant seasonal variation, the recipe is tweaked from batch to batch, but overall, Issa believes that his gin's aromatic profile needs no further revision. "At the moment I think I reached a good balance for a product that works well in most cocktails, so I don't think I need to adjust it again despite it being a relatively new product," he says, although he adds that he might well introduce new expressions in the future.

Like Tourelle's arak, GinBey is delectable as a neat drink, but the Lebanese have welcomed it as a substitute for mainstream brands in twists on classic cocktails, and as

a partner to both tonic water and the more left-field rose water.

Despite its young age, GinBey has already achieved nationwide fame. "We started about a year and a half ago in September 2021, and although we don't produce big

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quantities, now we are the biggest local brand in Lebanon," Issa proudly points out.

As international brands' prices skyrocketed, GinBey offered the Lebanese a good-quality premium product with the added value of a comforting sense of place. "The economic crisis is worsening in Lebanon, and we are politically unstable," Issa admits. "We are

losing currency every month, things are getting more expensive. But this is the time when local producers can flourish. It is a trend that you see across other industries too in Lebanon."

Alongside domestic growth, the gin is carving its own international niche, too. It is already present in nine foreign countries and counting. GinBey's international success does not simply benefit Issa's own pride; in a region struggling with hysterical inflation, exports are bringing to Domaine des Tourelles, and to Lebanon as a whole, much-needed foreign exchange.

"Selling in the local market does not give us a good return. We need to sell on the export market to bring hard currency into Lebanon," says Issa. "Despite the challenges, we increasingly shifted volumes to export markets. Things are unstable and we don't know what is going to happen, but in the long run, this situation has been positive for us. We are resilient people."

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GINBEY COCKTAILS

GinBey Salty Dog

Glass: Highball

- 50ml GinBey
- 150ml fresh grapefruit juice
- 1 tsp maraschino liqueur or passion fruit liqueur (optional)
- Wedge of red grapefruit, to garnish

Add both ingredients to a mixing glass over ice cubes and stir to chill the mix. Take the highball glass and salt its rim, then fill with fresh ice cubes. Double strain into the highball and garnish with a wedge of red grapefruit.

For a variation, add a teaspoon of maraschino liqueur or passion fruit liqueur.



GinBey French 75

Glass: Highball

- 40ml GinBey
- 120ml sparkling wine
- 1 tsp icing sugar
- 10ml fresh lemon juice
- Lemon twist, to garnish

Put the sugar, lemon juice, and gin in a shaker and shake with ice until the mixture is blended. Pour into a highball glass and top up with a high-quality sparkling wine. Garnish with a lemon twist.

GinBey Rosé

Glass: Lowball / Rocks

- 50ml GinBey
- 30ml rose syrup
- 150ml sparkling water
- Lemon zest
- Dried rose petals, or lemon peel, to garnish

Put the gin and the syrup in a lowball glass and stir to dissolve the syrup. Add the sparkling water and stir again until all the mix is blended. Fill with crushed ice, squeeze the lemon zest, and garnish with dried rose petals on a stick.



GinBey Gimlet

Glass: Lowball / Rocks

- 50ml GinBey
- 14g brown sugar
- 30ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
- Slice of lemon, or a sprig of mint, to garnish

Take a lowball glass and sugar the rim. Add the fresh lemon juice, sugar, and gin, then stir until about half of the sugar is dissolved. Fill with ice cubes and give it a final gentle stir, minding the sugar rim. Garnish with a lemon slice or a sprig of mint.

