

he glossy door swings sun onto four thousand more bottles than the proverbial ten green ones. I enter the office, warehouse and, ultimately, home of Edgar Harden, documenter and vendor of 'antique' spirits. 'I haven't invented the vintage spirits category, but delving in, I made myself known as a good choice in the market, he says modestly as I pull up a chair, mindful of the bounty snaking about me. They include the dagger-shaped Nepalese rum removed, Excalibur-like, by Harden from the cast iron grate of the dining room's marble fireplace. And centrepiece on the table is McGibbon's branded Scotch in what looks like a golf driver.

'I try to get as many fun things as possible,' says Harden, revolving the square, porcelain lid of Buton Cherry Brandy which features hand-painted King of Clubs and Queen of Diamonds. Meanwhile, beyond film protection, the gold and black vessel of a Japanese green tea liqueur evokes a vase, or cocktail shaker? Of the edition of Bols which contains a pirouetting ballerina, Harden commends the quality of the musical movements as 'very high, unlike modern Chinese crap: But the gin fronted by the once-Equity-card-holding Rough Collie, Lassie is 'a bit silly.'

Born in Vancouver, Harden learned decorative arts in New York, working at Washington Gallery, Getty, Louvre, V&A, Rockefeller, Phillips de Pury and Christie's. At the latter, he discovered the furniture department was conveniently located beside the wine department. Expressing interest in wine, Harden was frequently invited to appraise samples of seminal lots, 'including Victory Lafite 1945 and Domaine de la



RARE SPIRIT possesses an extensive, unique collection of unsual tinnles

Romanée Conti 1961: However, it was the relatively-humble nineteen fifties Bollinger which proved his Damascus sip. 'Silk with stars in!' he says, reasoning, 'whatever description you give is okay so long as it allows you to recall the drink.

Harden broadened into Bordeaux futures in the heyday of 2005, although the market has 'now come back to bite people on the bum with a third fall in price - no one's fault but the châteaux.' But, finance won over romance in the fine wine business. 'First growths often traded three times before they were even delivered to a bonded warehouse, with the real prospect of no one ever drinking it.'

Fortunately Harden heeded a signpost while clearing a client's cellar. 'The client advised me to sell his 1982 Mouton Rothschild but bin the sixties Gordon's. "Take it to the skip!" they said. So I did. The skip that was my flat!' What did it taste like? 'Light, citrusy, but still palatable, and easy to sell. It reconfirmed the quality in older things, when production was smaller and corners weren't cut. And that's just the contents.' Harden cradles a bottle. 'The glass was thicker and darker.' There was also more choice from brands, says Harden, showing me an intriguingly age-stained rate card from Gordon's. It promises an array of assets, from 'ginger brandy' to 'milk punch' and even a 'rum shrub' alongside standard fare. He picks out a bottle of Gordon's Orange and Lemon gin. 'Amber hue, from very early in Elizabeth's reign.'

Motivated over seven subsequent years by the idea of survival, or 'drinking out of time', Harden amassed thousands of bottles dating, approximately, from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. 'In some cases, twenty

years old can be 'vintage', especially if they were sold briefly, such as Beefeater Crown Jewel, Campari Cordiale or Tanqueray Malacca (later reintroduced in a run of twenty thousand). But, as a general rule, I work thirty years from now backwards to ensure metamorphosis within bottle and branding.

What changes has Harden noted in consumers? 'People are more 'adventure some' in what they consume, although the market for 'used spirits' is still in its infancy! And who is buying? 'There's a small crowd of real cognoscenti in anything, although the focussed obsessive is less common than I would hope for. I have requests for birth year bottles, holiday gifts, and from people who want to make drinks at home from a very basic bar of classics. He tells me how he began stirring sales. I pounded the pavement and cyber-pavement to build a rolodex of eight hundred clients. Everyone on it knows me and I know them;

Jono, Harden's second in command, arrives. 'We met at The Spooty Fox pub around the corner' says Harden Later. Jono will hand-deliver London orders in a gently-worn, unassuming leather case. In contrast, the black sacks of bubble wrap and polystyrene packing 'peanuts' obscuring the bay window relate to dispatches to be made further afield.

Ladmire one of the few items without an ABV in the house: a porcelain sculpture. 'It's 'Sprout' by Richard Slee of Camberwell College of Arts', he says. 'An airbrush pioneer'. As Lapproach it. Harden recounts the story of the cleaner. who dusted a bottle of rare vintage bitters off the shelf of Salvatore Calabrese's bar at the Playboy Club. It had been destined for a record-breaking cocktail. 'Fortunately I was able to replace it, chuckles Harden. The label of Lash's Old

"It was the relatively humble 1950s <u>Bollinger</u> which proved his Damascus sip. 'Silk with stars in!' he says"

EDGAR HARDEN'S **BEST LONDON BARS**

- Off Regent Street, Bar American at Brasserie Zedel (brasseriezedel.com/ bar-americain) and MASH next-door (mashsteak.co.uk/ bar) are both art deco. Also try Mark's Bar, Brewer Street (marksbar.co.uk).
- The American Bar at The Savoy (fairmont.com/ savoy-london/dining/ americanbar) is both fun and classic.
- Outside Zone One, High Water, Dalston (highwaterlondon. com) comes from the founder of New York's Dead Rabbit. To think 10 years ago I would have feared getting knifed buving a kebab in the area!
- Evans & Peel, Earl's Court (evansandpeel. com) for memorable drinks made with ingredients including beetroot.



An age-stained rate card from Gordon's

Bitters, which I am briefly allowed to hold, makes interesting boasts, being 'natural', 'tonic' and 'laxative'. This type of curio is, according to Harden, 'very hard to find.'

In contrast to the rare, fillip bitters, I ask Harden what offers good value and availability. 'Blended Scotch is coming back into vogue. Diageo's 'Fine Malt Gang' brought single malts to the front as best.' He shakes his head. 'But single malts from the nineteen forties through to the seventies command wild prices versus blends like Whyte Horse, with a very high malt content, or Glenflayer, a now mothballed distillery.' Also 'very rewarding territory' are fifty to sixty yearold Cognacs.' I note that a bottle of fifties Martell shows the bird motif flying West rather than the East of today, the East being the marque's most profitable territory.

What stash has most excited Harden? 'Pre-prohibition bourbon and rve made pre-chilled filtration. Apparently they were meant to come out of barrel in the early nineteen twenties at four to five years old, but many were left in wood until 1933 completely by accident. The quality should be too woody, but in fact they are super-complex with aged vanilla notes, easily given the strength to ride out ninety years.' Harden looks sad. 'Of course a lot of pre-prohibition drinks were destroyed:

We cross the threshold to the kitchen, which, despite the chandelier-illuminated ceiling's patina, showing colourful fragments of one hundred and fifty five years of paint, has apparently 'just been decorated'. Here we taste a dozen pours dating back to the nineteen forties, from a prettytasting seventies Cuervo Tequila 'pre-the marketing', to a floral fifties Gordon's 'which still mentions Tanqueray on the label', Benedictine for the Spanish market, which has an almost indefatigable saffron-tinged aftertaste, and the thick, rich Garnier's Crème de Cacao from the forties. I also take an interest in the phalanx of beers. 'Vintage beers sounds somewhere between a new and a terrifying category, says Harden. Regardless, he discloses, 'something like three bottles went out this morning, the oldest of which was 1902Royal Ale.' He picks up 'Jubilee', brewed by Bass for Princes Margaret's visit. 'You could always count on her to go to do a

Part Polish by upbringing, Harden remembers eyeing Wyborowa vodka in his parents' freezer. He generously gifts me a half of Polmos Wødka from his own, which has a peeling price tag (£1.74) and, as I later discover in lemon oil-pepped martini form, a spicy poke. Thinking of the outdated price, I ask if the UK government's seemingly punitive double-taxing of spirits (currently £7.41 per 70cl bottle of 37.5% ABV, followed by 20% VAT) ever threaten Harden's business? 'People will always drink. The government are hard-up and they'll tax. If it was really to do with health concerns they'd do more Draconian things'

An almost cushion-shaped cat appears on the windowsill. Harden picks up a nineteen fifties Campari and places it on



VINTAGE 1970S GIBSON

• MAKES: 1

INGREDIENTS

- 75ml 1970s Smirnoff vodka
- 2ml juice from a jar of pearl onions

METHOD

Stir and strain into a Martini glass. Garnish with a pearl onion to serve.

• Recipe courtesy of Old Tom & English oldtomandenglish.com



VINTAGE 1970S **NEGRONI**

• MAKES: 1

INGREDIENTS

- 1 part 1970s Beefeater gin
- 1 part 1970s Campari
- 1 part Antica dry vermouth

METHOD

Stir all ingredients with ice and strain into an Old-Fashioned tumbler over ice with a twist of orange. Serve and enjoy.

• Recipe courtesy of Old Tom & English oldtomandenglish.com



WHERE THERES MUCK THERES RRASS A small selection of Harden's valuable spirits

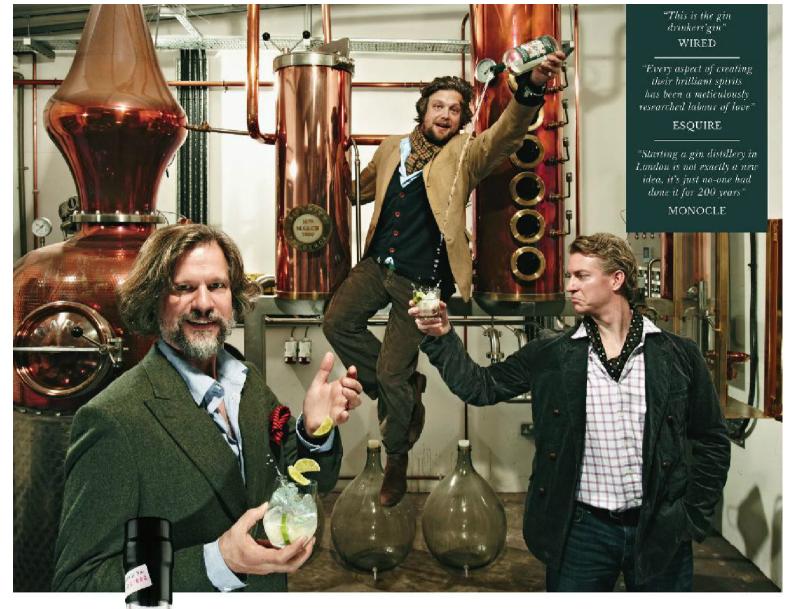
'The client advised me to sell his cases of 1982 Mouton Rothschild but bin the 1960s Gordon's gin. 'Take it to the skip!' they said. So I did. The skip that was my flat!'

the middle of the guillotine window. 'The apex!' he announces. When cooking dinner, this takes the Negroni to another level. The ABV has calmed down, and herbs mellowed. This is cochineal-coloured rather than tinted by an e-number dictated by a bean counter. Organic, real and natural. There's certainly less protein without bugs today!' The cocktail also requires one part of vermouth. 'Who knows when, five to fifteen years in, vermouth oxidises and remains in stasis. Plant ingredients, sometimes numbering in the dozens, break down and recombine.' The cat gazes at the bright Campari. 'I aim to get to the Campari museum in Milan: the Purley gates of heaven!'

So what is next for this spiritual advisor? 'A spirits book, he says. I'm actively collecting old ads. It would be succinct vet pithy on types and brands versus the countless romantic books already out there.' And what about fashion? Harden cradles a faux-frosted bottle of Japanese melon liqueur, Midori. 'A revival in 'disco' cocktails like the Harvey Wallbanger. There's a post-modern space for all liqueurs. All have something to say in history.

Not unlike the cat, I gaze thirstily at the crowd of drinks from times past. The biggest surprise for people coming to this category is that most of this gets drunk, says Harden. 'But anyone into this already has a hedonistic bent, which is the main difference from fine wine. What's that word you said earlier?' 'Sybarite,' I answer. He ponders for a moment. Yes, 'sybarite'. It's a big, interesting world which I'm trying to make manageable...' 🕤

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