

Get into the spirit of things

Forget the traditional dram and try a different tippie on a new tour, says *Joseph Reaney*

This is where it's all made," says Vivienne Muir, as she opens the door to the industrial unit. The cramped, guest room-sized space is piled high with distillation equipment: a copper-and-steel still, lines of metal drums, stacks of plastic barrels and a desk drowning in bottles and papers.

I am standing in the distillery – and head office – of NB Gin, a craft producer in the coastal town of North Berwick. And while the room may be tiny, its success is far from it. It's here that owners Vivienne and her husband Steve create a spirit that was named World's Best London Dry Gin at the 2015 World Drinks Awards (the term "London gin" refers to a strict distillation process and ingredients, rather than the spirit's origins).

Scotland may be best known for its whisky, but it is also responsible for producing 70 per cent of the UK's gin. While big brands such as Gordon's and Tanqueray play their part, it is the rapid rise of craft gin that has really raised local spirits. There are now more than two dozen distilleries in Scotland, from cities to outlying islands, and 15 of these – along with two specialist gin bars – have now been mapped on the Scotland Gin Trail, an initiative by the Wine and Spirit Trade Association (WSTA).

NB is my first stop, where I'm being allowed behind the scenes, since the distillery isn't open to the public. The trail suggests a nearby shop, Lockett Bros, as the place to try the gin. "We launched in 2013, and sold our first bottle at Lockett Bros," Vivienne tells me. Three years on, NB is a global business. Sampled neat, it is delightful – a crisp, classic London dry gin – but adding tonic really brings out the citrus notes – the results of coriander seed and cassia bark, rather than lemon and lime.

My next stop could not be more different. Edinburgh Gin is a tourist attraction in the heart of the capital, offering tours, tastings and gin-making experiences by day, and operating as a bar by night. The gin production itself is still on a craft scale, with the two in-house stills combining to make only around 900 to 1,200 bottles per week; a drop in the ocean compared to Gordon's two million bottles a week. It is these small batches, says owner Alex Nicol, that give them the freedom to invent.

"We have an innovative ethos at the distillery," he says. "Take our Seaside Gin, made with Scottish coastal botanicals such as bladderwrack, scurvy grass and ground ivy – the taste of a windy walk on a Scottish beach. It is hard to see larger gin brands having the same amount of freedom."

This liberal attitude can be tasted in all of Edinburgh Gin's spirits, from its navy strength Cannonball Gin, to the seasonal Valentines Gin. I try both neat – the contrast of the juniper-led, Szechuan pepper-infused Cannonball (which, at 57.2 per cent, could ignite gunpowder) and the floral, pink-hued hibiscus and rose Valentines is startling – before washing them down with a tasty gin-based rhubarb and ginger liqueur.

The day is rounded off at gin bar, The Jolly Botanist, a stockist of Firkin Gin, which is made in tiny batches at Gleann Mór in Dunbar. Strange yet sublime, this is gin that's the colour of whisky and with the character of bourbon, the aftertaste of caramel and, dare I say, shades of Southern Comfort. I love it.

After a good night's sleep, I head west. Glasgow Distillery was set up by Liam Hughes with



Clear winners: the distilleries at Eden Mill (above) and Edinburgh Gin (left); gin cocktail (right)

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Visiting there

Lockett Bros, North Berwick (01620 890799; lockettbros.co.uk) sells NB Gin.
Edinburgh Gin (0131 656 2810; edinburghgindistillery.co.uk) offers tours with tutored tastings for £25pp. The Jolly Botanist, Edinburgh (0131 228 5596; thejollybotanist.co.uk) serves Firkin Gin.
Gin71, Glasgow (0141 353 2959; gin71.com) serves Glasgow Distillery's Makar gin.
Eden Mill, St Andrews (01334 834038; edenmill.com) offers tours with gin tastings for £10pp.

More information

bit.ly/GinMap
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whisky in mind, but, he tells me: "We saw what was happening in the US, the gin renaissance. And in the UK, brands such as Hendricks and Sipsmith were changing the perception of gin as a granny's drink."

So, in 2014, the company launched Makar Gin. A bright, "juniper-forward" spirit, it has since won multiple awards. Like NB, Glasgow Distillery isn't open to the public, so the best place to enjoy a taste is at Gin71 in the city centre. A stop on the WSTA's trail, it serves a wide variety of craft gins – 71, in fact – in a beautiful heritage building, renowned for its Art Deco ceiling and ornate chandeliers.

Leaving Glasgow, I go north to St Andrews, and to Eden Mill, a combined brewery and distillery, which brings typical beer and whisky flavours to its gins. There's Oak Gin, flavoured with oak clippings, and – my favourite – Hop Gin, made with intense Australian beer hops. There are also



local twists such as Golf Gin, infused with hickory shavings from old golf clubs. They can all be tried at the on-site bar, before or after a tour.

Eden Mill's MD, Paul Miller, is infamously passionate about gin, and puts its popularity down to "palates developing and getting more sophisticated, and people being more interested in local, craft experiences". And it's little surprise to him that Scotland is leading the way. "We have a great pool of distilling talent and creativity – it's in our DNA to make spirits – as well as an abundance of natural resources and native ingredients."

This is where my tour ends, but later in the year I plan to strike out further afield. Perhaps to Gordon Castle in Speyside, which makes use of the ingredients grown in its own walled garden, or even to the UK's northernmost distillery, Shetland Reel Gin. After all, if I've learnt anything, it's that good gin can't be rushed.