



Gin it up Estonian Style

Estonian Gin is an intriguing product to watch – it is a still young, and highly innovative industry, with an emphasis on the pure, the fresh, the rare and the hand-crafted. And it is thriving.

Estonia has a centuries-old tradition of distilling spirits. The country turned to gin-making relatively late, a natural and seamless segue, given the wealth of natural ingredients available, the unstoppable popularity of this delightful spirit, and the similarities in the distilling process of gin and vodka. About a hundred years ago, Estonia was famous for producing vodka for the Russian Empire in its manor house distilleries. In 1938, its 98% pure alcohol or 180 proof Eesti Piiritus (Estonian Spirit) featured in the Guinness Book of World Records as the strongest and purest alcohol.

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Today, gin is rapidly becoming Estonia's favourite liquor, with small distilleries offering new gins and gin experiences in the form of distillery tours, tastings and inhouse cocktails. Both competition and demand are high; the 'buzz factor' is very real – adding up to one of the most exciting and creative 'gin spaces' in the world.

Estonian gin has an advantage in the purity of its ingredients. Water is key in gin production, so the country's clean, mineral-rich water is a plus. Rye, the

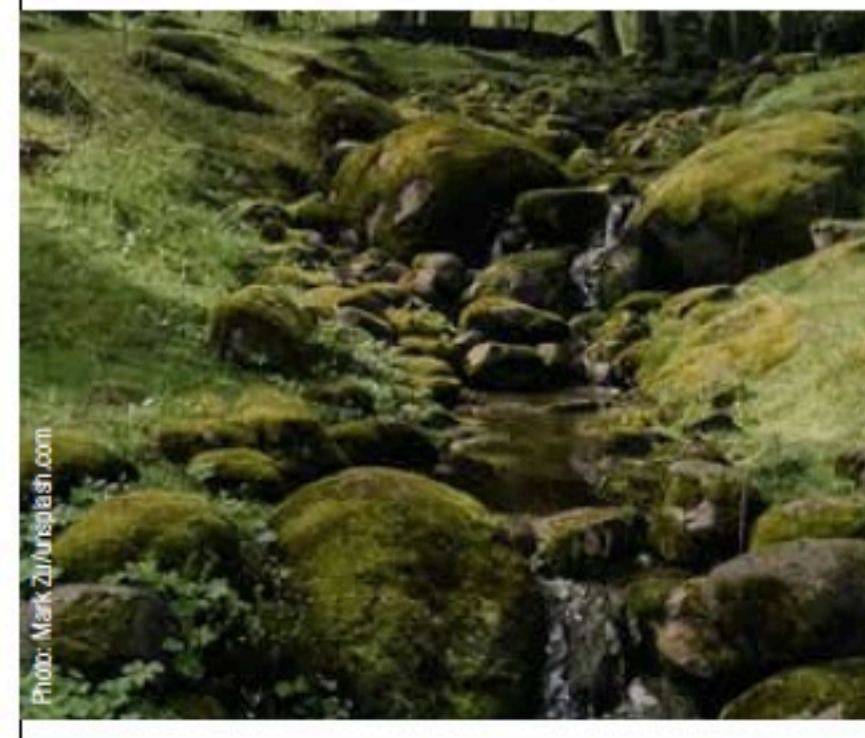


Photo: Mark Zilinskas.com



grain from which Estonian gin is produced, is a winter crop here, and a lot of it is organic. The processing and milling of winter rye lends it a singular flavour – the use of rye is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Estonian gin.

Estonian gin-makers offer an intriguing marriage between two contradictory global trends that we are witnessing right now. While gin sales are growing steadily worldwide, reflecting its increasing popularity, overall alcohol sales are falling, largely due to the consumer preference for healthier beverages. In Estonia, while the gin market is valued at US\$12 million and projected to double by 2025, the average consumption of alcohol per capita has nearly halved for this period. With their emphasis on local, organic ingredients and small-batch, artisanal products, gin makers have managed to capture the imagination of, and garner popularity with, consumers on both sides of the trend.

The distinct flavour of gin comes from its most essential – and universal – ingredient, juniper berries. However, every gin also requires a blend of herbs and botanicals. It is this blend (the recipe for which is a distillery's most closely-guarded secret) that gives each gin its distinctive flavour. Estonia has an abundance of juniper berries, but also many unique botanicals such as lilac, aronia, cowslip, Nordic ginger and elfin thyme, which gin-makers use to innovate.



The Tohi Distillery, for example, used cloudberries, also called the Nordic Vitamin C bomb, to create their award-winning Cloudberry Mist Nordic Dry Gin. Tohi is the brainchild of three gin-loving friends, master distiller Prit Palk, Tormi Tamm and Siim Markus. Together they bought a manor house Tohisoo, 30 km from Tallinn, and founded their distillery, making gins that they call 'heartcrafted.' The clean lines of Tohi's bottles and logo reflect their minimalistic, Nordic ethos.

Tohi's Aronia gin is another unique offering. Aronia is a vitamin-rich Nordic super-berry, with a unique taste, which combined with gin produces a memorable, full-bodied and rich taste. Aronia berries are picked from Estonian gardens. The juice is stomped out underfoot, as in historic European wineries, and as part of the making process need to 'rest' for half a year. Hence, a limited quantity of Tohi Aronia gin is produced just once each year.



Maarit Põõr, the CEO and architect of the Lähentagge Distillery, turned her passion for local herbs and flavours into the first artisanal gin in Estonia. Saaremaa, an island in Estonia and Maarit's hometown, boasts the cleanest air in the world. The brand's signature, Õsel Dry Gin, is made using hand-picked herbs from the island.

In keeping with the popularity of non-alcohol drinks, they also produce a non-alcoholic gin using Saaremaa juniper berries and other local herbs – Lähentagge Flâneur – which is Estonia's first non-alcoholic spirit distilled in Kuressaare.

A very recent, and phenomenally successful player is Juniperium distillery, based in Telliskivi. The distillery opened its doors only in 2019 and its gins have collected scores of international medals since. Juniperium are unique as the only gin brand that uses juniper wood caps on their bottles, giving a wonderful scent when the bottle is opened.

Juniperium Blended Dry Gin bagged the Best Estonian Dry Gin at the World Gin Awards 2021. Its flavourful, complex taste is achieved by the combination of three of the world's best junipers with



fine local Estonian berries, coriander, angelica, cubeb pepper, thyme and two 'secret' local botanicals. Their Sloe Gin was a top-four winner in the International Wine and Spirits Competition 2022. A fresh, fruity gin made with sloe berries and giant juniper berries, this gin can be enjoyed on its own over ice, or with soda and lemon, and lends itself to endless cocktails.

Liviko Distillery, Estonia's oldest and largest alcohol producer, produces the gin brand Crafter's, with two offerings – London Dry Gin and Aromatic Flower Gin. London Dry Gin has a slightly peppery edge, softened by floral notes. Veronica, a herb picked from the wilds of Estonia, is a key ingredient. It won a Double Gold Medal in the San Francisco World Spirits Competition 2022. Crafter's Aromatic Flower Gin turns pink when mixed with tonic, due to rose-hip flower pigments used in the formulation. Liviko's Re-crafted Crafter's Junibeer was nominated for the World Beverage Innovation award in 2019. This is a zero waste-product – an additive-free fizzy drink, available in non-alcohol and low-alcohol variants, made by reusing the juniper berries after gin distillation.

New distilleries, many of them small and sold only locally, continue to find an eager market, while some



craft-gin brands aim for international recognition. As new styles of rye bases and innovations with exotic local botanicals emerge regularly, it is clear that an 'Estonian style' of gin is still evolving and there is much to look forward to. [TL](#)

Radhika Tandon



Liviko Distillery