

# A GIN RENAISSANCE

Gin is experiencing a revival in popularity in cocktail bars around the globe – as is an appreciation for all things locally made. YVONNE LORKIN discovers the stories behind three New Zealand gins.

**G**in appreciation is new for me. My first ever experience with gin was attempting to procure the obligatory bottle from the “spirits most easily topped up with water” selection in my dad’s liquor cabinet, to sneak to some teenage party back in the ‘90s. Of course, it didn’t end well and for years I’ve associated gin with boyfriend bust-ups and not being able to find my shoes. However, my taste buds became reacquainted with it around the same time as motherhood arrived (funnily enough), and thankfully the new millennium brought with it a raft of cool, quality-focused gin brands. It didn’t take long for some canny Kiwis to click that when you couple creativity with quality water, anything’s possible.



Ice buckets and tongs from The Object Room ([www.theobjectroom.com.nz](http://www.theobjectroom.com.nz)), Cocktail shaker from Studio of Tableware ([www.thestudio.co.nz](http://www.thestudio.co.nz)), Menu stacker glass from Simon James Concept Store ([www.simonjamesdesign.com.nz](http://www.simonjamesdesign.com.nz)), Week jar from The Homestore, Plate from Republic Home ([www.republichome.com](http://www.republichome.com)).

### LIGHTHOUSE GIN

Back in 2010, Rachel Hall began working in sales for an apple juice company called Mela, in Greytown. With two young children at school it was the perfect part-time job. Her boss was one of the shareholders in an up-and-coming local distillery, producing Lighthouse Gin in the very same shed as the apple juice. Distiller Neil Catherall needed a hand with his sales and marketing, so Rachel gave that a go too. Before long she was lured to the gin side of the shed full time.

Neil Catherall had started Lighthouse back in 2005 using ten botanicals distilled in his self-designed 200-litre copper still, which was built by local craftsmen in Masterton. He named his gin after the Cape Palliser Lighthouse at the southernmost tip of the Wairarapa district. For Rachel, things moved quickly from office work to helping with production and bottling, and when businessman Bill Foley bought Lighthouse and Neil announced his retirement, she was offered the 'distiller' job.

While fortunate to have Neil as a mentor, Rachel says it was still nerve-wracking doing her very first solo batch. "I double-checked everything, I was so nervous that I was going to bugger something up! But I got through it and gave Neil a little bottle to try. He thought it was good, then we did a comparison with our old library stock and it was perfect."

Lighthouse has an enviable reputation to protect after the gin received a gold medal at the prestigious Gin Masters Competition in 2013. Production is very hands-on: "There's a lot of hard, manual work," Rachel says. "We fill, label, seal, sticker and box each bottle one at a time." The botanicals are added in a sort of tea-bag effect. "When I load up the still, I've got vats that I put the botanicals in and they macerate with the alcohol overnight. We do one distillation with them in and one without."

While her exact recipe is a closely guarded secret, Rachel happily rattles off the list of botanicals contained within it: juniper, coriander seed, sweet almond, cassia bark, cinnamon fronds, liquorice root, orris root, kawakawa, hand-zested New Zealand Navel oranges and Yen Ben lemons. "I only use Yen Bens. It's never been crossed with any other lemon, meaning it's a direct descendant of the Lisbon lemon – it's a very lemony lemon."

In addition to learning the intricacies of botanicals in gin production, Rachel says one thing that's really opened her eyes is the importance of the water. "If you don't have really pure water it can create all sorts of problems. For example, little white flakes can appear if the water is too hard, or it can throw a haze or impart an odd flavour. We get our water from a natural spring near Wharekauhau Lodge on the coast. It's beautiful water – soft, pure and perfect."



**BARRIER REEF**  
[recipe next page]



**GIN MULE**  
[recipe next page]

### ROSIE DAYS

45ml Black Robin Gin  
25ml simple syrup  
5ml Crawley's Rose Syrup  
sprig of rosemary  
3 slices fresh ginger  
30ml lemon juice  
10 raspberries  
soda water to top

**SIMPLE SYRUP:** Put 1 cup of sugar and 1 cup of water in a saucepan over a medium heat. Heat until sugar is completely dissolved and set aside to cool. Bottle and store in the fridge.

Stir the simple syrup and rose syrup together and steep with a sprig of rosemary and three slices of fresh ginger for at least an hour.

Combine gin, syrup mixture, lemon juice, 6 raspberries, and ice in a cocktail shaker. Shake and strain into a glass filled with ice. Garnish with 4 raspberries.



Rosie Days: Weck jar and Ball preserving jar from The Homestore. Charcoal jug from Republic Home. Summer Rambler: Stemless Japanese glass from Everyday Needs ([www.everyday-needs.com](http://www.everyday-needs.com)).



**SUMMER RAMBLE**

*[pictured]*

45ml Black Robin Gin  
8 blackberries  
20ml simple syrup  
20ml lemon juice  
1 mint leaf

Muddle 6 blackberries and simple syrup in a glass. Add gin, lemon juice and top with crushed ice. Garnish with 2 blackberries and a mint leaf on a skewer.

**BARRIER REEF**

*[previous page]*

30ml Lighthouse Gin  
20ml Cointreau  
1 scoop vanilla ice cream

Blend ingredients together in a blender. Pour into an old-fashioned champagne saucer and serve.

**GIN MULE**

*[previous page]*

45ml Lighthouse gin  
10 mint leaves  
30ml simple syrup  
20ml lime juice  
60ml ginger beer  
sprig of mint to garnish

Muddle mint, simple syrup and lime juice in a cocktail shaker. Add gin and fill with ice. Shake and strain into an ice-filled highball glass. Top with ginger beer and garnish with a sprig of mint.

**THE GARDEN GNOME**

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30ml Rogue Society Gin  
6 slices fresh cucumber  
1 half fresh kiwifruit  
25ml fresh lemon juice  
soda water to top  
1 basil leaf  
1 lavender stalk  
1 long slice of cucumber

Press the cucumber, kiwifruit and lemon juice into a tall glass and add Rogue Society Gin. Top with ice and soda water. Garnish with basil leaf, lavender and cucumber.



THE GARDEN GNOME  
*[recipe previous page]*

*So why does gin spin their wheels? “Its chequered history. Gin’s the oldest spirit around and it’s had some pretty rough times with ‘mother’s ruin’ and prohibition. It’s got such a great story.”*

— MARK NEAL, ROGUE SOCIETY

#### **BLACK ROBIN GIN**

“Sip the gin neat and warm, then sip it again after adding a tiny splash of water – no ice – and see how beautiful that tastes,” instructs Peter Darroch, the creative force behind Black Robin Gin. “There’s no rhyme or reason as to why we don’t drink gin straight.” It’s amazing how the sweet florals, white pepper, juniper notes and smooth, velvety mouthfeel change between the two. “The key differentiation with our gin is that it’s distilled five times, while most gin is only distilled two or three times,” he says.

Twenty five years in international advertising, followed by stints in the wine and water businesses, gave Peter Darroch the grounding he needed to launch what’s fast becoming a must-have gin in bars around the world. Just over a year ago, he and his team at Simply Pure (including Phil Clark of Nourish Group and businessman Ben De Haan) released Black Robin Gin alongside its sibling, Blue Duck Vodka, after an idea to create a quintessential New Zealand spirits brand.

Being a long-time member of the Southern Gentlemen’s Angling Club and spending weeks every year out in the New Zealand wilderness, Peter was keenly aware of our endangered birdlife. “What’s the most demonstrative, differentiating thing about this country? It’s not mountains and lakes and things: it’s our birds.” Peter and his Simply Pure team are fanatical supporters of New Zealand’s Forest & Bird Society, donating 50 cents per bottle sold to help them enhance and protect the habitats of the Blue Duck and Black Robin.

The Black Robin story is one of amazing survival, having dropped to just four breeding pairs in the ‘80s. “Even the name is evocative of mystery, rarity and New Zealandness,” says Peter. The gin also uses the native botanical horopito, and when expertly crafted by the team at Ditto’s Distillerie Deinlein in Tauranga, has helped them position Black Robin against ultra-premium brands such as Hendricks and Tanqueray, with no apology. “[Ditto] are just impeccable with everything that they do. When we were developing our recipe, we were trying to make the best gin we could, but we’ve actually kind of hit it out of the park.” Consumers thought so too, giving Black Robin a gold medal at the consumer tasting category at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition in 2014.

#### **ROGUE SOCIETY GIN**

You know you’re dealing with hip young things when your interview is littered with sentences such as: “We met these

guys, and they like, totally got us and so we went ‘Sweet’, then they went and like, just nailed it.” The “it” was Rogue Society Gin, and it was about three and a half years in the making, says co-creator Mark Neal.

“It was [about] creating a gin from the bottom of the world that turns tradition upside down. As a category, gin’s quite serious – quite proper, 19th century, ‘olde English’ – and we felt there wasn’t anything on the market that really talked to us as emerging gin drinkers.”

The “we” is Mark’s business partners, brother-in-law Daniel McLaughlin and friend Richard Bourke. Their aim was to create a modern, contemporary gin they thought was cool and involved gathering research from gin experts in the UK to answer questions such as: How is it made? What do the botanicals do? What’s your grain spirit? What do you distil it in? What flavours do you want?

“We learnt a lot before coming back to New Zealand to find a master distiller who understood what we were after,” says Mark. That master distiller was John Fitzpatrick at Southern Grain Spirits in Kaiapoi, who uses a rare, 140-year-old John Dore pot still (considered the Rolls-Royce of stills) to create fine spirits from pure Canterbury Plains water. “John and his team are incredibly detailed in their work for us, they’ve been awesome to work alongside.”

So why does gin spin their wheels? “Its chequered history,” says Mark. “Gin’s the oldest spirit around and it’s had some pretty rough times with ‘mother’s ruin’ and prohibition. It’s got such a great story.” The other reason is gin’s diversity. “Every gin’s different, there’s no right or wrong; it’s all interpretation. With that diversity comes versatility. Ninety-five per cent of people think adding tonic is the only way to enjoy gin, but there are hundreds of cocktails that you can play with. That’s the key challenge for us, to educate people about gin’s versatility.”

According to the Rogue team, there are four elements in good gin making: first is the grain spirit. “We use the purest, world-class wheat-base grain spirit imported from the States,” says Mark. “Secondly, it’s the botanical recipe, developed to suit our desire for a citrus-led, ultra-smooth gin.” Rogue has a spice merchant in the UK who gathers their 12 ingredients from the best regions of the world: their citrus comes from Spain, the juniper from Italy, and the angelica root from Poland. “Thirdly, it’s our antique copper-pot still, and fourthly it’s the water that we use. Each of those is vital.” ○