



GIN BLOSSOMS

Sipsmith is one of the pioneers of London's 'gin revolution' – and the capital's first distillery to use copper stills for nearly 200 years.

James Wood reports.

The modern trend of inventing portmanteaus has seen the word 'ginaissance' coined to describe the re-emerging popularity of the spirit in recent years.

According to the Wine and Spirit Trade Association, sales of gin surpassed £1 billion in the UK for the first time in 2016, spurred by a rising number of artisan distilleries established throughout the country.

In Chiswick, Hounslow, Sipsmith operates from Cranbrook Road, a residential area reminiscent of a location where gin producers would typically be found 200 years ago.

It was established in 2009 by two friends – Sam Galsworthy and Fairfax Hall – who moved into a small workshop in Hammersmith and shortly afterwards enlisted the skills of master distiller, Jared Brown.

Moving to its larger current premises in 2014, employee numbers are continuing to grow steadily. Sipsmith's current building was formerly owned by the nearby Fuller's brewery, Galsworthy's old employer, with whom he has a good working relationship.

The ambition has been clear since the outset: to produce London Dry Gin the way it used to be made and in the city it was named after. To achieve this goal, the distillery became the first in London in 189 years to use copper pots for gin production.

Designed with the help of Germany's oldest still producer, Christian Carl, Sipsmith named its first pot Prudence – an ironic gesture – Galsworthy and Hall had ignored advice of the then-prime minister Gordon Brown that UK residents should be financially prudent. The entrepreneurs responded by selling their houses and quitting their jobs to pay for the copper pot. Since 2009, Sipsmith has added two more stills for production, named Patience and Constance.

In December 2016, the Sipsmith business was bought out by Japanese drinks firm, Beam Suntory, which owns Jim Beam and Maker's Mark bourbon and Yamazaki whisky.

Francesca Torlot, the company's 'curator of pairings and keeper of stories', says this will help it expand globally while retaining its core business.



"Nothing changes," she says. "Our gin will continue to be produced in exactly the same way – we will never compromise on that – but we now have an opportunity to grow the business internationally and that's very exciting. The first three markets we are reaching out to are in the US, Germany and Spain."

Sipsmith has supplied drinks for big events since its conception and has been present at music festivals such as Wilderness and Festival No. 6, the Port Eliot Festival and The Big Feastival, presented by Jamie Oliver. The gin can also be found in high-end department stores, such as Harvey Nichols, as well as in most high street supermarkets.

Torlot believes a supermarket such as Waitrose now stocks around 50 gins, something she puts down to the rising number of distilleries: "It's a reflection of the entrepreneurial nature of this generation," she says. With such considerable growth in the industry, Torlot knows that to make Sipsmith competitive, its focus has to be on consistency and quality. "Growing the business doesn't mean we compromise on the most important thing: to keep building relationships with people who drink Sipsmith.

"When we started, there was no one in existence who knew how to produce gin in copper stills like they did 200 years ago.

"People like Sipsmith because there's a story behind it – it helped to pioneer London's gin revolution."

Pictured: Sipsmith's range includes London dry, sloe and lemon drizzle gin, as well as vodka.



HERE FOR THE BEER

Craft brewing has never been more popular. James Wood finds Hounslow's Reunion Ales is readdressing the balance from the high concentration of microbreweries in the east.

Beer drinkers are living through a golden era. Pubs and off licences are stocking a higher number and wider variety of brews than ever before, as the industrious people who produce it make the transition from pursuing the hobby at home to establishing businesses on industrial estates across London.

In 2015, Francis Smedley set up Reunion Ales on the Vector Park estate in Feltham as a response to the lower density of microbrewers in west London compared with other parts of the capital.

"The revolution is much more apparent out east," he says. "So we were looking for premises rooted in the west but with great transport.

"Moving the finished product out to customers both within London and nationally is obviously a vital part of our business and we were drawn to Feltham because of its excellent transport links. In the longer term, the proximity to Heathrow might be beneficial when we start to export."

Such a saturated market can make it difficult to compete but Smedley also believes there is an upside: "I regard this as something of a double-edged sword," he says. "There is lots of competition, but that has helped to create a market which simply didn't exist 10 years ago. Drinkers are increasingly moving away from bland, characterless products towards craft beers like ours which have so much more to offer."



Those in the brewing industry have coined the term "sessionable" as a way of describing beers of which people can easily enjoy a few pints – Reunion has set out to create a range of consistently good session beers. A "secret weapon", Smedley believes, is the yeast Reunion Ales prefers to use, which "contributes masses of flavour and personality to the beers."

The industrial site "ticks a lot of boxes" too, he adds. Built in 2006, the modern building had no inconvenient support structures getting in the way of the production process. Considerable height has allowed the brewery to build an upper floor for fermentation and for storing the malt and hops in a clean and dry place away from the wet brewing area below.

With Reunion Ales winning plaudits and repeat orders from publicans, Smedley is confident in the brewery's future. "We are ambitious and things are going well," he says. "I think we will easily out-grow our premises in the not too distant future and we plan to expand. We are already beginning to think about how that could work."