

Bringing It Back Bar: How to Use Old Tom Gin

In "Bringing It Back Bar," we shine a light on overlooked bottles and devise recipes to take them from back bar to front shelf. Up now: Old Tom, modern gin's slightly sweet predecessor.

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Less malty than **genever** and more full-bodied than London dry, Old Tom gin bridges the gap between its 16th-century Dutch predecessor and the contemporary standard bearer, both stylistically and chronologically. And though it'd all but disappeared by the mid-20th century, its recent revival has been met with enthusiasm from bartenders for good reason: Not only does this slightly sweet style better our understanding of classic gin cocktails, it's helped heal the image issue of one of the backbar's most divisive spirits.

Though it'd eventually become its own distinctive style, Old Tom began its story as an unsavory offshoot of the widely popular genever. By the early-18th century, tighter government regulation—put in place to curb alcohol consumption during London's Gin Craze—had driven distillers underground. With genuine genever in short supply, gin vendors resorted to cutting their product with turpentine, often masking it with naturally sweet botanicals like licorice root, which resulted in a distinctly sweeter, bootlegged product.

The era saw a number of steep licensing fees imposed on gin sellers, too, spurring a secretive, cat-themed work-around known as Puss and Mew—from which many suggest Old Tom takes its name. The practice, which supposedly began in 1736, was the brainchild of Irish immigrant, Captain Dudley Bradstreet, who installed a painted sign above the window of his shop depicting a black cat (colloquially, a "Tom"). His idea, which was widely copied at similar establishments around London, was that in-the-know gin seekers would insert payment through the window and call "Puss," at which point, if spirit was available, the seller might respond "Mew," and dole out a serving of gin.

By the end of the century, the name had stuck, as did the sweeter style (a turpentine-free version was first properly bottled and sold under the name Old Tom in 1800). It wasn't until much later in the century that the London dry style would become mainstream, aided initially by the 1830 advent of the Coffey Still, which allowed distillers to produce spirits at a higher purity and with lighter body.

Decades later, in 1897, a *New York Herald* article noted drinkers' changing tastes in an article describing the drinks list at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel: Though the **Manhattan** and the **Martini** (made with Italian vermouth and Old Tom) were the most popular of the lot, the article emphasized a new, drier drink consisting of equal parts French vermouth and Plymouth gin. "The present demand is for the dry," wrote the author. Prohibition dealt it its final blow: Not only was there little incentive to bootleg Old Tom, there was even less to resurrect it by the time Repeal rolled round.

Old Tom wouldn't officially be revived until 2007, when Hayman Distillers brought back a family recipe dating from 1870. But since then, it's made a quick jump to the backbar, with bartenders eager to recreate the flavors of historic, pre-Prohibition-era cocktails that featured the spirit—notably, the **Martinez** and the **Tom Collins**.

It's in those classic cocktails that the spirit shines at San Francisco's gin-centric bar, **Whitechapel**, where bartender Keli Rivers uses Old Tom to win over non-gin drinkers. For her, the return of Old Tom serves to recify the image-issue gin has faced for decades. "Gin doesn't say, 'Let's go do shots at the bar,' [or] 'let's go have a fruity cocktail on the beach,'" she explains. "Gin says, 'that bad experience you had in high school or college,' or 'something that your grandparents drank.'"

In Whitechapel's **take on the Ford Cocktail**, Rivers combines Old Tom gin with **blanc vermouth** and a splash of **Bénédictine** for a cocktail that drinks like a **Martini**, but with more complexity and crucially, fewer preconceptions.

"Old Tom is a beautiful thing," says Danny Shapiro, head bartender at Chicago's **Scofflaw**, where guests are encouraged to enjoy the housemade Old Tom straight, out of a spent oyster shell. "I enjoy its versatility—it plays so well with so many things." In his **Brockton Navy**, Old Tom acts as a counter to bittersweet Amargo-Vallet liqueur, which gets a citrusy kick from lemon and a touch of sweetness from **orgeat**.

At **The Gin Joint** in Charleston, beverage director James Bolt similarly deploys the Old Tom in his **Baboso** to balance the bitter notes of two gentian-based aperitifs—**Suze** and Bonal—while rye, Cynar and Carpano Antica add a fall-friendly veneer to this full-bodied, stirred drink, garnished with a charred habanero.

Echoing the sentiment shared by Rivers and Shapiro, Bolt argues that Old Tom is a uniquely approachable spirit: “Old Tom is a great gin to get non-gin drinkers to start enjoying gin,” he says. Or, in Rivers’ words, “[It] helps get people to come back, as they call it, to the white side.” — **P**