

# This Gin Joint is Jumping

In Washington, D.C., New Heights Restaurant Attracts a New Gin-eration



New Heights recommends tonics to complement each gin on the menu.

They say gin is back, though it's debatable if it ever really went out of fashion. Sure, vodka gives it a run for its money, but fans who crave the former's aromatic botanicals — often as varied and complex as those in wine — would never eschew them for vodka's clean but relatively neutral notes. At New Heights Restaurant in Washington, D.C., gin junkies can get their fix — and then some.

During a particularly hot and humid stretch in the summer of 2006, New Heights' ice machine and air conditioning went out of commission on the same day. Quick-thinking owner Umbi Singh bought ice nearby and called the restaurant on the drive back to secure staff to help unload it. The chef at the time, John Wabeck, grabbed the first bag of ice and immediately made a round of thirst-quenching Tanqueray Rangpur Gin & Tonics. "Thus began a gin tasting spree that ended a few weeks later. By that time we had 30 gins for our list and also discovered the benefits of pairing different gins with tonics of various characteristics," recalls Singh. Thus, the unofficially coined "Gin Joint" was born.

(As for the guests sweltering on that hot night, while the air-conditioning repairman desperately worked on the roof to bring relief, staff offered to either make reservations elsewhere or

serve up refreshing G&Ts or Martinis to make them forget the heat — or care less about it. New Heights lost only two customers that evening.)

Today, this Woodley Park neighborhood bistro boasts upward of 32 examples of the spirit, accounting for 35 percent of all liquor sales. The menu lists brands from driest to richest, each with a short flavor profile like "orange peel, coriander, aged in Pinot Noir barrels" for Rogue Spruce Pink, and "lavender, lemon peel" for Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery's Back River.

Top-selling gins continue to be Plymouth, Broker's, Citadelle, DH Krahn and 209. Prices vary and are not listed on the menu, but the most expensive is Bols Genever for \$12. Two \$14 flights, a Gin Tasting and Gin & Tonic Tasting (each with three pours), retain themes while regularly changing brands, giving repeat customers a different gin experience each visit.

Singh has a theory for many of the guests who drop in to New Heights and declare, "I don't drink gin:" Either they have been exposed to a distasteful, poor quality version (perhaps at a college party), or their only experience has been mixing it with a cloying tonic. To remedy the latter, Singh replaced the venue's soda gun with bottled tonics and bumped up the price of cocktails by 25 or 50 cents to offset the mixer's higher cost, justified by noting that tonic needs to be treated as the major flavor component that it is. Menu descriptions include helpful tonic pairing advice: very dry Fever Tree is best served with drier gins; medium gins fair well with Schweppes; medium-bodied Seagram pairs with rich gins; and full-bodied, citrus-y Canada Dry works with richer gins. For a tarter cocktail, staff recommends mixing rich and lemony Fever Tree Bitter Lemon with the fullest bodied gins. This elevated attitude toward mixers proves to be eye opening for guests, many of whom become gin converts.

Beyond the ubiquitous G&T, mixologist Jason Robey's best-selling innovations (all sold for \$12) include The Jeff, with Tanqueray Rangpur Gin, Galliano, mint and cucumber; his Americano, which adds Grand Marnier to the classic recipe; and a version of D.C.'s own cocktail The Rickey, with Hayman's Old Tom Gin and fresh lime soda.

Future plans for New Heights include promoting the synergy of sipping certain gins with food — the restaurant recently held a gin pairing dinner and plans to host more in the future. Though some may associate gin with the warmer months, Singh's philosophy deems that there is a "gin for every season." With so many combinations on the Gin Joint's menu, it may require an entire year for a thirsty tippler to sample them all. **NCB**

Kelly Magyarics is a wine and spirits writer and wine educator in the Washington, D.C., area. She can be reached through her web site, [www.trywine.net](http://www.trywine.net).