

The spirit of Christmas

words & photography ALICE HANSEN

Interest in gin has exploded over the past few years with independent producers flourishing and big distillers putting more emphasis on artisanal methods. So it's no wonder punters are thirsty for more information

Gin is quite the fashionable drop today. But few know the story of its beginnings, as a liquor that supposedly induced bravery among Dutch soldiers going into battle. Hence the term "Dutch courage". Master distiller Bill McHenry shares this snippet as we hover over individual stills, our own brews bubbling with Tasmanian botanicals. None of us intends to carry a hip flask into battle, but we will depart with our own labelled bottle of bespoke gin.

We're with Kim Dudson of Bespoke Tasmania Tours, who offers premium tailored tours. This is just one of her offerings and the others are equally unusual. Think lunch in a private walnut grove, baking bread in an oven that pre-dates Port Arthur or venturing into an 1860s oast house where hop flowers were processed. Bespoke tours venture through doorways not open to the public, making them rather exclusive.

Today's experience, a four-hour gin workshop on the Tasman Peninsula, is the only workshop of its kind in Australia and quite likely the world.

We're in good hands with McHenry, according to *Gourmet Traveller*, which raves about his Classic Dry Gin as among the prettiest, most harmonious and enchanting gins to be found.

The day begins with a coffee as McHenry shares tales dating back to days when gin was dispensed on the streets of London through arguably the world's first vending machines. Pop your coin in the slot, the barman hears it tinkle and out comes a gin poured through a pipe, hopefully landing in the patron's mouth.

London Dry Gin is among the varieties of world gin sampled before McHenry invites us into his distillery world and down to the custom-built still that he'll sleep beside at crucial distilling times. He talks of his whisky, which takes 10 years to mature, vodka, rare barrel-aged gin and wild berries sloe gin (early settlers planted the original sloe berry bushes as hedging plants).

What's the DNA for all McHenry's spirits? It is pure Tasmanian spring water, bubbling out of the earth right on McHenry's property. Up to the top of Mount Arthur we go, to see this smooth water at its source. McHenry tells us the spring has moved grown men to tears and goes on to share the story of how he became a distiller.

In five years, McHenry has created quite a stir with his award-winning gin, despite whisky being his main intention.

From here it's a gentle wander across to the bothy (a Scottish term for a small dwelling in a remote location). Its simple deck is a simply spectacular alfresco lunch setting. Under swift-moving clouds, we settle in with views across the Hartz Ranges and Bruny Island.

The seasonal picnic fare of local cheeses, Rannoch Farm quail, crusty bread and smoked Tasmanian salmon is flavour-matched with a gin and tonic poured by McHenry. He mentions it's always nice to wipe the rim of the glass with fresh lemon.

When a few raindrops settle on our empty plates, it seems a good time to begin distilling our own gin in McHenry's Bond Store.

It's a throwback to Year Nine chemistry class with the making of a 500ml bottle of bespoke distilled gin our goal. (Guests also receive a 200ml bottle of McHenry's Classic Dry Gin, in case their experiment turns sour. Or too sweet.)

We've been invited to bring our own botanicals or to simply choose from McHenry's range on display now. As I survey the Tasmanian lemon myrtle, pepper berries and saffron, I begin to wonder what his magic recipes entail. He is generous with his advice as eager novice distillers curiously eye each botanical.

"Use about three, I'd say no more than five," he says as a woman excitedly gathers up a large bouquet.

The distillation process takes time, giving each participant the chance to hold a finger under the slow-dripping creations of another. We're encouraged to name our gin and write down



BEHIND THE SCENES: Bespoke Tasmania Tours offers a four-hour gin workshop which includes a visit to Bill McHenry's distillery near Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula.

the prized recipe. Come nightfall, those who would like to sip their own gin in public can enjoy a special arrangement made by Dudson: pass your bottle to the barman at Henry Jones Art Hotel bar who will happily whip you up a bespoke cocktail.

Next on Dudson's schedule? She'll be meeting Saffire Freycinet guests and whisking them off on an East Coast adventure. Her designer tours are notable particularly for those wishing to see lesser-known Tasmanian treasures. Seasonal set tours are available as well as tailored options crafted around a special taste or interest.

For Dudson, it's all about personalising the experience. If a guest is curious about colonial banking, medical or botanical history, she might just find some early papers at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to build the day around. Nothing is stock standard and it appears that's just the way Dudson likes.

Alice Hansen was a guest of Bespoke Tasmania Tours



THIRSTY WORK: Participants receive a 500ml bottle of bespoke distilled gin and a 200ml bottle of McHenry's Classic Dry Gin.



SPECTACULAR SETTING: The gin workshop includes lunch on the deck of Bill McHenry's distillery with views across the Hartz Ranges and Bruny Island.

MAKE A NOTE

GIN WORKSHOPS WITH BESPOKE TASMANIA TOURS

0429 636 348; www.bespoketasmania.com

BOOKINGS: Workshops are held on Fridays, 11am-3pm by appointment.

PRICES: The four-hour gin tour costs \$300 a person, using individual still and \$280 a person using shared still. Full-day escorted tour including gin workshop, plus tailored private tour to your choice of destinations near Port Arthur, start at \$395.

GETTING THERE: McHenry Distillery is a few minutes' drive on from Port Arthur Historic Site. Allow 90 minutes to get to Port Arthur.