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### Old Tom For A New Century: A Long-Lost Spirit Makes A Comeback

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The cocktail scene in the 21st century is almost as preoccupied with archaeology as mixology. Old-style saloons and faux-speakeasies are all the rage. Bartenders are reviving long-forgotten juleps, cobblers and punches whose recipes dotted 19th and early 20th century bar books by the likes of Jerry Thomas and Harry Johnson. And as a result, long-forgotten libations like brandy crustas and Ward 8's are nudging aside apple martinis and cosmos at high-minded watering holes all over the world -- a most pleasing turn of events for serious drinkers.

The only problem is that many of the ingredients required for these vintage cocktails haven't been made for decades. Enter craft distillers -- small, mostly independent alchemists who have become the Doctor Franksteins of the cocktail scene, recreating everything from bitters to absinthe using chemical analysis, vintage recipes and the dogged determination of bloodhounds on the scent.

Among the most legendary vintage cocktails is the Martinez, which evolved from its humble origins in the mid-1800s into the martini, the most famous and iconic alcoholic beverage of modern times. On first glance -- and sip -- you wouldn't know that the two cocktails have anything in common. Where a martini uses a whisper, trickle or splash of dry vermouth awash in a glass of dry gin or vodka, the Martinez is more than half vermouth, and sweet vermouth at that. Moreover, the gin that's used isn't even modern-day London Dry gin, but a curious, long-extinct animal known as Old Tom gin.

The origins of Old Tom gin are murky, and to even get an accurate definition of it is pretty difficult. Gaz Regan, in his invaluable tome *The Bartender's Gin Compendium*, explains it thusly: "... at some point in the early 1800s, when distillers started adding sugar to their gins, probably to disguise their badly made spirits, Old Tom became a term used to describe sweetened gins." So far, so good. But gin itself took many different forms in the 19th century. As cocktail historian/bon vivant David Wondrich told me, "There was no one way of making it, and as distilling technology changed... what was Old Tom at the beginning of the century would have been pretty unrecognizable from what it was at the end of the century."

So Old Tom wasn't just sweetened gin, it was lots of different kinds of sweetened gins. There was London Dry gin -- a neutral grain spirit (a/k/a vodka) flavored with juniper and other botanicals and spices. But there were gins that had been aged in wood for various amounts of time, usually weeks or months. And then there were Dutch-style genevers, which employed longer aging and added malt wine to the neutral spirit.

Confused yet? Then you can imagine how any modern bartender who wanted to recreate an authentic 19th century Martinez must have felt. Amazingly, for the better part of a century it was nearly impossible to whip up a historically accurate version of one of the most important libations in cocktail history.

Seestedt, with David Wondrich to guide him along the path of historical accuracy, has brought back to life a type of Old Tom that was around when Abe Lincoln was an obscure Illinois lawyer and Jerry Thomas, the most legendary bartender of the 19th century, was still a relative unknown -- Wondrich describes it as "almost pre-Victorian, it's almost late Georgian." Looking at Ransom Old Tom, and then tasting it, a 21st century martini drinker will probably say, "This is gin?!" Well, yes, although it's got more in common with Dutch genevers (also known as Holland gin, at the time the most popular gin in the States), and even American whiskey, than with modern London Dry gin.

Ransom Old Tom employs juniper and other traditional gin botanicals (orange, coriander and angelica, to name a few), but that's about where the similarities to modern-day gin end. Instead of using neutral grain spirits, Seestedt blends in a high percentage of barley-based whiskey. And at the end of the process, the gin is barrel-aged, giving it a whiskey-ish amber color.

The first taste of Ransom Old Tom is mind-blowing, or rather, **taste bud-blowing**. It's incredibly malty, with strong juniper and citrus notes and just a hint of sweetness. On ice, it opens up even more to reveal wood, corn and a little more sugar. **It's one of the most complex spirits you'll ever try.** In a Martinez... well, let's just say you haven't had a Martinez until you've tried it with Ransom. Its carnival of flavor mixes most harmoniously with the vermouth, making what could be a heavy, sodden drink a surprisingly light concoction. To think that this stuff went out of style!



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