

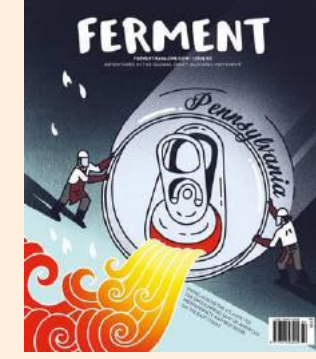
A trip to juniper's moorland home

Anthony Gladman gets to the bottom of his gin bottle



— Anthony Gladman

Photos: Anthony Gladman
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Where would we be without bottles? This thought comes to me as I labour my way up a heather-clad peak to a granite outcrop, holding a freshly poured martini. An empty glass and full bottles of its constituent parts would have made my task much simpler. Still, I reach the top without spilling any of my drink and raise a toast as the sun dipped below the Cheviot Hills.

It is not my first martini of the day. In fact, by this point, I am no longer entirely sure what I am toasting. Juniper. The rewilding of the Hepple Estate. The gin made on it. Our wonderful hosts, Walter and Lucy Riddell, who own the estate and its distillery. Chris Garden, head distiller. That we are drinking another martini, at sunset, on top of a rock, as wild horses run through the moorland below. Any of that. All of that. All at once.

In truth, I am here to see the juniper. The berries from this scruffy, scrubby conifer are why gin tastes good. I've followed the trail of its flavour from bottle to bottle for years, and yet somehow I'd never seen it growing, nor tasted it divorced from all the other peels, leaves, seeds and barks with which distillers like to tinker.



Forgotten acquaintance

To be so unfamiliar with this native plant would once have been unthinkable. It was woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. Lovelorn maids concocted potions from its berries with which to bewitch their crush, and later (perhaps if that worked a bit too well) to hasten unwanted pregnancies to an end. Its branches, people said, could protect against evil spirits; hanging them over doorways on the eve of Beltane (now May Day) was a sure-fire way of keeping mischievous fairies out, while burning them on Samhain (Halloween) repulsed your bothersome dead. Romans turned to juniper berries to give their gut-rot the heave-ho. Ancient Egyptians sought them out to rid themselves of tapeworm. English herbalist Nicholas Culpeper recommended them to Jacobean gents plagued by flatulence. If you needed to clear the air, burning its boughs delivered purification and blessings.

All well and good. Its best use though remains the flavouring of gin. My day at Hepple starts with a nose around the distillery. Getting into the sanctum sanctorum to taste it properly is like finally talking to someone you've been glimpsing across a crowded room all evening.

The berries from this scruffy, scrubby conifer are why gin tastes good

Hepple distills four different junipers in three different ways, then blends them back together to make its final gin. Ripe Italian and Macedonian juniper berries go into a copper pot still much like one you'd see in any gin distillery. These give fresh pine flavours, with grassy and resinous notes that make me think of bracing walks on windy, wooded hills. Fresh green juniper from the estate goes into a small vacuum still. This distils at a lower temperature and produces a distillate that is earthier and woodier. I taste cedar and sandalwood, with pine-menthol cooling sensations to round it off. Finally, organic juniper berries from Bulgaria go into a supercritical extraction column. This forces high-pressure CO2 through a bed of juniper to extract the essential oils that make juniper tick. The end result looks like neon vinaigrette and smells impossibly fresh and vibrant, like every bit of the juniper is crammed in there.

Rotten from the root up

Later, standing amid a mass of weathered wooden tables, Walter surveys a few hundred small plant pots housing tiny sprigs of juniper that quiver in the breeze. The largest are about as tall as your finger is long, and took four years to reach that point. We are looking at the long-term future of Hepple's juniper supply.

In recent years, despite juniper's starring role being mandated by law, other botanicals have started to steal its spotlight – although not at Hepple. This decline among some gins is mirrored in nature itself. Common Juniper, known to its mother as Juniperus communis, was once found throughout the UK, albeit most commonly in the north of England and Scotland, but the number of natural sites where it grows are at an all-time low. It is one of our rarest native trees.



PHOTO: Hepple Spirits

Walter explains that many old juniper stands are unable to regenerate successfully, and we don't really know why. One suspect is a fungus-like organism called Phytophthora. "There are 400 Phytophthora in the UK, and one of them unfortunately is a juniper-killer," he says. Phytophthora austrocedri damages juniper's roots and stems, affecting its ability to take water and nutrients from the ground. It was first identified in the UK in 2012, but evidence suggests it was here for some time before then.

Walter told the story of a juniper planting programme in the 1990s: "They sent 20 thousand seeds to a nursery, and when they got 20 thousand seedlings back at first they thought it was amazing!" It was unusual that none of the seeds had failed to germinate. "But then they noticed that about 10% of the plants looked a bit weird. Some months later those plants all died." It turned out the nursery had replaced failed seeds with plants imported from nurseries in the Netherlands. It's likely this is how Phytophthora austrocedri first came to the UK; its presence in plant nurseries across Europe supports this theory.

A slow, steady return

Walter could replant the juniper on the Hepple estate in one go by buying in plants from nurseries. Instead he chooses to rely on his own propagation programme. "The whole point of what we're doing is to slow down and do things properly," he says. To avoid Phytophthora austrocedri infection, the estate uses only seeds from its own trees, planted in its own soil, and grown on site. Half of the juniper bushes planted here won't survive, but those that do will go on to have a fertility rate of 90%, compared to just 9% or so for the old juniper stands on Box Hill. "They'll spread like weeds. They should be spreading like weeds," Walter says.



PHOTO: Hepple Spirits

Walter hopes Hepple will one day use only juniper from its own estate to make its gin, although he says it could take 20 years to reach that point. Later I lend a hand, pushing a spade through the fat grass to plant my own juniper bush. With a glint in his eye, Walter invites me to return in 15 years and harvest its berries. I joke that what he actually wants is some free labour.

The next time I drink a Hepple gin I will think of that corner of the Northumberland moors, now home to a juniper bush that bears my name. And I will greet juniper's piney-turpsy flavour, not as some half-hidden wraith but as an old acquaintance, perhaps one that's turning into a friend. It ought to be that familiar to each of us. If Walter's replanting programme and others like it succeed, then in a few decades it could be again. Until then, there are always martinis. You don't have to climb a hill to enjoy one, but I'd recommend trying it at least once.

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