

GENIUS GIN

BY SHELLEY SEALE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISON NARRO

You might say Mike Groener got a head start on the path to developing an appreciation for diversity. As a child in San Francisco, he had a free-spirited, creative mother who often introduced him and his brother to new and unfamiliar foods. “I was eating sushi when I was three, and on the cilantro wagon in the late eighties,” Groener says. “[Mom] was constantly creating and exploring different types of cuisine; this inspired me to keep seeking new and bold flavors.”

Groener continues to think about the individual and collective notes in food, and he’s moved forward on a new path that started in 2010 when he and his good friend Charles Cheung became interested in the “locally produced” movement that seemed to be overtaking Austin. The two discussed applying this to the world of spirits—in particular to gin, which is often derided as overwhelming, harsh and perfume-y.

In the most basic terms, gin is simply a neutral base infused with botanicals. But recipes, ingredients and processes vary wildly from maker to maker, and result in flavor profiles that run the gamut from good to bad. Groener’s and Cheung’s interest in the gin-making process led to months of research and sampling as they experimented with different botanical infusions. “We were never bartenders or professional chefs,” Groener notes. “Just two normal guys with a distinct perspective on flavors.”

Both Cheung and Groener have master’s degrees from St. Edward’s University and both were working in the technology industry when they first began experimenting with gin flavors. Between their mutual backgrounds, tenacity and shared love of quality and aesthetics, they eventually landed a recipe and technique for an artisan gin that made them proud. They called it “Genius” and incorporated in late 2011.

Distinct, indeed. The partners handcraft every single drop of their gin from scratch here in Austin—a rarity for distillers who often source portions of their ingredients elsewhere. A 16-percent alcohol is created in about five days using yeast, water and sugar. This neutral base is then distilled to about 92 percent to begin the rest of the journey. Genius employs a unique hot-cold process for infusion—introducing some of the botanicals early in the process, using a room-temperature steep, and others during the hot phase using a basket in the copper still. The steep is bright green, extremely floral and includes bold and nuanced ingredients, such as elderflower, lavender, lime peel, angelica root, juniper and coriander—many



of which are sourced locally. “The flavor of Genius was conceived more with adjectives than ingredients,” Groener jokes. “I wanted to create something that felt elegant and smelled beautiful. That initial smell had to take you captive with beauty and immerse you into a huge punch of flavor.” And through a proprietary fermentation process that lends a unique silky quality, that punch of flavor, Groener says, ends up drinking more like bourbon than gin.

Genius gin comes in both standard and Navy strength to appeal to different types of drinkers. Standard is a 90-proof homage to the classic London Dry variety: easy to sip by itself without briskness. Genius Navy is 114 proof—the historical proof carried on British Royal Navy fleets. The low water content, which Genius has replicated, was perfect for long sea voyages; the gin could accidentally be spilled on gunpowder without rendering it useless. “Navy strength allows for a few additional botanicals while really leading the flavor in a cocktail,” Groener says. “It packs more presence and clarity.”

Finally, Groener points out that the 100-percent, made-in-Austin process is hugely important to him. “I feel a handmade product is actually made from scratch,” he says. Of course, creating gin from the ground up is difficult and time-consuming, but for Groener and Cheung, the resulting quality is unparalleled. “There’s no more versatile spirit than gin,” he says. “It can be heavy, light, fatty or transparent. It has a transformational element that other spirits don’t have.”