



George White and Stephanie Downer's successful Clarity Distilling Company started as a hobby.



Clarity's secret is in the meticulous individual steeping of botanicals.



The local multi-award-winning gin is getting international acclaim.

RAISING SPIRITS

How three Bay distilleries are redefining New Zealand gin.

PHOTOS **ALAN GIBSON + ERIN CAVE** + SUPPLIED

It might seem unlikely, but behind the roller doors of a nondescript unit in Tauriko's commercial estate, two friends are crafting one of the world's best gins. Just 25 minutes away in another small space in Ōmokoroa, a similar story is unfolding as two friends blend botanicals to bring their award-winning gin to life. And just over the hill, in Matahui, gin drinkers can bottle their own creation — and become award winners themselves.

Far from being on the rocks, gin is obviously continuing its recent resurgence. The clear spirit has gained popularity thanks to its clean herbal aromatics and botanical complexity. Because gin can be produced relatively quickly, small-batch makers have embraced it as a space for creativity, developing unique signature styles and exciting flavour profiles. Juniper remains the foundation, of course, but now it's not unusual to find exotic ingredients like mānuka, licorice, or Szechuan pepper in the mix, adding bold new twists to traditional

flavours. Small independent distilleries in the Bay of Plenty are at the forefront of the gin revolution here in Aotearoa.

Clarity Distilling Company, Bay Distillery and Matahui Distillery are three local producers who are lovingly crafting world-class gin, right here in the Bay. While their approaches to gin differ, the three small batch distilleries share plenty in common. Each is run by a pair of hands-on founders who manage every part of the process themselves, from developing recipes through to distilling, bottling and branding.

Their gin may be internationally recognised now, winning back-to-back golds earlier this year, but Clarity started as a hobby for George White only a couple of years ago. It was something he'd do in his downtime away from the childcare centre he and friend Stephanie Downer had started.

"I've always been a guy that likes to cook at home and try recipes and create flavours," George says. "Gin is open.



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GOOD THINGS COME IN SMALL BATCHES



Gin makers Karen Hawkins and Denise Roscoe.



There are no restrictions. You can do whatever you want. You can put anything into that still and create any flavour you want.”

It was George’s love of cooking that would become Clarity’s secret ingredient. Rather than traditional methods, which see all the botanicals distilled together, the pair instead steep each ingredient individually.

“When you make a gin, it’s like cooking, except you’re dealing with botanicals,” George explains. “When you cook a stew, you don’t throw your meat, herbs and everything in and shut the lid. You layer it. So why would making gin be any different to that?”

This meticulous process of distilling each element separately allows them to exactly control how much flavour is extracted and then added to their blend.

“We get the best out of every single botanical,” George smiles. “Because all that’s in our gin is the botanicals. That’s where all of the flavour comes from.”

It’s proven to be a winning formula. In May, their Clarity Navy Gin was awarded ‘Spirit of the Year New Zealand’ at the prestigious 2025 London Spirits Competition. They also have multiple Double Golds from San Francisco, and took home ‘Best London Dry’ and ‘Best Navy Strength’ at the NZ Spirits Awards and NZ Small Batch Gin Awards this year.

Just as much care has gone into Clarity’s look, with Stephanie handpainting the label’s distinctive artwork and even illustrating the ingredient list.

“That’s part of our ethos,” Stephanie says. “Essentially, if it’s not on the bottle, it’s not in the bottle.”



Matahui Distillery’s Paul Horak and Angela Howard with their handcrafted spirits.

The operation has quickly scaled up, now with six distillers and upgraded bottling systems. But George says they don’t want to grow for growth’s sake.

“We want to be a household gin, not a special occasion gin,” he says. “We want to be affordable. If people are going to buy gin, we’d much rather let them buy a New Zealand gin.”

It’s a similar story over at Bay Distilling, where gin makers Karen Hawkins and Denise Roscoe launched their gin after running a coffee caravan in Ōmokoroa.

“We both like coffee, so we had a coffee business,” Karen says. “And then we sold that and thought, ‘what else do we like?’ Well, we quite like gin...”

They spent a year in the garage perfecting their dry gin recipe, encouraging friends to give honest feedback, though it was mostly glowing.

“We like a classic dry gin and really wanted to get that right,” Denise says.

Their gin iti recently took silver at the NZ Small Batch Gin Awards. Now in a commercial space, they handle everything from distilling to packing themselves, with a little taste-testing help from Karen’s husband. Their branding is rooted in the local landscape, with a label designed by Karen’s daughter.

Meanwhile, just outside of Tauranga, Matahui Distillery offers something unique: a chance for people to create their own gin, and potentially win awards for it.

“Late last year, people who had come through our gin lab were asking for feedback on their creations,” says co-founder Paul Horak. “That’s where the Matahui Gin Lab Awards came from. It’s a bit of fun, but with proper base testing and scoring of their recipes.”



The gins are created through blending pre-distilled botanical spirits, a process Paul says is used by commercial distillers like Hendrick’s. “It’s actually the best way to develop a recipe,” he explains. “You can quickly see what works, then adjust quantities until it’s perfect.”

Although their signature Adventurers Gin earned silver at the NZ Spirits Awards, the focus at Matahui is on the customer experience. “We’re not aiming to become a big factory,” Paul says. “Selling direct allows us to stay small, and our workshops help fund our own small-batch experimentation.”

The experience has evolved too. Originally participants distilled on-site, but council restrictions prompted a shift in method. “In hindsight, it pushed us to improve,” Paul says. “Now we focus on flavour — people still walk away with a gin they designed, but the quality is even better.”

They’re also working on home-blending kits, so people can recreate the experience themselves. “It’s something we want to launch in time for summer,” he adds.

While many come to Matahui for birthdays or hens’ dos, Paul says it’s just as often individuals with a curiosity for gin.

“New Zealanders are still discovering gin. Every gin is unique, and that surprises a lot of people. But once they learn more about it, they’re hooked.”

These three small-batch distilleries are proving that success in the competitive spirits market doesn’t require big investors or a corporate machine. Instead, it’s passion, ambition and a classic Kiwi ‘can-do’ attitude that are putting them, and the Bay, on the map. **11**

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