



RUTTE SHINES A LIGHT ON A DUTCH TREAT

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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY
RUTTE DISTILLERY

I'm in a room on the 9th floor of the Line Hotel in Los Angeles, sitting in front of several bottles of spirits in various stages of emptiness. This doesn't look like an educational setting, but I assure you it is one. The hotel's ground zero for BevCon, an annual convention where people in the libations industry gather to attend seminars, hawk merch, and hobnob. Most of the action takes place on the first couple of floors, but I'm upstairs and ready to embark on a crash course in genever. My teacher is Myriam Hendrickx, Master Distiller for Rutte, a small-batch distillery from Dordrecht, Netherlands. Lord knows I need a muse. I came to this rendezvous knowing very little about genever. I wasn't sure if it was officially pronounced GEN-e-

ver or gen-E-ver. Hell, I wasn't even sure I was spelling it right — that bastion of internet truth known as Wikipedia insists it's spelled "jenever" despite what I read on other websites. *(Editor's note: If you, like the author, want to know what the heck the deal is with this spelling and the history of the spirit, head over to page 85 and read Jenever and the Origins of Dutch Courage.)*

Fortunately, Hendrickx has more important things to do than mock my linguistic ignorance (for the record, it's the latter pronunciation). She's here to promote Rutte's Old Simon Genever, but that's only part of her mission. The other bottles are from different distilleries, and they speak to her broader quest to

put genever into the minds and onto the palates of the average American imbibers.

"Consumers are surprised when they learn about genever," Hendrickx says. "They may be familiar with Nordic spirits like aquavit, but the concept of a Dutch spirit is something that's unknown. Thankfully, more and more bartenders have learned about genever and are willing to share that knowledge with their customers."

There's a lot to share — enough to warrant a brief history lesson/indoctrination. Genever is a Dutch juniper-based spirit that occupies the space between gin and whiskey. It's considered to be the forerunner to gin, and it's been around since the early 1600s. It evolved from a

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flavors is broad enough to add a sense of place and history, one that seems to connect to the Dutch East India Company's spice route. Some tend to be light and floral, and others are dense and a touch smoky. The fluctuations are nuanced, certainly not strong enough to call them gin or whiskey. It's a fascinating dichotomy that I can't quite wrap my head around, and that's perfectly fine. It only adds to its allure.

Naturally, the tasting ends with Old Simon Genever. Its complexity is labyrinth-like: hints of cinnamon, citrus, and clove transition from nose to palate, underscored by nuanced nuttiness and spiced notes that aren't too dissimilar to what you may find in a proper Caribbean rum. I learn it's not the only genever made by Rutte — they also make an oat-distilled and an Old Tom version, as well as a few others — but Old Simon's the lone label currently distributed to the United States. This will have to do for now, and that's fine. It's delicious.

The sips of Old Simon also spark a conversation about what cocktails we could build with it as a base. It quickly turns into another history lesson. "Did you know that the Martinez was originally built around genever?" Hendrickx asks, referencing the cult pre-Prohibition martini precursor. I admit to thinking the base spirit was gin, and my confession demonstrates why she feels her mission to spread genever's gospel is so important. "Discovering a spirit like genever can be so much more than finding something new," she says. "It can open you up to learning about the history and culture surrounding its creation or its use. It can be like going on a big, rewarding adventure."

She does have a point. After all, learning about new spirits — and spirit categories — is one of the reasons this industry so much fun, isn't it? 

simple beverage of juniper berry-infused malt wine to a spirit imbued with whatever exotic spices and botanicals were picked up from the New World spice routes forged by the Dutch East India Company. It's a worldwide ingredient plunder that Rutte and other distilleries in the Netherlands still do today, according to Hendrickx. "We all search around the planet for the very best ingredients possible," she says. "It's a very Dutch thing to do."

You don't need to know all of this to enjoy genever, of course. You do, however, need to know that it exists. This is what makes Rutte rather fascinating, if only because its presence inadvertently emphasizes just how off-the-radar genever has been in the United States. They've been making the spirit in Dordrecht since 1872, and they have multiple generations' worth of recipes and family secrets stuffed in their stills. When Hendrickx took over as master distiller in 2003, she quickly learned how protective the Rutte family was of their craft. "They owned exactly one PC when I arrived," she says. "A few of the old recipes were printed on DOS, but most of them were written on paper or tucked away in old recipe books that I found. The family stored things like this because they were nervous about others getting hold of how they made their spirits. They believed that they'd lose the soul of the spirit if they didn't do it themselves. It's why I felt so honored when they asked me to help

carry on [the] Rutte legacy," She smiles in clear self-awareness. "I know that sounds like a marketing story made to move craft spirits, but in our case, it is absolutely true."

Today, Rutte's a brand operating in two worlds. It was acquired by distribution giant DeKuyper in 2011, which has greatly helped increase the profile of Old Simon Genever as well as Rutte's vodka and two gins. At the same time, Hendrickx positions herself as a fierce protector of the Rutte family's desire to keep things craft, deliberately keeping strict production limits and only tinkering with recipes if they don't disrupt the family's integrity. "Our genevers have been tested for several generations," Hendrickx explains. "I may experiment with some of the recipes' botanicals along the way, but in those cases, they'll always have a connection to the Rutte family's traditions. It's important that we stress this heritage because we feel it makes us different. Fortunately, we've been lucky with our partnership with DeKuyper. While we do a lot of marketing work with them, they let us function as an independent distillery."

On to the tasting. The genevers Hendrickx shares have names ranging from unassuming (Bobby's) to, well, Dutch (Smeets). Bobby's throws me another curve ball — they spell genever with a "j" in what may be proof that they're in cahoots with Wikipedia. The range of

Rutte is located in Dordrecht, Netherlands. Visit www.rutte.com for more information.