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Holi Gin, Batman! Louisville company combines Kentucky distilling with founder's Indian heritage

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | October 11, 2018 5:45 am



Mike DiCenso and Kartik Kamat of Holi Gin | Courtesy of Holi Gin

In the land of bourbon, bringing in a new distilled spirit might seem like a sacrilege. But for one local entrepreneur,

producing the botanical magic of gin is a chance he's willing to take.

Kartik Kamat, who was born in Sirsi, Karnataka, India, immigrated to the Louisville with his family when he was 8 years old. His parents opened [Granite America](#) in Louisville, and Kamat now helps run the family business. But as a child, he knew he wanted to take part in the distilled spirits industry, he just didn't know exactly how.

He eventually decided that he wanted to make gin out of Kentucky-grown corn and infuse it with the spices of his native land. [Holi Gin](#), now on the shelves of several local bars and liquor stores, celebrates the Indian spices of chai tea in a gin.



The Holi Festival in India is how Holi Gin got its name. | Photo by Steven Gerner, Flickr

When you visit Kamat's parents' house, the first thing his mother does is make you a cup of chai tea.

"Sharing a cup of chai tea with my mom is a sacred moment," Kamat told Insider Louisville.

The gin gets its name from the Indian [Holi Festival](#), known as the Festival of Colors or the Festival of Love. It's an event where they throw bright colors into the air and onto one another in celebration.

A good mix

Kamat enlisted the help of Mike DiCenso, an engineer and entrepreneurship MBA student at the [University of](#)

[Louisville](#), where Kamat also graduated with his MBA.

DiCenso was working at GE Appliances.

“I was looking to enter the distillery world also, but instead of joining corporate, Kartik convinced me, ‘Why go to corporate when you’re in the entrepreneurship MBA program?’ ”

DiCenso said.

“I’ll pay you half, but you’ll learn more in this business than you ever would anywhere else,” Kamat added. “And he was stupid enough to take it!”

Since then, the two have been working tirelessly to get Holi Gin on the shelves and into the public’s hearts and minds.



Holi Gin | Courtesy of Holi Gin

But who’s ever heard of chai gin?

“Gin is really never played with,” explained DiCenso. “When they do have a craft gin, it’s usually playing with normal gin, maybe some citrus. Hendrick’s is the only one really breaking the mold with rosehips and cucumber. We take a huge leap forward and completely break that mold with chai spices.”

Kamat worked on the recipe for several years, creating 70 versions until he finally got the flavor he wanted. The chai spices come from his mother’s own chai recipe.

Gin & Juice

Gin
was
a



Masala chai, or “spiced tea,” is an Indian specialty. |
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variation on the original Dutch drink genever. It became popular in the British Isles and was introduced to India and other colonies as a way to make soldiers get enough quinine to battle malaria.

Tonic water had quinine, so the Brits encouraged soldiers to use their gin ration to make gin and tonics.

The Brits also had a huge influence on the tea business in India. In the 1830s, the British East India Company created tea plantations in India to combat the Chinese monopoly on tea, which the Brits consumed in large quantities.

In the early 20th century, British companies encouraged companies to give employees tea breaks, but vendors started adding their own mix of spices to the teas, eventually creating masala chai, or “spiced tea.”

“They made masala chai, which is all these spices that make up a fantastic take on tea,” Kamat said. “That’s what I wanna do to gin, with the same kind of innovation.”

Kentucky Gin

Now that chai tea has become popular in coffee shops all over the world, and the distilling industry in Kentucky is in a boom, Kamat and DiCenso are ready to ride that wave. As MBAs, they know how to spot a hole in the market and anticipate the needs of customers.

Their company, Distillery America, is at 1110 Wilson Ave., near the Limerick neighborhood. They've hired a muralist to decorate their building in an effort to help brighten up the neighborhood. They hope to begin offering distillery tours in about a month as a way to bring tourism to the area, too.

"At Distillery America, we want to teach people how to make gin and how to make gin cocktails," Kamat said.

Holi Gin | Courtesy of Holi Gin

Already, bartenders around town have been using Holi Gin to make special concoctions. Volare has even used it in a creme brulee, DiCenso said, bringing out the nutmeg flavors of the gin.

Kamat said his date nights with his wife have become sales pitches. They go to restaurants and bars to find out about their gin selection. Then he'll run out to the car and bring in a bottle, offering a sample to the bartender.

His favorite tactic, though, is to tell people to go to their usual liquor store and tell them they won't come back until they start carrying Holi Gin.

"We don't threaten anybody, we just throw a tantrum," DiCenso joked.

In the future, Distillery America might market other distilled spirits, but for now they are only focusing on Holi Gin.

"We can do whatever we want, but we want this to be successful," Kamat said. "We are committed to this gin."

In March, the company plans to have a Holi Festival party in which the fun of the Festival of Colors will be blended with the chai-flavored gin. In Sirsi, Kamat's hometown, there is a special folk dance called [Bedara Vesha](#), in which the dancer wears a tiger mask and huge peacock feathers in an elaborate costume.

Kamat joked that he would like to learn the dance and perform it at the party.

"The dance is nuts!" Kamat said.

“I will gladly watch you do it,” DiCenso added. “I will cheer you on.”

Some suggested recipes from the creators of Holi Gin:

- White grapefruit, lemon, lime, simple syrup, club soda, Holi Gin
- Aperol, ginger syrup, lemon juice, Holi Gin, lemon peel garnish
- Borghetti coffee liqueur, angostura bitters, gin, orange peel garnish
- Muddled basil, cucumber lime, simple syrup, club soda, Holi Gin

LISA HORNUNG

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master's degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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