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Let's get fizzical

THERE'S AN EPIDEMIC RUINING
OUR G&TS. ZEREN WILSON IS ON
A MISSION TO BRING BACK TONIC
WATER WITH MORE FIZZ.

“See how its strength bursts to the top of the glass... the difference is almost frightening.” These are the mellifluous tones of suave British actor William Franklyn, on a voiceover for a 1970s Schweppes commercial created by Ogilvy and Mather, as a wrecking ball keeps smashing into the house he’s walking through. You can hear the tonic in his glass fizzing amongst the crashing.

In another advert he steps up to make a speech in front of a large crowd, pouring himself a tonic before he begins. The hectic sound of the sparkle gets picked up by the microphone and the crowd begin to applaud. A delighted Henry Cooper

It’s clear what they are banging on about here, the Schhhh...You Know Who message highlighting the pleasure of having a fizzing maelstrom in the glass. That joy appears to be a rarer one these days. Limp, barely sparkling, lifeless G&Ts are dominating our bars and restaurants, an unwelcome flaccid malaise that is being driven in the name of ‘boutique’, ‘craft’ or ‘premium’ and ‘botanical’. Fever-Tree, I’m pointing a jabbing and accusatory finger, primarily, at you.

Yes, I applaud how they have revolutionised the tonic market in a quite spectacular way, with an admirable and perfectly judged focus on the integrity of ingredients with the brilliant ‘If ¾ of your Gin & Tonic is

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is smiling and clapping with gusto. Seizing the moment, Franklyn lifts the glass closer and the crowd goes wild, giving him a standing ovation. He doesn’t say a word, until sitting down. A relieved look at the camera: “They like my speech.”

tonic, mix with the best TM strapline clinching the argument – absolute genius, love it. Also worthy of praise, is the way they have slipstreamed since they launched in 2005, directly behind the resurgence and cavalcade of gin brands, and the relentless launch of boutique distilleries in the







UK – the tonic market was ripe to be exploited, and they have done so with a rapier-like efficiency.

As news broke last month that Fever-Tree co-founder Charles Rolls had cashed in a tidy amount of his shares (£73 million), I'm metaphorically there at the back of the room, slow hand-clapping the success while thinking of all the limp gin and tonics I've been enduring over the last few years. I'm not a spirits expert or a tonics expert (wine is more my bag), so any rage is coming purely from a punter's perspective: quiet tonic makes me a bit ragey.

So, what's my beef? It's the fizz, man: where has it gone? This scourge of gentle carbonation, without a good nose prickle after first pouring, and then dissipating in seconds, ain't doing it for me. Their website states 'exceptionally high level carbonation', but I'm not having it. These are tame, tame bubbles that shuffle off far too

carbonation of mineral water. Another major player, Britvic, have also followed suit with their own rebrand. A battle of the mixers is on.

I've been slinging my tonic angst to and fro with one of my former Oddbins colleagues, Stelios Eliades, who now runs Drink Directory (drinkdirectory.co.uk), a bespoke service for the trade and everyday consumer for sourcing drinks. "A great tonic should enhance the drink it is mixed with. The carbonation is important because it lifts the aromas and flavours out of the glass and up to your nose as you drink. A lot of what we perceive as flavour is delivered by aroma", notes Eliades.

He put me on to a player that is looking to take on Fever-Tree head on in the tussle for premium tonic space, Merchant's Heart, which is owned by the owners of Schweppes, Suntory (who license it to Coca-Cola in the UK). We tried it. Good, more carbonation, righto. Better. Silly

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swiftly. I even heard some guff recently that it's so highly carbonated that the bubbles are bursting quickly. Nah, not having that either. It's not just them, either – I'm encountering similar lacklustre bubbles with other brands.

Then there's the cost. If you drink a lot of gin and tonics at home (I do, cans of Schweppes the preferred weapon of choice), Fever-Tree begins to become prohibitive. If $\frac{3}{4}$ of your Gin & Tonic is tonic, make sure you're loaded, as you're going to spend fuck loads on the part that doesn't get you pissed...or something like that.

The Schweppes brand has clearly felt the bite as their former market dominance has been scythed by not just Fever-Tree, but by a growing host of tonic brands – their recent rebrand goes back to their roots, highlighting their 1783 heritage, the beginning of the business Jacob Schweppes founded which perfected the commercial

name, but anyway. It has made an appearance at Holborn Dining Room and a handful of London bars – it has Fever-Tree firmly in its sights.

The roll-call of tonic brands goes on and on: Goldberg; Thomas Henry; Franklins; Double Dutch; East Imperial; Jack Rudy; Square Root; 1724; Ledger's; Fentiman's; Bramley & Gage; Peter Spanton. It's dizzying. If not always fizzying.

Food and drinks writer Kate Hawkings led a tonic taste test with industry professionals in 2015, the results written up for The Telegraph, with the less successful deemed to have bubbles which are “too soft and/or too fleeting”. Schweppes ran out as the winner in the opinion of an esteemed judging panel. I check in with Kate on her current thoughts. “I've always thought Fever-Tree has the wrong sort of bubbles – they dissipate really quickly and leave the drink a bit flat



“A great tonic should enhance the drink it is mixed with.”

and claggy. I quite like their ‘Naturally Light’ one, but the bubbles are still wrong!”

It all leaves bars and restaurants in an invidious position: tonics are sometimes being listed because of reputation, not because they are the best for the job. Or because customers are wanging on about them. Sophie’s Steakhouse is the only restaurant where I spotted Schweppes in cans as the preferred serve. New opening Plaquemine Lock serves Schweppes from the gun (as well as offering Fever-Tree in bottles), so ultimately a choice is the ideal compromise. The Mash Inn in Buckinghamshire has recently also started to offer Schhhh...alongside Fever-Tree. I may have harangued and bludgeoned owner Nick Mash into submission with my moaning. At least it has shut me up, no small mercy.

Yet still, I’d like to find that tonic which has all of the brilliant story/

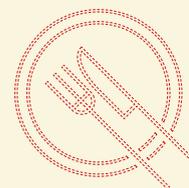
ingredients/ethics of the ‘premium’ mixer, with stories of ginger from the Ivory Coast and Nigeria, lemons from Sicily, quinine sourced from a remote part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and without the sodium saccharine sweetener – but most importantly – with enough perky levels of fizz to wake up the synapses. But which one to try next?

“Each tonic adds something different. It’s great that there are so many gins and vodkas out there. Now, with the mixer market catching up, we can experiment with an incredible amount of combinations”, says Eliades. Right, on his tip-off, I have just placed an order online for some German Goldberg tonic x48, suckered in by their ‘high carbon dioxide content’ spiel. Next up, I’m in for a case of Thomas Henry. Don’t let me down.

Another William Franklyn refrain stays with me from those commercials:

‘A rare effervescence that lasts the whole drink through’ – yes, yes, YES. That’s all we ask for.

The hunt for a tonic with the requisite cut and thrust of a nose prickling fizz continues.....until then: Schhhh.... You Know Who.



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