

Custom tonics can cure a classic

BY FRITZ HAHN

Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, gin is the quintessential drink.

The gin rickey is Washington's official cocktail, honored at bars throughout the city during July's "Rickey Month" celebrations. The humble gin and tonic, though, has long had a reputation for being stodgy: something our parents and grandparents drank at garden parties. That's changing as a raft of independent gins

IF YOU GO

NEW HEIGHTS GIN JOINT

2317 Calvert St. NW.
202-234-4110.
www.newheightsrestaurant.com.

have hit the market in recent years, all begging to be served with ice and a twist and something beyond the usual harsh tonic water that shoots from the soda gun at most bars.

The place to go to rediscover the G&T? New Heights Restaurant's cozy, pleasant Gin Joint bar, which stocks 50 gins from around the world and a variety of tonics to pair them with, including a rotating selection of house-made tonics.

Chef John Waback created this novel bar dedicated to gin four years ago, and it has been steadily evolving in both selection and quality. Recent additions to the ever-expanding menu include St. George's malty, juniper-heavy Dry Rye Gin; the dry, spicy Voyager from Washington's Pacific Distillery; and a fragrant, botanical-forward gin called Greenhook Ginsmiths from Brooklyn. Purists can comfort themselves with Old Raj, Broker's, Plymouth and Leopold's Navy Strength.

The big improvement in the past years is in the selection of tonics cooked up by bar manager Nicole Hassoun and her team. Flavors include baking spices — think cinnamon and nutmeg — that blend with cardamom and malty gins, a to-die-for summer blend of orange-flower water and fresh lime, and a zippy tangerine mix that includes cayenne pepper.

Sometimes these are created to pair with the "Gin of the Month" — the ginger tonic was designed to complement the gingery flavors of Breuckelen Gin — and sometimes they're seasonally inspired. Flavors come and go. Hibiscus and mango, for example, were featured this spring.

New Heights' menu is set up very simply: one column lists all of the gins and their essential flavors, including juniper,

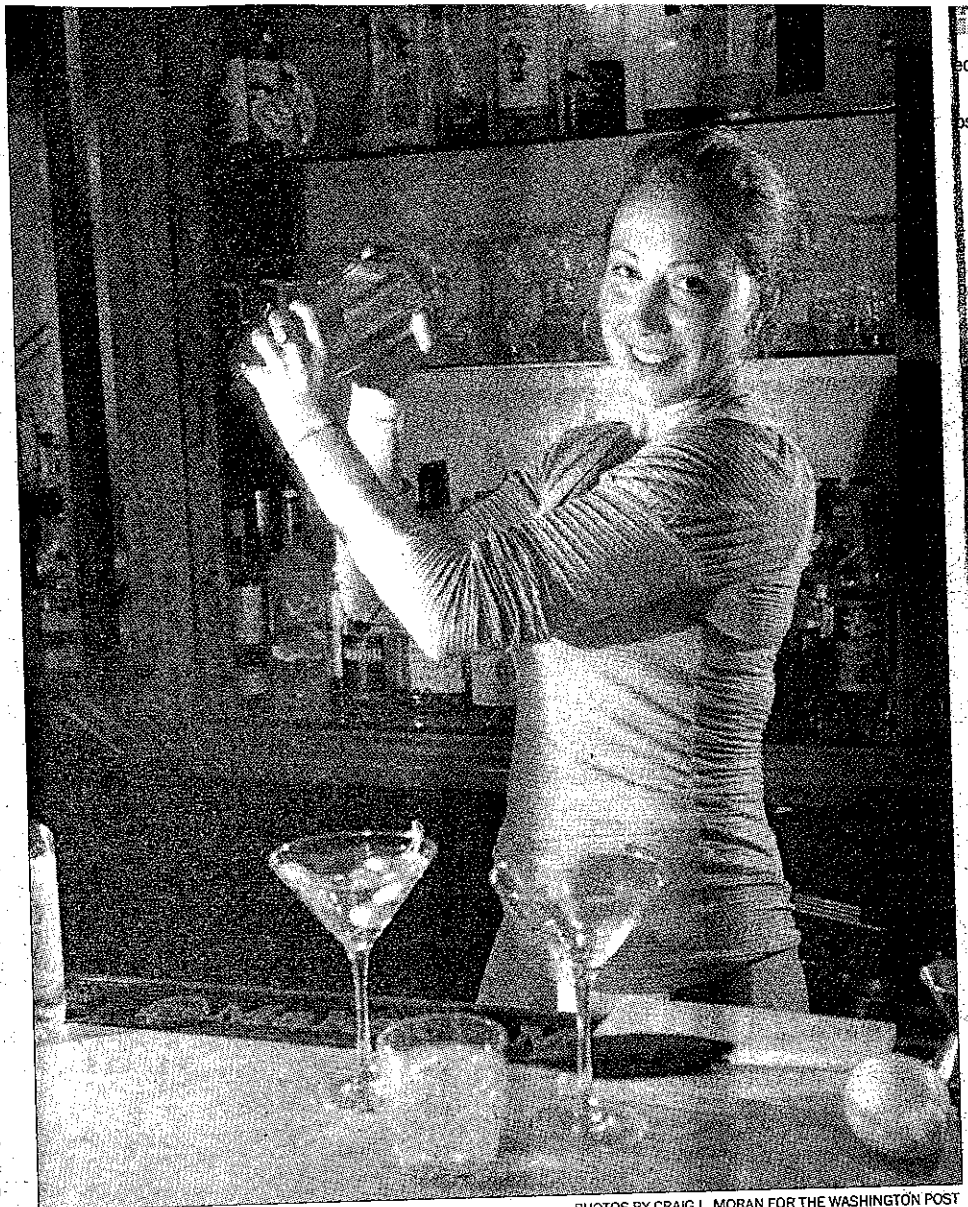
lemon peel or pepper, and the other column lists both house-made and commercial tonics, such as Fever Tree Bitter Lemon or Seagrams. Then you play mad scientist or mixologist to decide what to pair. Indecisive types can choose one of the pre-matched tasting flights of three gin and tonics (\$19). Most other drinks cost about \$9 or \$10 per glass, depending on the gin.

When concocting your own, it's easy enough to think, "This gin has lemon and orange, so I'll choose the citrus or orange-water tonic." That usually works, although

sometimes you wind up with too much of the same flavors. So try marrying opposites: Smooth Ambler, a peppery, citrus-heavy gin from West Virginia, becomes a bracing summertime treat when paired with the ginger tonic. Combining Greenhook gin with the house citrus tonic created amazing flavors: savory orange peppery juniper and floral sweetness.

If that doesn't sound like the last gin and tonic you poured, it's time to go to New Heights.

fritz.hahn@washingtontimes.com



PHOTOS BY CRAIG L. MORAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



New Heights Gin Joint bartender Nicole Hassoun, above, mixes drinks using some of the gins in the bar's collection, left. Hassoun created a gin and tonic, in the glass on the right, with No. 3 London Dry Gin, the bottle in the middle.