

44°N

A gin imagined and distilled in Grasse

Marrying state-of-the-art technology with the savoir-faire of perfume production, Comte de Grasse is raising the spirits of the city. The result is the pure essence of Grasse in a bottle. Riviera Insider takes you inside Grasse's newest luxury brand.

By NICOLE RUSKELL

Comte de Grasse is an innovative new distillery in the heart of Grasse. Dedicated to the heritage of the perfume capital of the world, 44°N (named after the latitude of Grasse) is created using traditional perfume extraction techniques combined with modern distillation technology. It's a process that hasn't been done before in the spirits industry. They are trailblazing not only the distillation process but also how a spirits company incorporates sustainability and supports the local community.

Respect for tradition is the foundation upon which Comte de Grasse is built. Every step they have taken has thoughtfully considered the heritage of the region, the sustainability of the land and the future it can provide the people. Their motto sums it up: "We came for the heritage, we stay for the future."

This is what Joanne Birkitt, Chief Marketing Officer, tells us when we visit the new distillery inside the old Roure perfume factory from 1820. Located at Traverse Dupont in the *Espace Jacques-Louis Lion* start-up centre, the series of stone warehouses have been in disuse for



The old Roure perfume factory in Grasse © D.R.

nearly a century. The brick chimney--the last surviving, in-tact perfumery smokestack--stands as a tribute to a bygone era. Comte de Grasse is renovating the historic structures and turning them into luxury spirit distilleries, starting with gin then rum and finally, whiskey.

The founder, Bhagath Reddy, is an expert in merchandising luxury goods. Originally from Bangalore India, he is a long-time connoisseur of whisky and he dreamed of opening his own high-end distillery. He had been searching for where to establish his business, considering India, the UK, the US and others. A friend in the petroleum distillation business suggested he look into the perfume industry, as it uses the finest and highest quality distilling techniques. That's how Bhagath discovered Grasse. Inspired by its history and terroir--add the appeal of the Côte d'Azur--and it was a clear choice.

The launch

Mayor Jérôme Viaud gave a speech 21 February for the official launch of the gin, where he thanked Bhagath for his risk and his courage to open his business in Grasse while honouring its heritage. "You chose Grasse for its water, its quality of perfumery and its capacity to find natural products; you also chose Grasse because you found a building and resonance of us working together." Pointing to the chimney towering above us, he concluded: "This chimney is a historic symbol of Grasse that has been dominant for so many years. I think it's wonderful that symbolically, it will find its smoke again." Bhagath spoke after the mayor, explaining that his project would not have been possible without the support of the city and the *University of Nice Côte d'Azur*. He said:

"When I first started, the idea was that it's not easy to start a business in France. But I believe that idea (that exists around the world) is wrong. We have had great support and everybody has adopted me and this project, despite that fact that I don't speak French. So thank you very much."



The stylish bottle, inspired by perfume © D.R.



The largest ultrasonic maceration machine © D.R.

Committed to being a French company, they source nearly every ingredient, down to the bottle itself, from Grasse, the Alpes-Maritimes, or greater France. They also involve the community, working with the *University of Nice Côte d'Azur*, local farmers, and a local solidarity group 'Renouer' which helps employ out-of-work and disadvantaged people (see insert). "Giving back and community spirit is really important to us and we try to incorporate it into everything we do," explains Joanne. "It's a commitment, not a claim."

Innovating distillation

Bhagath hand-picked Joanne for her expertise in the drinks industry. Together, their meeting of the minds sparked many ideas of how to create a new paradigm for a sustainable, respectful, community-focused luxury brand. They also wanted to create something completely unique and innovative. "We've kind of ripped-up the rule book on how to bring spirits to life," she says. They brought in their own flavour and scent expert from the University. Marie-Anne Contamin has twenty years of experience in the industry but this is her first time working with gin. She was charged with creating a recipe inspired by

the terroir of Grasse and the following poetic, albeit vague phrase: 'if light were a flavour and illumination a scent.'

The result reads like the ingredient list for a perfume: rose centifolia, verbena, jasmine, iris, immortelle, mimosa, lavender, grapefruit, and bitter orange. Add to this the classic juniper berries that make gin, with the addition of cade, a local juniper variety that has larger, lighter berries with a more woody flavour.

These traditional ingredients are then macerated in a state-of-the-art machine. Comte de Grasse has introduced the combination of ultrasonic maceration, vacuum distillation and supercritical CO2 extraction for the first time in the distillation of gin. This method - called the HYPRX Fat Distillation Procedure - is trademark registered by the company.

Ultrasonic maceration is a technique used mostly in the perfume and pharmaceutical industries and their machine is the largest in the world, custom-built for 44°N. The normal maceration process takes 1-2 days, but with this machine, that time is reduced to 45 minutes, extracting the most essence while preserving the true flavours of the botanicals. The resulting solution is placed in a glass balloon vacuum distiller where they have more precise control over temperature and alcohol degree. This creates a complex and delicate gin with a refined depth of flavour and a clean finish.

Bottling the Côte d'Azur

A work of art in itself, the Blue Klein bottle is specially designed by *Force Majeure*, a French company in Brooklyn, together with *Agent Chic*, a Paris-based bottle manufacturer who specialises in... perfume bottles. Bringing the essence of Grasse together with the striking beauty of the Côte d'Azur, the bright yellow top signifies the sun shining over Grasse, its rays moving down the neck of the bottle, and settling on the rough sides which signify the movement of the Mediterranean Sea. Rumour has it that if you place the bottle in the sun, it casts an image of the sparkling sea, azur like the water itself. They have quite literally managed to bottle the South of France.

So how does it taste?

Heavenly--if you like botanical gin.

RENOUER



Established in 1993, this locally based integration association fights unemployment and socio-professional exclusion by supporting the training and job placement for the

long-term unemployed. Renouer makes these people available to individuals and companies for small jobs and maintenance work (cleaning, gardening, small renovations).

Its focus is to respect the individual, provide solidarity and develop sustainable activity. 'Cueillette Solidaire' is their agricultural initiative where jobs are given to pick and sell local fruits from those who do not need or want them. The resulting products from the fruit (marmalades, olive oil, syrups, etc.) are sold through Renouer to support the workers. Compt de Grasse pays extra to employ these local workers to provide the cade berries, lemons, rose centifolia and bitter oranges.

A true sipping gin, 44°N can be enjoyed neat or on the rocks. The delicate notes hold their own in perfect harmony, achieved by Marie-Anne's masterful nose. Comte de Grasse recommends tasting in three steps: first neat--allowing you to taste the full set of botanicals, starting with citrus and wood notes, followed by a floral sensation and finishing with delicate rose lingering on the palate.

The second step is to add ice, which they say 'opens it up' and really changes the flavour, adding in a peppery note from Alexanders and Sichuan pepper.

The final step is to add a light tonic--no Indian tonic for this--no lime either. In fact, Comte de Grasse recommends no garnish for their 44°N G&T. However, a delicate rose petal would make an appropriate finishing touch.

Their visitor centre and tasting café is planned for later this year, with the complete renovation of the site for June 2020. We will be keeping an eye on Comte de Grasse as they have more exciting projects on the way. ▀

WHERE TO BUY

44°N can currently be found in a few high-end hotels, including the Martinez in Cannes, or can be purchased directly from their website. A 500 mL bottle will set you back €75, an investment for your liquor cabinet but also an investment in Grasse.

www.comtedegrasse.com

