



THIS WONDERFUL LITTLE PLACE

... HOPE & SESAME, GHANGZHOU

Well-travelled distiller David Havelin discovered this cocktail bar on one of his frequent visits to China ...

I've travelled extensively as an engineer, working in Sweden, Denmark and Japan before moving to Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton), China at the start of 1997. I was in telecoms then and China was building out its telephone network, so I went.

Guangzhou is the trading capital of China, and has been for centuries. It's known for its enormous wholesale markets dedicated to commodities such as fabric, jewellery, tea. Twice a year the city hosts the vast Canton Fair which attracts buyers from all over the globe.

Despite a population of 20 million people, Guangzhou is surprisingly leafy, its trees providing relief from the subtropical climate of intense sun and heavy rains. The osmanthus tree is my favourite - its tiny but potent flowers fill the air with scent from late autumn to spring.

I left Guangzhou at the end of the 1990s but visited again in recent years after a gap of almost two decades to find a city transformed. A whole new skyscraping downtown had appeared, along with a magnificent opera house, city library and museum. A 400km subway system had been tunnelled beneath the streets. They don't hang around in China.

Restaurants were the main hub for socialising in the 1990s and Guangzhou, of course, is a paradise for Cantonese-style cooking, particularly dim sum with its bottomless cups of tea, and all kinds of seafood. It was possible then, too, to enjoy the many regional cuisines from around China. Today, restaurants remain ubiquitous and cheap, but it seems like every major world cuisine is represented now as well. Guangzhou truly deserves its official recognition as a "food city".

When I started my gin distillery, and needed a recipe, I recalled George Chinnery, a 19th-century artist whose work I had come across while in Guangzhou. He started his career in Dublin but spent his final decades in south China painting the portraits of the merchants of the Old China Trade and sketching the local life.

For ingredients for Chinnery Gin, I went back to Guangzhou's markets and selected osmanthus for its fragrance and peach-like sweetness, and cassia bark and tea as typical commodities of the Old China Trade. I tasted many teas before settling on a particular variety of oolong called *huangjingui*. It's less bitter than many teas and, once distilled, it adds a savoury depth to the spirit.

My favourite little place is Hope & Sesame, a small speakeasy in the historic Dongshankou area, which I discovered in conversation with a potential tea supplier. She mentioned a gin event at Hope & Sesame so I went along with my wife. The taxi dropped us outside but we still spent half an hour looking for it. Only when we spotted someone going through the hidden door did we figure out where it was. I went back the next night with a bottle of my own gin and chatted with the owners. It was a very stimulating discussion. The bar's radically original cocktails offer an unusual take on Chinese ingredients, geography and heritage. The current menu, for example, is inspired by a traditional Cantonese wedding feast. I like perching at the bar and delving deep into Chinese culture with the bartender, or taking my drink to the live jazz room and forgetting the world for a couple of hours.

I'm grateful to the gin business for giving me an excuse to revisit this wonderful and dynamic city regularly. I've spent years of my life there but I feel I've still only scratched the surface. ■ www.hopeandsesamez.com



Cantonese café that leads to Hope & Sesame



Hope & Sesame