



*“I’m astounded by
the support people
have shown me”*

Inspired by her mum’s recipe and a yearning for creativity and balance, Kate Griffin handcrafts natural gins and spirits

WORDS ELLEN TOUT PHOTOGRAPHS LEANNE BRACEY

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ABOVE AND RIGHT
Production, events, retail and admin all take place at Kate’s ‘gin palace’ in Hampshire

BELOW With the help of a local interior designer, Kate honed her vision with bespoke furniture, paint and accessories



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For 10 years, Kate Griffin taught English in a secondary school. ‘I never imagined I’d end up manufacturing gin!’ she says. ‘I loved teaching; when I walked into the classroom, I knew what I was doing. But, to the children, you’re not a real person, just a teacher. Now, however, my work is quite personal.’ Despite the difference in ‘clientele’, Kate’s teaching skills come in handy. ‘As a teacher, you’re used to putting on an act to become what you need to be in that moment. That experience helps me in situations where I don’t feel confident, like approaching pubs or restaurants to ask them to sell my gin,’ she explains.

Kate was familiar with small-scale gin production and had an understanding of the process, with childhood memories of her mother making sloe gin. ‘I use the same methods as my mum to create my infusions,’ she says. It was after Kate’s daughter was born with a cleft lip and palate that Kate began to struggle balancing work and caring for her children, Thomas, eight, and Alice, now five, and wondered whether a new career could be the answer to a healthier work-life balance.

‘My husband, Matthew, has a business mind and, although he doesn’t drink spirits, he suggested I set up a distillery. I thought he was joking!’ says Kate. His encouragement was the catalyst for Kate launching Wessex Spirits two years ago. ‘I’d still be thinking about it and all the ways it wouldn’t work, but Matthew encouraged me to take the leap. He believed in me, would always be honest with me and kept saying, “Just do it!”’

Start small, dream big

Before moving to Kate’s ‘gin palace’, production took place in her grandad’s annex. ‘At first, it wasn’t scary because I had very few overheads. I didn’t really think it through, it just happened. It felt more scary as it became real. Now, I feel terrified at times,’ she laughs. As demand grew and Kate occupied more of her grandad’s space, she realised the business would need a larger base. ‘I looked at lots of places but had no plans for a tasting room or shop; it was just going to be production facilities. When I moved into our new premises, the space felt enormous, so I created multifunctional rooms.’ >>>



LEFT Sociable Kate enjoys connecting with customers for gin-tasting experiences and says she 'reads the room', because every group and event is unique

BELOW Kate is hands-on for all phases of production



LEFT Each gin is herb-infused and naturally produced. This makes the taste more subtle and aromatic than popular high-street brands



"There's no machinery, I do it all - I stick on every label and seal bottles by hand. I even do deliveries. It's so rewarding"

"I feel so lucky. I can't imagine going back to the nine-to-five. I can wear my slippers to work!"

>>> As well as providing stock for an online store, craft fairs and farm shops, the new premises in Andover, Hampshire, allowed Kate to connect with customers and host intimate tasting experiences and parties. 'People buy my gin because of the story behind it,' she says. 'When I see someone take a bottle off the shelf, I still find it amazing.'

Kate handcrafts each stage of the process. 'I tell people that every bottle sold makes a real difference to me - and I think they like being part of that. Most days, I get a batch on early in the morning, then take the kids to school before coming back to the shop to do admin. In the afternoons, I filter, bottle and label the gin,' she says. 'There's no machinery, I do it all - I stick on every label and seal bottles by hand. I even do deliveries. It's so rewarding, especially when someone says they like it.'

The joy of freedom

Although Kate has help with marketing and says finance is her weak point, she enjoys having ownership of each phase. 'I like the fact that I do everything, and it's varied. I'm learning all the time. I love that I can plan my day and have the flexibility to do what I want, when I want.'

Kate has always enjoyed being creative. 'When I was a child, I made all sorts of things, but I stopped when I grew up. I enjoy the process of making something from start to finish.' Her first product was Test Valley Gin, for which her mum still grows the basil and thyme. Then she developed different infusions, working with a local chef to source home-grown ingredients. 'I work with all-natural herb infusions and don't use sugar or flavourings,' she says. 'The best bit is when I'm trying new flavours. I often make it up as I go along, and it's trial and error. I'll have stacks of jars all over my kitchen and experiment with timings and quantities to see what works. Then I can upscale my recipe to bigger batches.'

Working naturally means each brew is slightly different. 'This can be tricky,' says Kate. 'The colour of the gin, for example, is not consistent, but I think that's rather nice. The herbs are always fresh so, in hot weather, the gin is darker and, in the cold weather, it's lighter.'

But did she expect her product to be so popular, despite the craft gin trend? 'It's taken me a while to get to this stage,' says Kate. 'There's was a point when I thought I wanted to sell the business and go back to teaching, but now I feel so lucky to be

able to do this. I can't imagine going back to the nine-to-five. I had a revelation the other day - that I can wear my slippers to work! It's silly but that felt quite symbolic.'

Camaraderie and connection

'I think my biggest hurdle has been fear - doing something completely different and out of my comfort zone. It's been a process of working it out, muddling through and having to learn to ask for help,' says Kate. She hopes to be more selective with time management, in order to create harmony with her family life. 'I'm working on time blocking, because it can often feel like I'm flying around all over the place. I can't always spend as much time as I feel I should on the business, but my goal is to make it work around my family. Flexibility is crucial, so I can manage my daughter's hospital visits and care.'

Kate is grateful for the encouragement she has received from her community. 'I've been overwhelmed by the support people have given me. I've really benefited from it. I'm astounded at what people will do for each other. I had no idea!' she says. 'My products are locally focused, and I enjoy working with nearby businesses. There's been nothing but support,

even from other gin makers, and I was truly surprised by that.'

Neighbours also mucked in with the shop's design and DIY makeover and photography. 'Interior designer, Stephanie Briggs, from La Di Da Interiors, offered me her help when I moved into the shop and said to give her a shout at any time. People always say that, but she actually meant it!' says Kate. 'Steph helped me create vision boards and mood boards, and then made bespoke paint for the walls and furniture; she really went over and above what I expected.'

What does the future hold? Kate is excited about the upcoming launch of her rum brand. 'The gin craze is amazing, and I've been incredibly lucky, but I don't want to have all my eggs in one basket. I think rum is on its way!' Her new creation is inspired by the colourful history of Cornish pirates and smugglers. 'It's blended, spiced and salted with Cornish sea salt. It's called Resting Place Rum; a "resting place" is where smugglers' boats would lie in wait for the rising tide, so they could bring their goodies to shore. I enjoy experimenting, and thinking about the potential of my business.'

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