

## 'You won't See Anyone Promoting a Bronze': Awards and Ambivalence Amongst Craft Gin Producers

Thomas Thurnell-Read <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Loughborough University*, UNITED KINGDOM

\*Corresponding Author: [t.thurnell-read@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:t.thurnell-read@lboro.ac.uk)

**Citation:** Thurnell-Read, T. (2019). 'You won't See Anyone Promoting a Bronze': Awards and Ambivalence Amongst Craft Gin Producers, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 4(2), 14. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/6358>

**Published:** December 11, 2019

### ABSTRACT

The recent surge in the popularity of 'craft' and 'artisanal' spirits made in small batches by independent producers raises a range of questions about the processes by which the economic and cultural value of consumer products and practices are assessed and acknowledged. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 craft gin distillery workers in the UK, this paper analyses the role played by trade and press awards in this process. Whilst the majority of interviewees had received awards for their products and most recognised the continued importance of such accolades both in terms of attracting new customers and bestowing status on their labour and its outputs, many also expressed notable ambivalence towards the processes by which judgements are passed and awards allocated. This typically involved expressing cynicism about award judging procedures and motivations, as well as proposing alternative measures of judgement involving different referents such as specific influential individuals, hypothetical 'average customers' and personal subjective tastes and preferences. The paper therefore seeks to add to understandings of the personal and cultural narratives associated with practices of award giving and consumer culture.

**Keywords:** craft, artisan, gin, awards and prizes, consumption

### INTRODUCTION

The recent rise in popularity of craft and artisanal food and drink products raises a number of pertinent issues for the study of cultural change and, in particular, how value is defined, identified and attributed to particular products and those that make and consume them. Whilst research in cultural studies and cultural sociology has a relatively long history of exploring such debates in relation to established cultural fields such as the arts, cinema, literature and music, it is only with the recent 'return' to independent, small-batch and handmade 'craft' products (e.g. Cope, 2014; Oejo, 2017) that renewed academic interest in the delineation of quality and value, and the consecration of cultural tastes, has emerged in studies of the food and drink sector (Johnston and Bauman, 2015). Within these craft economies, values and practices that distinguish the mass production and consumption that dominated the late 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are replaced with an emphasis on individual and autonomous 'makers' who produce tangible products of high quality and also work upon cultural narratives which establish their products as 'authentic' (Thurnell-Read, 2019).

Set within these wider debates about cultural value the academic study of award and prize giving has become of increasing importance to scholars interested in cultural authority, power and recognition. In what has become a landmark work on these matters, English (2009) details how the proliferation of awards and prizes in contemporary culture is 'perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of cultural life, touching every corner of the cultural

universe' (English, 2009: 2). Whilst progress has been made in studies of award, prizes and cultural prestige in arts, culture and creative industries few have studied their increasing significance in the food and drink industry. Yet, as shall be seen below, winning awards and prizes is a prominent theme in the narratives of craft producers and arises in how they speak about their labour, their products and their industry.

In this article, these issues are explored in relation to awards within the spirits industry. By drawing on a set of twenty interviews with craft gin producers in the UK, nearly all of whom had won some form of award or prize for their products, this article explores how the giving and receiving of awards has been an integral part of the increase in production of artisanal and craft goods in recent years. This surge has seen the number of distilleries operating in Great Britain doubling from 152 to 315 in the five-year period from 2013 to 2018 (Humphries, 2018). Further, this quantitative trend is accompanied by a widely acknowledged qualitative change in how this commodity is viewed by the public. Mainstream news coverage and product brand narratives alike present the craft gin 'boom' as being led by consumers increasingly driven by quality and innovations (Butler, 2018). Thus, what was long-established as a common place or, at best, middlebrow product – a product that Manning (2012: 80) describes as being for many years still rooted in the semiotic landscape of Empire and nostalgia – has undergone a renaissance. In this increasingly crowded marketplace small, medium and large scale producers are all competing for market share but also for recognition and legitimacy.

Amongst established and new entrants to this market, awards are an instantly recognisable feature, appearing on bottles, websites and in the text and images of both traditional and digital marketing content. Whilst the field of prizes, competitions and awards for alcoholic drinks has grown steadily, awards for spirits such as gin focus primarily on two large international competitions. The International Wine and Spirit Competition was established in 1969 and is organised into 37 categories with the Gin category subdivided into seven styles including London Dry, Dutch, Flavoured, Old Tom and Slow Gin. More recent, but equally regarded, the San Francisco World Spirits Competition was founded in 2000 and states that awards are made 'on a merit basis' having been 'evaluated within a peer group of similar spirits' and that 'the judges will not grant an award when, in their opinion, an entry is not worthy of an award'. Competitors pay \$550 per entry and can go on to pay further licence fees for the use of official competition logos and 'medallions' in online and in print material and product packaging. The competition included 2,469 spirit entries in 2018, with the list of medal winners running to 75 pages. These awards have built their reputation on the experience, knowledge and impartiality of its judges (Japhe, 2018) and both have a track record of winners receiving considerable media and market attention (Morris, 2010). Beyond these two prominent international awards, a number of spirit-specific awards have emerged in recent years. For example, the Spirits International Prestige (SIP) Awards were established in 2009 in California and in 2018 saw 783 spirit brand entries, while the Gin Masters competition established in the UK by trade publication *The Spirits Business*, also in 2009, includes categories for 'Design and Packaging' and for 'Marketing Campaign' as well as those set by product style.

Beyond specific awards relating to spirits, a number of more general food and drink awards include prize categories relating to alcoholic beverages. The Great Taste Awards, organised in the UK since 1994 by The Guild of Fine Food, judged 181 categories in 2019 to allocate awards of one, two or three stars in recognition of 'truly great taste, regardless of branding or packaging'. Of these, only eight categories related to alcoholic beverages, with one each for beer and cider joined by a 'Spirits and Liqueurs' category subdivided into sections for Gin, Rum, Vodka and Whisky categories as well as those for 'Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Wines' and for 'Any other alcoholic drink inc. mead, liqueurs & sloe gin'. Another source of awards prominent in the UK were those offered by magazines with a focus on regional lifestyles (for instance, *Cotswolds Life*) and by regional and local food and drinks retail organisations (such as the *Food Drink Devon Awards*).

Importantly, as this article will explore, the ability for small craft-based enterprises, often with paltry marketing budgets, to leverage substantial viability from their winning of awards and prizes means that the award giving culture of these sectors is something that they must unavoidably have an opinion on and develop a strategy towards. This reflects the need to view craft drink making as cultural labour that involves the marshalling of meanings and stories as well as making tangible products through skilled processes and the manipulation of ingredients and equipment (Thurnell-Read, 2014). The craft distiller identity involves skill, knowledge and passion (Ocejo, 2017). In this context, the judging and receiving of awards provides a window into analysing changing understandings of taste and value. Talking to craft spirits makers about awards and prizes proved a useful means to focus discussion on questions of quality, prestige and recognition. Their narratives proved to be complex and multifaceted; the tensions evident within expressions of mixed pride and cynicism revealing a great deal about how meanings related to craft work, craft products and craft consumers were the subject of ongoing negotiation.

## REWARDING QUALITY, AWARDING PRESTIGE

The proliferation of prizes and awards has been a prominent yet relatively under-analysed feature of culture in recent years (English, 2009). As Frey (2006) observes, awards and prizes have become ubiquitous features of most fields of culture and are present in most areas of social activity. Prizes are widely accepted as ‘a hallmark of quality’ that bring ‘cultural recognition’ (De Valck and Soeteman, 2010: 291). Prizes and awards therefore play a key role in the ‘consecration’ of tastes in many cultural fields and are ‘seen as essential to an account of the production of culture’ (Street, 2005: 821). The most prominent cultural awards, such as the Booker Prize in literature (Anand and Jones, 2008; Todd, 1996), the Turner Prize in modern art (Stout and Carey-Thomas, 2007) and the Grammy awards in popular music (Anand and Watson, 2004), have come to dominate debates in their respective cultural fields. Such awards have developed richly complicated histories. Awards and prizes can have a formative influence on the emergence and evolution of particular cultural fields; the most influential awards and prizes can shape cultural taste and influence business practices (Street, 2018). Awards and other accolades may add legitimacy to emergent and developing cultural fields when they are regarded as both valid and genuine by both producers and consumers. Thus, in their study of wine shows in Australia, Allen and Germov (2011: 36) observe that ‘symbolic value is created whenever wine show judges determine that some wines are worthy of medals or trophies and others are not’ and that ‘this symbolic value can then be converted into economic value because the quality of a wine, as certified by a medal or trophy, has implications for its price’.

Whilst no academic studies directly address these matters in relation to the spirits industry, debates about the value and purpose of prizes and awards, the processes by which they’re given and how they’re received by consumers has a long history in the wine trade and a more recent trend in studies of agriculture and artisanal food production. As such, wine exhibition awards are said to signal quality to consumers and serve to influence the purchase process through simplification and reassurance of otherwise potentially intimidating complex categorisations of style and quality (Orth and Krška, 2002). Wine awards therefore play an important role in guiding consumer choice and establishing hierarchies of prestige in the minds of consumers (Charters and Pettigrew, 2003; Goodman, 2009). Similar importance has been identified in studies of food production, where particular focus appears to be on the role of awards in supporting smaller or newly established producers. Henryks et al’s (2016) study of participants in agricultural show awards in Australia notes the significance of such awards especially for smaller entrepreneurs who become well placed to use prizes allocated in their niche marketing to set them out as quality-focused producers. Similarly, Marsden and Smith’s study of ecological entrepreneurship mentions awards as valued symbols of recognition and prestige for small and innovative food producers vis a vis ‘mass’ producers with a more corporate focus (2005).

Recent studies have sought to highlight the workings of power, authority and authorship at work in the distribution of awards and prizes. Lane (2013), for instance, explains how those with the position to award prestige in a particular field exercise power and authority and uphold certain values and styles, often at the expense of others. Similarly, Warde (2009) uses a longitudinal analysis of the high-end restaurants selected for inclusion in the *Good Food Guide* to chart the evolution of British culinary identity across six decades to trace changes in legitimacy and recognition in regard to features such as ethics, nationalism and globalisation. Such studies illustrate how the criteria by which awards are allocated can be both a powerful reflection of and an influence on the identities of those involved in that particular cultural arena. For instance, Kersten and Verboord (2014: 9) demonstrate that winning or being nominated for prestigious awards can be used as ‘the parameter for professional recognition’ in providing winners with validation and recognition by peers according to the current structures of legitimacy accepted in a given cultural field. Indeed, in certain fields winning awards may be regarded as the pinnacle of a career or as the primary measure of success and achievement. Thus, Lane (2013: 353) notes that ‘The *Michelin* award system is regarded as an exceedingly important influence on culinary culture and on the socio-geographic identity of chefs and their cooking’ whilst, as shall be discussed below, many gin distillers spoke of certain awards as bringing a huge degree of pride and fulfilment.

Awards may be analysed in order to identify the favoured characteristics of a particular cultural sector. For instance, Lin and Mao (2015) identify particular attributes relating to naturalness, authenticity, indigenouness and craftsmanship as dominating the descriptions of award winning food products. Awards therefore play a key role in determining the symbolic value of products and by extension serve as a major influence of commercial value once products reach the market. Prizes and awards can be seen as highly symbolic communicative acts. Delmestri and Greenwood (2016) demonstrate the importance of awards to the increased cultural visibility and legitimacy of grappa in Italy and beyond and observe how a literary prize created by the grappa maker Nonino allowed associations between the drink and established and already valorised fields of culture to be communicated.

Throughout these debates, and as will become apparent in the present analysis, prizes and awards are appealing for consumers and cultural producers alike for their potential to serve as a ‘fixative’ to complex issues around value, quality and prestige. Squires, for example, asserts that cultural prizes operate in ‘the realm of marketing and

promotion, in which meaning proliferates in the promotional circuit and value is seen to be constructed rather than absolute' (2004: 39). This becomes of particular interest to craft food and drink producers who are engaged with protracted efforts to define and communicate how to make a particular food or drink product 'the right way' (Cope, 2014; Paxon, 2013; Thurnell-Read, 2014). Awards tend to proliferate in cultural fields experiencing rapid change, where such changes give rise to complexity or uncertainty and can be reassuring for consumers and producers alike. Doane (2009), for example, follows Bourdieu in suggesting that award and prize winners are a safe and easy option for new entrants to a given cultural field.

Given the very recent and rapid proliferation of gin products each staking a claim to quality, distinction and legitimacy, it is perhaps logical that a great number of awards and awarding entities should emerge. As such, following a short description of the methodological approach adopted in the research, the remainder of the article will explore the ways in which the prominence of awards is understood and experienced by gin makers.

## METHODOLOGY

Whilst there are exceptions, such as Stout and Carey-Thomas' (2007) edited collection of reflection by Turner Prize winners and nominees, few studies have focused specifically on the subjective experiences of recognition and valorisation that award conferment brings on individual cultural practitioners. This paper is based on research involving 20 interviews with craft gin distillery workers from across England, from the far Southwest to the Northeast and across the West and East Midlands. The sample included distilleries based in rural, suburban and urban locations. Of the 20 interviewees, a quarter were female, the majority were white and British but two were British Asian. Age ranged from very early 20s to late 50s. Social class was diverse, some respondents were university educated, many were not; several were privately educated. In terms of previous jobs, they were also very diverse so the sample included former plumbers, IT consultants, graphic designers, and marketing and media executives. Most worked as hands-on distillers, but some were in or had progressed to managerial or marketing roles; a few used a hired-in distiller.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and, in a number of instances, over the phone. The interviews lasted for an hour on average, with some as long as two hours, and all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the author and then coded for key themes. On completion of analysis, all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details such as specific brand names were removed in order to preserve the anonymity of participants.

In addition to this core dataset of qualitative interview transcripts, observations and field notes were made at a range of locations and events including tutored tastings, distillery tours, and gin 'festivals'. Throughout, the theme of value and prestige was prominent and the research focused specifically on how narratives were constructed around the product, its maker and the places and processes by which it was made.

## REWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Awards were widely acknowledged as a manifest feature of the spirits industry and as being of particular prominence in the premium and super-premier categories in which most interviewees sought to position their products<sup>1</sup>. As conversation turned to interviewees' own experience of winning awards, most could name an award that they had won that they were proud to have received or that they felt had been valuable for their business in terms of customer recognition or secondary media coverage. For Felix, and for a number of other interviewees, the initial response when asked about awards and prizes was to demonstrate a feeling of pride in having received them as recognition of the quality of their product. Felix was therefore characteristically animated as he explained how:

We won the *Great Taste* award, we won a *Spirit Masters* gold award and then just before we left, about a month before we left producing in the dining room, we also won the *IWSC* - which is the *International Wines and Spirits Competition* - gold medal, and last year only 20 gins in the world won those (...) We beat some of our favourite gins in the world that we'd revered for years, which we potentially stolen brand colours from, and they got silver, we got gold.

---

<sup>1</sup> Typically, the core brand gin for most interviewees had a retail price of approximately £40 per 70cl bottle, in contrast to £13-16 for 'mainstream' brands such as Gordon's. Prices per serving in on-trade licenced venues, however, could be much higher. During fieldwork the author noted gins produced by certain interviewees on sale in cocktail bars priced as high as £19.95 for a double with tonic mixer.

Given that, for example, the Great Taste Three Star award that Felix refers to is only awarded to around 2% of entrants, the linking of award winning to feelings of pride seems well placed. As noted by Squires (2004: 42), ‘one of the most important roles of prizes - ostensibly the most important role - is to recognise and reward quality’. Further, Felix also went on to explain that winning certain awards had been instrumental in their securing of a contract with a prominent UK retailer noted for its association with taste and quality.

Awards were one of many ways of making the often painstaking labour of craft production visible (Ocejo, 2017), and were felt to offer recognition for doing things ‘the right way’. For Martin, this meant awards giving him the faith in his product being worthy of attention from consumers with an interest in quality produce who might nonetheless be hesitant because of a significantly higher price than commanded by other more established mainstream gin brands. He therefore said that he valued awards:

Partly for our confidence, though, because when you’ve made something ourselves and you’re not from the industry and you’re competing against people who *do* know what they’re doing, or perceived to be...yeah, we’re the only gin in the world to get two double gold medals at the San Francisco spirit awards and that gives us absolute confidence when somebody says “why is your gin so expensive?”, you know, “why should I choose yours over these thousands that are out there?”

For Martin, then, the recognition of quality offered by a prominent international award was vital in being able to charge in excess of £50 per bottle but also represented acceptance from an industry in which he had initially felt himself to be an outsider.

Awards help small enterprises quickly establish their credibility and they can leverage this to enter new markets and to gain visibility in sectors led by larger established corporations who dominate mainstream marketing media space (Morrish and Deacon, 2011). For example, Jessica described how ‘for a small brand with no money’ winning awards meant ‘you really want to be able to say “Look, we won this prize!” and to give your consumers a reason to pick your bottle off the shelf. Likewise, Eddie, described how his gin winning a prominent international award was ‘just like a flick of the switch’ in terms of how he suddenly ‘got lots of interest in the local area, the local media’. Based on this, he was largely positive about the role of awards in the sector and went on to say:

Awards and things like that, especially for someone like myself, a small operation, is really useful. And I think people who run the awards, I think that they know that they basically provide a service, I suppose. People who promote craft spirits.

These examples illustrate the importance of awards to the craft gin sector being acknowledged, for various reasons, by nearly all of the 20 interviewees. Indeed, it is likely that those winning awards express degrees of loyalty to or respect for the organisations bestowing them (Frey, 2006) and this was shown by interviewees. Within the premium spirits sector, as elsewhere, prize giving creates highly visible and highly marketable events that seem to capture the imagination of the general public and of particular key stakeholders alike (Street, 2005). Winning an award can give a small producer, particularly those who have only recently entered into the spirits industry, a chance to secure a tangible measure of credibility that affords them recognition by customers and fellow industry professionals and, in so doing, gives them confidence in their own product and the skills and processes by which it is made.

However, whilst certain awards such as the *International Wines and Spirits Competition* were widely accepted as being worth winning, other awards were not so highly rated. Jessica, for example, described the *San Francisco World Spirits Competition* as ‘massive and kind of well thought’, meaning ‘you have to enter that’, while the *World Gin Awards* is ‘a new competition [that] within the industry hasn’t got that much traction’. Yet, as the latter *did* appear to have quickly accrued recognition amongst consumers, the *World Gin Awards* prize for “Best London Dry Gin” was being featured prominently on their bottles at the time of the interview because, in Jessica’s words, it ‘felt like a worthwhile one, in terms of talking to consumers about it’. This indicates both a degree of qualified ambivalence in relation to the nature of particular awards and a pragmatic recognition that different awards had different possibilities in terms of garnering respect from other producers or, alternatively, affecting changes to customer purchasing practices. Jessica’s comments draw a useful distinction between awards that draw their value from their recognition on either side of the producer-customer divide, with some being more important for customer recognition and others being well respected by distillers themselves and by other prominent industry figures. As the next section will explore, such reflection on the relative merits of specific awards was common amongst interviewees and often found expression in the ambivalence about which some awards, and for several interviewees the whole practice of award giving in general, were spoken of by participants.

## AWARDS AND AMBIVALENCE

Whilst all interviewees acknowledged that awards were a prominent feature of the craft spirits sector, most also expressed some form of concern or doubt relating to the processes by which they were conferred and, for some, the merits of building award-seeking into their business strategies. Such concerns are perhaps likely given the complexity of the award giving process. As Moeran (2012) notes, the act of consecration entailed in award giving is dependent on the cultural authority of the awarding organisation, of the adherence to rigorous procedures when making decisions, of selectivity in that there can only be a small number of recipients and, finally, that the organisation should identify and communicate objective differences that demarcate those receiving prizes from others who do not. This section, therefore, explores this ambivalence in order to further unpack the meaning of awards and prizes to craft gin distillers.

When asked about the importance of awards to her business, Jacqueline explained how ‘there are awards and awards, so there are some that you just get something for turning up. Not sure that’s worth the paper it’s written on’. Similarly, Eric, reflected that:

In fact quite a few of the awards are run by magazines, spirits trade magazines and so on and so [laughs] if you take out three adverts in a year you’re guaranteed to win a gold medal, sometimes (...) not all of them, of course, but I don’t think there’s many credible spirit awards...but, just sticking a label on the product with a gold medal or a silver medal on it helps.

Speaking from a position of vast experience in the food and drinks sector that had included overseeing the development of several major brands, Eric is knowledgeable about the reality of award processes and speaks with knowing cynicism in describing some awards as having ulterior motives that typically relate to selling advertising space in industry magazines. Similarly, Owen described how:

When we started, I was quite keen to make sure we had a Gold Award for our gin. How do we get international recognition for our gin? And one of the gin consultants we spoke to [suggested that] the sure fire way was to make your own award up and win it. Which is something a lot of the wine boys do.

Such comments were typical of many interviewees who appeared to estimate the value of a given award based on their own knowledge of the process by which awards are judged and distributed. Returning to Jacqueline, who rejected certain awards that lacked genuine competition as being of little worth, we see an emphasis placed on those awards based on a real and rigorous competitive assessment of the product itself. She explained that:

The ones that we value the most are the ones that we know have been blind tasted. They’re not being swayed by the packaging, or anything like that. It’s basically just down to the quality of whatever it is that you’ve put inside the bottle.

Clearly, for Jacqueline, an important feature of the award must be genuine competition meaning awards are not given out to everyone just ‘for turning up’. Instead, blind tasting, where the gin is sampled by judges from plain anonymised vessels and no reference is made to identify the particular product and its associated branding, is seen as the measure of an award where genuine competition and judgment take place based on the quality of the drink alone.

Such comments are significant in that they reveal a great deal about the way in which awards themselves are viewed by craft spirits makers but also about the wider values that distillers seek to uphold. As English observes (2009: 7), we may adopt a ‘double-edged approach’ to awards and prizes that is neither ‘strictly cynical’ nor a ‘mystified, essentially religious attitude’. Evidently, interviewees combined idealistic views about value and quality with more pragmatic considerations relating to consumer behaviour, brand recognition and market share. For example, Darren explained that:

If you are a small self-funded start-up you need to cut through as quickly as you can because you can’t do a Diageo and just buy acres of media space. Fastest ways of doing it is winning an award so it costs, you know, 100 quid to enter an award, if you get the award great, if you don’t get the award, you know, you don’t even acknowledge that you entered it. We talk about the ones that you win [and] we’ve used it as a publicity vehicle.

Darren, who had elsewhere in the interview spoken at length and in eloquent detail about the quality of his products, is here pragmatic in acknowledging the strategic role awards play for independent producers. Adopting a highly strategic approach of entering awards but only promoting success is reported as a matter of fact and widely practiced strategy. Likewise, Chris explained that Adnams, a brewery with a long history that successfully entered

the premium spirits market in 2010, were ‘a classic one’ for using awards strategically in their marketing. He said that:

Their gin won a Bronze, which is not necessarily very good (...) you won't see anyone promoting a Bronze. So they got Bronze and the very following year with the same gin they got Double Gold, best in the country, with the same competition. So the fact that that can happen can only mean one thing, it's a lottery, because something must be terribly wrong. Bronze one year and in the next year for it to be Double Gold and for them taking the cup it doesn't make sense does it?

Here, Chris positions such competitions as akin to a lottery, a concept well explored by both English (2009) and the likes of Rossman and Schilke (2014). However, unlike awards in other sectors where a novelist, artist or filmmaker would submit entirely new works for consideration in subsequent years, here it is likely that gin producers enter their core product on an annual basis. In such cases, variability of award outcome year on year is for Chris a sign of the fallibility of the process. However, some awards, such as the SIP Awards Consumer Choice Award medal for spirit brands that secure a SIP Award for two or more consecutive years, appeared to encourage repeated annual submissions and in some respects reward consistency over successive competitions. This reveals interesting questions about consistency of judgement that interviewees themselves were quick to highlight. For example, Rowena reflected that:

You can put your product in for an award one year and it gets Gold and you can put it in the next and because of a certain judge didn't like it it gets nothing so and don't really bother too much about them, its other stuff that's really enjoyable and really rewarding.

Such comments are typical of the ambivalence at the heart of interviewees' relationships to awards. Awards are seen as important, but they were also often acknowledged to be the result of processes which are at best convoluted and at worst deeply flawed.

Other interviewees also questioned the accuracy and rigour of judgement processes. Reflecting on the difficulty of finding qualified judges who can make skilled and impartial judgements (Street, 2018), both Noah and Stanley, for example, expressed doubt that teams of judges could make repeated tastings of gin and still accurately assess quality by saying, respectively, that:

I've got friends who sit on the panel and judge some of these awards and they can tell you that after 15 or 20 gins it will become a little bit slightly arbitrary who wins what.

San Francisco is a good one because it's generally blind tasted and there's a lot of competition but at the end of the gin run I bet their palettes are just on fire, maybe they could taste Ribena and say it's delightful so even amongst the Double Gold group there's some big commercial gins that I wouldn't want to be seen up against.

This critical stance is evidently a cause for concern for awarding bodies, many of which go to some length to posit, as the Great Taste Award does, that their logo on a products packaging is a ‘guarantee a product has been through a rigorous and independent judging process’.

Beyond the process of selection and judgment, many interviewees focused their concerns on the ways in which particular awards sought to monetise the process of promoting an award win through paid use of award logos and banners or purchasing paid advertising space. Indeed, Owen spoke of the latter as a matter of pragmatism, saying ‘we won a couple of awards and we've reciprocated...you know, the way these awards work [is] “we won an award, we buy a page of advertising”’. Even well respected awards were spoken of with ambivalence by interviewees who felt paying to enter and then, if successful, making further payments to use promotional materials such as award rosette stickers for their bottles geared the whole process towards those enterprises with money rather than necessarily those with the best products or processes. Noah, for example, spoke of another distiller who is known for actively pursuing, and vocally promoting, award wins for their gin. Noah expressed this concern by saying:

[He] enters everything every year. He pays for all the stickers, he kind of flashes them about but he's of the opinion that if you're going to do competitions you have to do it, you have go for lots of competitions and lots of medals, you have to shout about it, you have to pay for the advertising space, you have to get it on all your marketing material, all these little, you know, crests and stuff otherwise there's no point in doing it.

Similar to the earlier comment by Chris that ‘you won't see anyone promoting a Bronze’, Noah and others felt that awards were a commercial strategy rather than a purely a measure of quality and prestige. Likewise, Danny described in a matter-of-fact way that ‘it's hard to find a gin that hasn't got an award unless they've just started

out', and went on to acknowledge that 'we've got about 12, they're all different grades of Silver, Gold, Bronze, Outstanding'. For Danny, awards were a feature of the sector and part of the business practice of all distillers and, also, the organisations offering awards. He explained that 'you get what you pay for, a lot of the time a lot of these awards are very expensive to enter into and you'll find that not many distilleries come out with nothing'. Notably, then, entry can cost several hundred pounds *per category* with even less established competitions such as the Gin Masters charging £195 plus tax for the first category entered and £150 plus tax for each category entry thereafter.

Winning prominent prizes can bring exposure and media attention that winners do not always feel in control of or be able to respond positively too (Stout and Carey-Thomas, 2007). Owen, for example, spoke of another distiller in the region who had won a 'Best Gin in the World' prize. However, for Owen, such an accolade came with increased exposure and pressure to meet heightened expectations. Referring to this award, he said that 'there was a lot of buzz and a lot of people spoke about that. But how long will that last? Somebody's gonna win it next year and it won't be them'. In this sense, the honour bestowed by winning even the most prestigious awards could be framed as a passing phase or as an unwanted distraction from the core activity of making craft gin.

## ALTERNATIVE MEASURES OF VALUE

Whilst recognising the importance of awards many interviewees also suggested other measures of value that they saw as being of equal or greater importance to them. When Rowena explained her sceptical approach to awards, quoted above, she also concluded that it is 'other stuff that's really enjoyable and really rewarding'. For instance, some interviewees spoke of valuing the opinion of specific influential individuals more than awards bestowed by judging panels who they may not know or whose judgement they might not see as rigorous or valid. This made an interesting parallel to research by Henryks et al (2016) where artisan agricultural producers spoke of the support of respected chefs being more important than the recognition of judges. Thus, Stanley could name specific drinks writers and bar managers in prestigious venues in London whose favourable opinion he would value more highly than more many awards. He said that:

I think, you know, why the critics are more important than the awards because the awards help consumers [but] the critics know that these awards fall like snow in Antarctica across the whole industry. To have something those guys who have said nice things about us who are in the industry, that's more important.

Many interviewees did express desire for approval from consumers and several invoked a hypothetical 'average' but passionate customer as providing a greater sense of fulfilment than industry awards. Rowena, for example, explained that:

It sounds very kind of philosophical to say "I just want to make people happy and have nice drinks", but it's that kind of, you know, you get a lot more gratification from handing a gin and tonic over to someone in a bar and them being, like, "that's delicious". Then you know that it's worth doing and, like I said, even with the awards and things they're great and it's lovely to be able to post on your social media and stuff but they don't really mean a whole lot because it's so subjective.

Unsolicited feedback from 'average' customers was noted by many interviewees as being particularly welcome. Social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter allowed customers to make often sincere communications to craft gin producers expressing appreciation of their products. Austin, for example, said how:

It's that unsolicited praise that I really value. It's great, when someone has had your gin and thought to email you saying "hey, I loved your gin" or has taken time to go online and write a nice review or post an image of a G&T looking stunning.

This increased prominence of avenues for consumer reviews and feedback has the potential to democratise the sector (Mellet et al., 2014), and here we see that consumer feedback is often interpreted as being genuine and falling outside the strategic game-playing involved in 'award chasing'. As in wine consumption (e.g. Bianchi, 2015), building consumer loyalty with a specific brand may be the most effective ways to secure a long-term customer base once the initial interest generated by an award win has faded. Thus, the praise of a committed and passionate consumer remained, for many interviewed, the surest indication that they were 'doing things right'. Interestingly, the Spirits International Prestige (SIP) Awards makes a point of enlisting consumers as judges and frames this as a step to reduce industry influence and better reflect the opinions of 'ordinary' consumers rather than trained yet possibly partisan 'experts'.



Another important reference for some interviewees was their own personal tastes and preferences. As the craft narrative prioritises the individual skilled and passionate maker, many distillers spoke of how they were in effect their own judge and critic. An interesting tension emerged in relation to the craft narrative that prioritises autonomy and passion over market-orientated decisions. Tellingly, Felix explained that:

We knew our gin was good because we've designed the gin to be. It was a completely selfish product, we made the gin that we thought tasted best to us (...) having done that it's very strange to win an international award, like I say, from your dining room.

Winning a major international award from their rather humble context was, for Felix, a cherished part of their story. Elsewhere in the interview, he spoke of a desire to expand overseas markets and reach what he saw as informed and passionate consumers in the USA and in countries like Japan. Further, such asides served to illustrate the diverse ways in which value can be adjudged in the craft drinks sector. Certain awards are accepted as desirable whilst other awards are merely seen as useful in terms of gaining viability and recognition from current and potential consumers. However, as noted here, success can be measured through various often everyday ways meaning that the winning of prizes and other cultural accolades by no means monopolises measures of quality in the sector.

### CRAFT, CREDIBILITY AND THE 'ACCIDENTAL AWARD'

The above discussion shows that the accuracy and legitimacy of the processes by which judgements are made and awards and other accolades bestowed are of considerable interest to scholars who wish to analyse cultural value and the nature of its negotiation and contestation (Allen and Germov, 2011). Indeed, the present case is of interest precisely due to the nuanced and sometimes near contradictory views expressed by craft gin distillers when discussing the importance of awards and prizes. As English (2009: 144) has explicated, cultural prizes can involve elements framed as 'a competition to be the best' and those cast as 'a lottery to be the luckiest'. As in other fields such as literature, art and cinema, awards play a significant role in shaping debates about quality and prestige. However, unlike those fields, these awards relate to *literal* as well as *metaphorical* taste and consumers are in this sense dependent on branding, marketing and accolades such as prizes and awards to make decisions about purchases. This quality appeared to ground the more abstract verbosity of evaluation in the tangible taste of the product, with most interviewees acknowledging the importance of awards but also noting that there is 'no substitute for actually tasting the gin'.

Processes of cultural consecration play a significant role in 'establishing what counts' in any given cultural field (Childress et al., 2017) and the rituals that build up around award giving have the power to shape the field and influence its development (Anand and Jones, 2008; Anand and Watson, 2004). Thus, the way craft gin distillers communicate about the awards that they and others have received can be analysed in order to shed light upon the interplay of personal, occupational identities and established and emergent ideas about quality, value and craftsmanship. Similar to what Orth and Krška describe as 'the partial utility of selected awards' (2002: 385), interviewees all described how *some* awards were worthy of winning and that the impact of winning awards was varied and not always positive. Specific awards and certain aspects of the processes of judgement, selection and deliberation were targets of informed scepticism.

Whilst it is clear that the most trusted awards are judged in blind tastings by recognised experts, this then leaves no space for recognition of where a great deal of time, effort and resources are focused – namely in the adding of value to products through the design of logos, bottles and publication materials, and through the creation of narratives about provenance, motivation and authenticity (Thurnell-Read, 2019; 2014). During interviews, all gin makers acknowledged the importance of contexts and presentation by explaining the roles played by bottling, labelling, branding, context of consumption and the narrative of production. Herein lies a tension for makers who want their gin to be judged for an award purely based on 'the liquid in the glass' and without reference to the conditions of its production or its distribution (e.g. marketing, bottle design, and brand narrative). There was a sense, therefore, that a successful craft gin distillery was more than just a producer of a high quality spirit. Interestingly, few awards accommodated such a distinction. An exception is the *World Gin Awards* which, in having a distinction between its 'Taste Awards' and 'Design Awards', allows for both the intrinsic quality of the drink and the extrinsic factors such as branding, packaging and route to market to receive recognition.

The various tensions and ambivalences noted above when analysing craft gin distillers' attitudes and approaches to prizes and awards perhaps stem from several facets of the underpinning craft ethos. Because craft discourse emerges from critiques of rational corporate culture and mass consumption (Cope, 2014; Sennett, 2008), craft enterprises often oppose overtly corporate activity which prioritises market expansion and commercial success (Thurnell-Read, 2019). Being independent and staying 'true' to your principles is valued and becoming too popular

and, specifically, too commercially successful too quickly can radically undermine the ethos on which craft entrepreneurs base their occupational identity and market niche. A number of interviewees explained that they wanted to make gin ‘their way’ and that meant framing their work as being about passion and fascination with the craft not external measures of success such as awards and growth in market share.

One way out of this apparent contradiction between desiring awards as a measure of success and recognition yet not wanting to be seen too actively to try to appease judges and markets through strategic game-playing is what we might term the ‘accidental award’. Thus, in Felix’s comments above, making a gin because you like it that way and then receiving a major award almost inadvertently is a means for the desire for recognition to be satisfied without displaying an overt desire for or strategic chasing of awards. Such comments are of particular analytical interest as they represent a working through of the tensions between discourses of craft work which valorise intrinsic rewards of craft labour with the process of award giving which implicitly externalises value.

Research on food and drink awards has tended to focus on how such awards impact consumer purchase decisions. This paper has instead sought to explore how receiving awards for their products is bound up in craft gin distillers’ conceptions of themselves and their businesses. All interviewees showed themselves to be self-reflective and self-aware. Expressing knowledge about the awards and the motivations which underpin the processes by which they are judged and awarded appeared to be a feature of demonstrating participation within the sector. Keeping abreast of who had won which awards and, importantly, who was genuinely worthy of such accolades, was a means for individual distillers to demonstrate their individual knowledge and occupational identity as well as to act as part of a community of interest where connections are forged between distillers.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that prizes and awards were widely accepted as being of strategic significance to the craft gin businesses. Specifically, awards are of significance for new market entrants (Goodman, 2009), the majority of which were relatively newly established and saw entering and winning competitions as a necessary strategy. Yet, ambivalence and some instances of outright cynicism were common. Whilst acknowledging the importance of awards to the current health and future prospects of the enterprise, this was not conditional on an uncritical stance in relation to awards and prize giving practices in the sector. The ambiguities identified in many accounts have been approached as of analytical significance in exploring how the receiving of awards is an important indication of processes of negotiating and contesting value, success and worth within the sector. Given that information about how awards are awarded is partial and difficult to access with certainty (Frey, 2006), expressing such cynicism has here been interpreted as a useful means by which interviewees show their insider status, through accounts of sector-specific knowledge of ‘how these things work’, and as being expert and self-reflective practitioners of their own craft.

The academic interest in the topic of cultural awards stems from the point at which the promise of awards to provide a determinate fix for quality and value fails to deliver. Quality and value are inescapably subjective and prestige is relative. Across fields, there are similarities and differences, but thus far little comparison has been made between more established culture forms such as literature, poetry and modern art and those, such as craft and artisanal production, where an emphasis on quality, value and prestige cultivates a fertile ground for prize-giving and award-seeking activities. Strikingly, there are clear favoured awards to win – those that are seen as rigorous and impartial and are not established just for profit – and there is a preferred way to go about winning one that involves being true to your own ideals and the processes of your craft. Further research in this field is needed to explore how these enterprises, and the recent proliferation of food and drink sector awards associated with them, measure success in the long term and if attitudes and practices relating to award seeking change as start-up ‘craft’ enterprises become established through market expansion and development of more or less stable customer bases. Further, the focus here has been on the discursive narratives of interviewees whereas future research might track the framing and impact of award winning in this sector across a more ambitious range of media and platforms. Significantly, the analysis of how awards are perceived and spoken of by craft gin distillers has given a way in to unpacking the dynamic nature of value and prestige in this specific cultural field by showing how prizes, and the rewards and recognition they confer, contribute to the ongoing development of meaning and practice in the sector.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, M. P. and Germov, J. (2011). Judging taste and creating value: The cultural consecration of Australian wines. *Journal of Sociology*, 47(1), 35-51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783310380988>
- Anand, N. and Jones, B. C. (2008). Tournament rituals, category dynamics, and field configuration: The case of the Booker Prize. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(6), 1036-1060. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00782.x>
- Anand, N. and Watson, M. R. (2004). Tournament rituals in the evolution of fields: The case of the Grammy Awards. *Academy of Management journal*, 47(1), 59-80. <https://doi.org/10.5465/20159560>
- Bianchi, C. (2015). Consumer brand loyalty in the Chilean wine industry. *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 21(4), 442-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10454446.2014.885859>
- Butler, S. (2018). From mother's ruin to modern tippie: how the UK rediscovered gin. *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
- Childress, C., Rawlings, C. M. and Moeran, B. (2017). Publishers, authors, and texts: The process of cultural consecration in prize evaluation. *Poetics*, 60, 48-61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.10.001>
- Cope, S. 2014 *Small Batch: Pickles, Cheese, Chocolate, Spirits, and the Return of Artisanal Foods*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- De Valck, M. and Soeteman, M. (2010). 'And the winner is...' What happens behind the scenes of film festival competitions. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 290-307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909359735>
- Delmestri, G. and Greenwood, R. (2016). How Cinderella became a queen: Theorizing radical status change. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 61(4), 507-550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839216644253>
- Doane, R. (2009). Bourdieu, Cultural Intermediaries and Good Housekeeping's George Marek: A case study of middlebrow musical taste. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9(2), 155-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509104373>
- English, J. F. (2009). *The economy of prestige: Prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value*. Harvard University Press.
- Frey, B. 2006. "Giving and Receiving Awards." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1:377-388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00022.x>
- Goodman, S. (2009). An international comparison of retail consumer wine choice. *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, 21(1), 41-49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17511060910948026>
- Henryks, J., Ecker, S., Turner, B., Denness, B. and Zobel-Zubrzycka, H. (2016). Agricultural Show Awards: A Brief Exploration of Their Role Marketing Food Products. *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing*, 28(4), 315-329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974438.2015.1110547>
- Humphries, W. (2018). Number of gin distilleries in Britain doubles. *The Times*, January 18th 2018.
- Japhe, B. (2018). 'Heavy Medal: What It Means To Win At The San Francisco World Spirits Competition?'. *Forbes*, 22 March 2018.
- Johnston, J. and Baumann, S. (2014). *Foodies: Democracy and distinction in the gourmet foodscape*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315794600>
- Kersten, A. and Verboord, M. (2014). Dimensions of conventionality and innovation in film: The cultural classification of blockbusters, award winners, and critics' favourites. *Cultural Sociology*, 8(1), 3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975513480959>
- Lane, C. (2013). Taste makers in the "fine-dining" restaurant industry: The attribution of aesthetic and economic value by gastronomic guides. *Poetics*, 41(4), 342-365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2013.05.003>
- Lin, L. and Mao, P. C. (2015). Food for memories and culture—A content analysis study of food specialties and souvenirs. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 22, 19-29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2014.12.001>
- Manning, P. (2012). *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Marsden, T. and Smith, E. (2005). Ecological entrepreneurship: sustainable development in local communities through quality food production and local branding. *Geoforum*, 36(4), 440-451. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.07.008>
- Mellet, K., Beauvisage, T., Beuscart, J. S. and Trespeuch, M. (2014). A "democratization" of markets? Online consumer reviews in the restaurant industry. *Valuation Studies*, 2(1), 5-41. <https://doi.org/10.3384/vs.2001-5992.14215>
- Moeran, B. (2012). How to award a prize: An ethnography of a juried ceramic art exhibition in Japan. In *The 7th Conference of the European Research Network Sociology of the Arts*. 2012.
- Morris, S. (2010). 'Vodka from English crispmaker's farm voted best in the world', *The Guardian*, 11th June 2010: Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jun/11/vodka-english-voted-best-world>

- Morrish, S. C. and Deacon, J. H. (2011). A tale of two spirits: entrepreneurial marketing at 42Below vodka and Penderyn whisky. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*, 24(1), 113-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08276331.2011.10593529>
- Ocejo, R. E. 2017 *Masters of Craft: Old jobs in the new urban economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691165493.001.0001>
- Orth, U. R. and Krška, P. (2001). Quality signals in wine marketing: the role of exhibition awards. *The International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*, 4(4), 385-397. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7508\(02\)00066-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7508(02)00066-6)
- Rossmann, G. and Schilke, O. (2014). Close, but no cigar: The bimodal rewards to prize-seeking. *American Sociological Review*, 79(1), 86-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122413516342>
- Sennett, R. (2008). *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane.
- Squires, C. (2004). A common ground? Book prize culture in Europe. *Javnost-The Public*, 11(4), 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2004.11008866>
- Stout, K. and Carey-Thomas, L. (2007). *The Turner Prize and British art*. London: Tate.
- Street, J. (2005). 'Showbusiness of a serious kind': a cultural politics of the arts prize. *Media, Culture & Society*, 27(6), 819-840. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443705057672>
- Street, J. (2018). Reflections on the Mercury Music Prize: An interview with Simon Frith. *Popular Music*, 37(1), 119-129. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143017000605>
- Thurnell-Read, T. (2014). Craft, tangibility and affect at work in the microbrewery. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 13, 46-54.
- Thurnell-Read, T. (2019). A thirst for the authentic: craft drinks producers and the narration of authenticity. *The British Journal of Sociology*. 70(4), 1448-1468.
- Todd, R. (1996). *Consuming fictions: The Booker Prize and fiction in Britain today*. Oxford: Bloomsbury.
- Warde, A. (2009). Imagining British cuisine: Representations of culinary identity in the Good Food Guide, 1951–2007. *Food, Culture & Society*, 12(2), 151-171. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174409X400710>