

How to Taste a Cocktail

Tasting is drinking with attention. Five steps take a minute; the pages that follow keep what you find.

FIVE STEPS, ONE MINUTE

Look

Hold it to the light. A stirred drink should be clear, a shaken one cloudy with fine bubbles; egg white leaves a pale cap.

Smell

Breathe in over the rim before the first sip. Much of what we call flavor arrives through the nose: citrus peel, herbs, spice, oak.

Sip

Take a small sip and hold it for a moment. Notice the texture, thin or silky, sharp bubbles or soft foam, and how cold it is.

Balance

Sweet against sour, bitter as the backbone, alcohol as the warmth. In a balanced drink none of them shouts.

Finish

What stays after you swallow, and for how long: bitter, spice, smoke, fruit.

Taste again ten minutes later: as a drink warms and dilutes, it changes.



TASTE LIKE A BARTENDER

Bartenders check a drink with a straw: a few drops tell them if the balance is right.

Tasting several drinks? Small sips, water in between, something to eat. A tasting is about attention, not quantity.

WORDS FOR WHAT YOU TASTE

Citrus

lemon, lime, orange peel, grapefruit

Herbal

mint, basil, juniper, thyme, celery

Spice

cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, ginger, black pepper

Oak

vanilla, toast and coconut from barrel-aged spirits

Smoky

mezcal, peated Scotch, a flamed peel

Texture

thin, round, silky, creamy, fizzy, frothy

Fruity

berry, apple, pineapple, stone fruit, raisin

Floral

elderflower, rose, violet, orange blossom

Sweet notes

vanilla, honey, caramel, toffee, maple

Bitter

orange peel, grapefruit pith, coffee, cocoa, quinine

Nutty

almond, walnut, hazelnut, sherry

Warmth

the alcohol: soft, warming or hot

IF IT TASTES OFF

IT TASTES	NEXT TIME
Too sweet	¼ oz (7.5 ml) more citrus
Too sour	¼ oz (7.5 ml) more syrup
Hot, too strong	stir or shake a little longer
Thin, watery	colder ice, and more of it; a shorter stir
Flat, dull	fresher citrus, a twist of peel

SERVE IT RIGHT, TASTE IT RIGHT

Chill the glass. A warm coupe spoils a Daiquiri faster than any measuring mistake.

Fill the glass with ice. A full glass melts slower than two lonely cubes, so the drink stays cold and strong.

Taste it first, while it is coldest. A drink served up warms within minutes.

Twist the peel over the glass, shiny side down: its oils reach the nose before the first sip.

A Flight of Eight Classics

The 24cocktails classics course stands on eight drinks. Make them over a few weeks, one at a time, and note what each one teaches.

THE EIGHT, WITH THEIR MEASURES



Negroni OLD FASHIONED · STIRRED
1 oz gin · 1 oz Campari · 1 oz sweet vermouth



Daiquiri COUPE · SHAKEN
2 oz white rum · ¾ oz fresh lime juice · ¾ oz simple syrup



Dry Martini MARTINI · STIRRED
2½ oz London dry gin · ½ oz dry vermouth · 1 dash orange bitters



Mojito HIGHBALL · BUILT
2 oz white rum · ¾ oz fresh lime juice · ¾ oz simple syrup · 8 mint leaves · 2 oz soda water



Old Fashioned OLD FASHIONED · STIRRED
2 oz bourbon or rye whiskey · ¼ oz simple syrup · 2 dashes Angostura bitters



Margarita MARGARITA GLASS · SHAKEN
2 oz blanco tequila · 1 oz fresh lime juice · ¾ oz orange liqueur



Whiskey Sour OLD FASHIONED · SHAKEN
2 oz bourbon · ¾ oz fresh lemon juice · ¾ oz simple syrup · ½ oz egg white



Espresso Martini MARTINI · SHAKEN
1½ oz vodka · 1 oz fresh espresso, cooled · ¾ oz coffee liqueur · ¼ oz simple syrup

THE FLIGHT: WHAT TO NOTICE

DRINK	WHAT TO NOTICE	TASTED ON	RATING
Negroni	bitter against sweet; stirred, so it stays clear and silky		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Old Fashioned	how it opens as the big cube melts; orange oil on the nose		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Daiquiri	sweet against sour, with nowhere to hide		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Margarita	sip it with the salt rim, then without		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Dry Martini	temperature and texture; then twist or olive?		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Whiskey Sour	the foam: egg white makes it silky		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Mojito	fresh mint on the nose: pressed, never shredded		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Espresso Martini	the crema, and coffee's bitterness against the sweet		☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

SIDE BY SIDE: ONE CHANGE AT A TIME

- ☐ Shaken, then stirred
the same Daiquiri made both ways: texture and froth
- ☐ Two cubes, then a full glass
the same drink with little ice and with plenty
- ☐ Lemon, then lime
one sour made with each
- ☐ With and without the twist
an Old Fashioned before and after the orange peel
- ☐ Two gins
the same Gin & Tonic with two bottles
- ☐ Up, then on the rocks
a Margarita straight up and over fresh ice

ONE AN EVENING

A flight is not a race. Make one classic an evening, sip it slowly, drink water alongside and write the page while it is fresh.

For the side-by-side pairs, mix each drink half size.



The eight classics, one lesson each
24cocktails.com/academy/classics

Tasting Notes

DRINK _____

DATE _____

WHERE / MADE BY _____

GLASS _____

WHAT'S IN IT _____

LOOK _____

AROMA _____

SWEET - SOUR sweet ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ sour

STRENGTH soft ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ strong

BITTERNESS none ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ bold

TEXTURE thin ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ rich

FINISH short ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ long

NOTES _____

RATING ☆☆☆☆☆

MAKE AGAIN? ☐ yes ☐ no ☐ with a change

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MY FAVORITES

[illegible]

DRINK	TASTED ON
Last Word	
Aviation	
Penicillin	
Paloma	
Mai Tai	
Sazerac	
Corpse Reviver No. 2	
Bee's Knees	
Pisco Sour	
French 75	



At home, make your top-rated drink for a friend and taste it together.