



William Powell (left) and Myrna Loy in *The Thin Man*

AN EXTRA TWIST
Want to dive deeper? Read *The Martini* by Barnaby Conrad and *The Martini Companion* by Gary Regan and Mardee Haidin Regan.

The Magic of the Martini

The dos, don'ts (and maybes) of America's classic and most elegant cocktail.

By Nick Passmore

★ For H. L. Mencken, it was the only American invention as perfect as the sonnet — “it,” of course, being the dry martini.

No other cocktail inspires such awed reverence, or is surrounded by such a panoply of lore, legend, and myth as the American martini.

For two generations in the mid-20th century, it was the mark of upper-class sophistication, as exemplified by a story from the 1948 presidential election. On the campaign train of Harry Truman, the man-of-the-people Democrat, the card game was poker and the drink of choice was bourbon, while on the train of Thomas Dewey, the upper-

crust New York Republican, the card game was bridge and the drink of choice . . . well, you guessed it.

The martini, in those long-limbed glasses with their sublime if impractical lines, conjures up images of impeccably dressed F. Scott Fitzgerald and Dorothy Parker sipping icy see-throughs in elegant art deco bars as the orchestra plays “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” and Fred guides Ginger across the dance floor with gravity-defying ease.

Dashiell Hammett was not specific as to the precise concoctions Nick and Nora Charles knocked back for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in *The Thin Man*, but in an early scene in the movie, set in a speakeasy that looks like the first-class lounge of a



PHOTOS (FROM TOP) THE KOBAL COLLECTION; ART RESOURCE; NY AND STOCK/FOOD/SALHIS & MILLER

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transatlantic liner, Nora orders six martinis just to catch up with Nick's afternoon activity.

The martini epitomized style and polish. One didn't order them in beer-and-a-shot dives or Western saloons. It was the drink of smoky club cars where dapper businessmen, comfortably ensconced in leather chairs, communed with their fellows and perhaps made a deal they hoped they'd remember in the morning.

And speaking of business, Don Draper and crew have nothing on the real Mad Men of the 1960s. Jerry Della Femina, famed Madison Avenue executive, restaurateur, and consummate self-promoter, recalled the real three-martini lunch for the *New York Times* in 1989:

The three-martini lunch with clients and colleagues was not an exaggeration of the IRS; it was real, and, one must admit, it was fun. The first martini at lunch always went down with talk about baseball or other sports. Suddenly it was 1 p.m. and someone would catch the maitre d's eye, raise his empty glass, and nod his head. Soon, another tray of silver bullets would arrive. The talk would drift to business. Then someone would remember, 'Hey, we forgot to order food. Waiter, can you bring us some menus and another round while we're waiting and, oh yes, bring us the wine list.

Not a Perrier in sight, and at three o'clock they went back to work, steady on their feet, or reasonably so.

These were all, of course, gin martinis. Vodka is a recent adulteration — in Della Femina's day it was regarded as a sign of weakness. Its current use, when combined with the macho fashion of ordering the drink ultra-ultra-dry, results in a martini devoid of flavor. Hence the equally heretical habit of dumping half a bottle of olives into the glass in order to make it taste of something.



MARTINIS ARE DECEPTIVELY EASY TO MAKE, BUT DON'T BE LULLED INTO INATTENTION — CONCOCTING A GREAT ONE IS AN EXACTING TASK.

The origins of the martini are, like that of most cocktails, cloudy. In the late 19th century it was made with sweet Old Tom Gin and sweet vermouth, which sounds like a pretty revolting concoction to me. The dry version emerged with the 20th century, but even in 1947, *Trader Vic's Bartender's Guide* lists the proportions as two parts gin to one part vermouth. And though over the subsequent decades it has become drier and drier, I agree with the political commentator James Carville, who said, "I like to taste the vermouth. None of this ten-to-one dry routine."

Carville seems to share M. F. K. Fisher's regard for the martini as a source of solace and refuge, observing

wistfully that "the ultimate feeling in the world is to be about two thirds of the way through my second martini with people I like. Anything seems possible."

Now martinis have made a comeback. Gen Xers, Gen Yers, Gen Whatever-ers, not burdened by their baby-boomer parents' rejection of "your father's Oldsmobile" cocktails, are rediscovering the delight of the pure, clean elegance of the martini — and learning that drinking doesn't have to be all beer and shots.

How to Make the Perfect Martini

Martinis are deceptively easy to make, but don't be lulled into inattention

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— concocting a great one is an exacting task.

The secret is *cold*. Warm is the martini's worst enemy, so start by putting two martini glasses in the freezer. Then fill a shaker with ice and add 6 ounces of high-quality gin — my favorite is Beefeater — and 2 tablespoons of Noilly Prat Extra Dry Vermouth. Aim for a ratio of 6 to 1, no more than 8 to 1.

Next shake well. Then shake again. And a third time. The more you shake, the colder the final martini. Pour into the chilled glasses and add a twist of lemon or, if you must, an olive.

Look closely at the glass; if you have done your shaking properly it should be cloudy with condensation. You should also see tiny slivers of ice glinting on the surface of the liquid. These not only serve to keep the mixture cold but also provide a necessary amount of dilution. This is important. I once ordered a martini in a swank London bar, and the resulting drink was most peculiar. In order to save time the bartender had premixed the ingredients and stored them in the freezer, so the resulting cocktail, unshaken, was pleasingly cold, but lacked those all-important slivers. An experience not to be repeated.

So remember: Cold. Gin. Vermouth. Shake and shake.

And The Right Vermouth, Please

Phew!

That's the collective sigh of relief heard from martini drinkers across America when, last summer, Noilly Prat announced that their former and much mourned French Dry Vermouth, the essential ingredient in millions of martinis, was, after a contentious three-year absence, returning to the U.S. market as Noilly Prat Extra Dry Vermouth.

As a martini-sipping acquaintance thirstily observed, "Thank God! Now I can get a decent martini again!" It had been a pretty harrowing martini-free hiatus for him.



THE MORE YOU SHAKE, THE COLDER THE FINAL MARTINI. POUR INTO THE CHILLED GLASSES AND ADD A TWIST OF LEMON OR, IF YOU MUST, AN OLIVE.

The trouble started in 2009 when Noilly Prat, maker of the world's favorite gin-enhancer, replaced its U.S. version with the European one, Original Dry Vermouth. The resulting cacophony of protest from silver bullet aficionados was deafening: How dare anyone mess with the sacred martini!

Responding to the outrage, Noilly Prat relented and, in October, reintroduced the pre-2009 version, this time calling it Extra Dry Vermouth.

Now martini drinkers are happy — they have their favorite dry vermouth back. ★

Nick Passmore, a native Brit, resides happily in New York City, where he tastes and writes. His website is nickonwine.com.