

COME CLEAN, LEAVE DIRTY

A barhopping test of my martini faith BY VANESSA SALVIA

*Starkle, starkle, little twink,
Who the hell you are I think,
I'm not under what they call
The alcofluence of incohol.
I'm not drunk as thinkle peep,
I'm just a little slort of sheep.*
— Sold Cober

The martini is a drink synonymous with *strong*. And it may also be among the most versatile cocktails known to man. The classic definition of martini, of course, is gin, vermouth and a green olive, plus a dash of orange bitters (a small but important detail that is, sadly, often left out). Even the James Bond variation — with vodka and lemon peel — is too much of a departure for the martini purist. If a martini is ordered with a pickled onion in place of the olive it gets its own name: The Gibson.

And yet drink menus all over the world show that the working definition of a martini is much, much broader. Any drink, regardless of the ingredients, is often called a martini — or given some cutesy 'tini name — if it's served in a martini glass. Whatever it's made of, it's certainly hard not to feel classy and sophisticated when sipping from the iconic, cone-shaped glass.

For a dirty martini, into the sacred mixture goes a splash of juice from the olive jar and, typically, since the bartender assumes that dirty martini-orderers *really* like olives, a toothpick full of the marinated gems resting rakishly in the glass. The drink itself, usually clear, takes on a cloudy, greenish hue. The olive juice makes it salty, the extra olives make it a meal.

A martini isn't hard to make and doesn't require a cupboard full of ingredients like many cocktails, but it's something that feels even more special when a professional bartender makes it for you. "I've tried making martinis at home and I'm not very good at it," says Maiya Becker. "Plus, it feels wrong. When I'm home, on the couch watching reruns of *Northern Exposure*, I want a beer. But out on the town with my girls in a dress? A martini is the perfect accessory."

When Becker came of drinking age, she knew she wanted to try a martini. And yet it took a few attempts to learn that she preferred vodka, and that her favorite part of the drink was the olives. Once, she was out with someone else who ordered a dirty martini, and she realized what she'd been missing. "A drink that tastes like the olives?" Becker remarks. "Perfect!"

Before embarking on research (read: drinking) for this article, I allowed that a martini could be made with vodka, but diluting the mythically crisp taste of a classic dry martini with olive juice (or anything else) was an affront

to civilized culture. So I figured I'd better bring along a drinking companion who actually *liked* the stuff. Becker likes them dirty enough that she calls them "filthy" — "I really want to taste the olives," she says — but there are a lot of variables with the drink. "I've had some that were so dirty it tasted like I was drinking brine," she says. "I think some bartenders think 'dirty' means I want as much olive juice as the glass can hold."

Becker was along on the first two stops of my martini quest. The first, and best, was downtown Eugene's Horsehead. If you can get over the fact that black rock 'n' roller clothing seems *de rigueur*, then you'll find that the Horsehead can make you one of the best dirty martinis in town. The décor may not be as posh as that of other downtown drinking establishments, but the lack of lighting makes that easy enough to overlook.

"Superb," says Becker of the Absolut vodka extra dirty martini with three olives she enjoyed there. "Although it tasted more olive-y than a regular martini, there was a delicate balance," she says. "You could taste the flavor of the vodka through the brine."

Despite the fact that martinis may not get ordered very much, any bartender worth his or her salt knows how to make one. Bartender J.T. Magee estimated that only "a sixteenth" of all of Horsehead orders are for dirty martinis, "if that, and maybe about four orders a night for a martini." (He says Horsehead's most popular drink is vodka and cranberry juice.)

If sipping a salty dirty martini is good, don't go overboard. At Good Times, Becker and I each ordered (mine: Tanqueray, dirty). Becker was approached by the lady bartender and I by the male bartender. The good news: expanding our data set by having two drinks made simultaneously by two different people. The bad news: locking lips with Becker's drink was, shall we say, disgusting? Not only were the drinks noticeably different in appearance (mine: an opaque light green; hers: a pukey, bright green color), they tasted vastly different. Upon inquiring, we discovered that the lady used a garlic and olive juice mixer for the drink. For Becker, it was undrinkable. "It tastes like it's made with something you would use to cook with," she said — imagine olive-flavored broth powder.

Though the bartender made Becker a replacement drink *sans* mixer, you could tell she was a bit chuffed at the extra work and having her recipe impugned: "You *said* you wanted it filthy... maybe you've gotten the mix before and just never knew it," she scolded us. Lesson: just use the brine straight from the jar, probably no more than half an ounce, for the best and brightest balance of flavors.

My third watering hole was the Prairie Schooner, on a weeknight at dinnertime. The bar was a solid row of people,



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

and most of the tables were full of folks eating burgers and onion rings, drinking sodas, beers, wine, even a bloody Mary... but nothing in a martini glass. I ordered my dirty martini from server Trisha West, who said my request was not exactly odd, but... "We're typically a straight up or on the rocks kind of place," she said. When she delivered the goods, I was pleasantly surprised that it was almost mini-sized — easily consumable in two slugs. I sipped. It was the beginning of the evening, after all, and after a big martini or two you could be drinking lighter fluid and never know the difference. Its crisp yet salty flavor was the perfect foil for the appetizer platter our table split.

As Johnny Carson said, "happiness is finding two olives in your martini when you're hungry." If that's so, then ordering a dirty martini may be the quickest way to make sure that you not only get a drink that conveys you to a higher plane of nostalgia, but a snack too.

And there's another advantage the martini has over other drinks: everyone looks cool holding one, no matter what it's made of. ■

The Bar at
Tune
1591 Willamette

Happy Hour:
Tuesday - Friday, 5-6 and after 10

Classic Cocktails.
We're not reinventing the wheel... just reminding you how folks used to roll.*
*(but we will reinvent upon request)