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# TASTING GIN AND COCKTAILS



# The **Gin** tasting

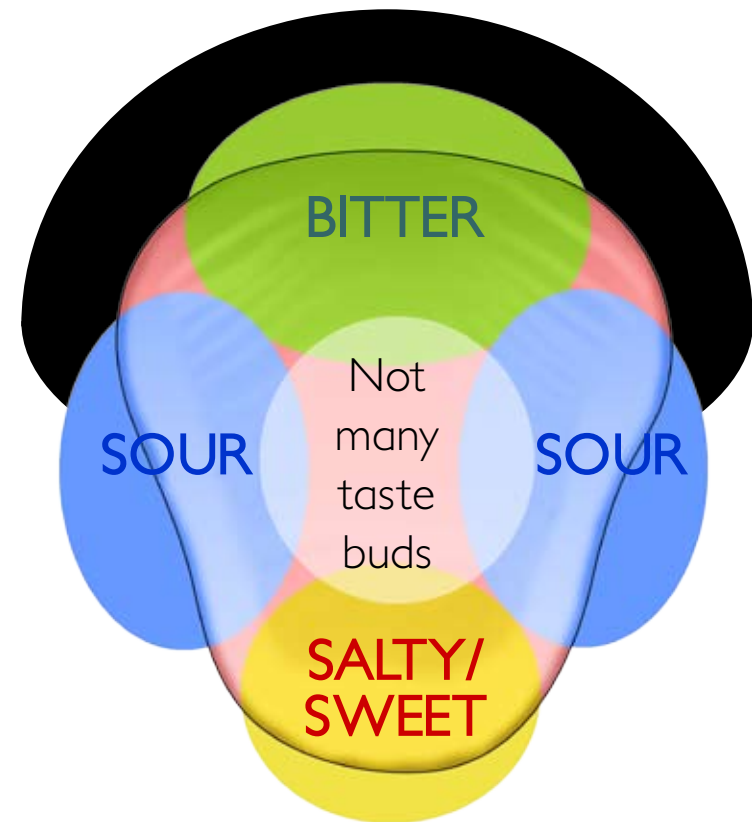
**Taste is a multi-sensory experience:** not only our nose and mouth play a role, but also our eyes, ears and the sense of touch determine how we experience a drink. We cannot separate these elements out. Academic studies have conducted tastings in aroma- and sound-neutral rooms on blindfolded subjects drinking from a variety of glasses raised to their lips by robot arms, and while the results of those tastings may indeed have been truly objective, nobody really drinks gin like that, now do they? It certainly doesn't sound like much **fun**.

## The Mouth

Your mouth sends **nerve transmissions to your brain** about how a drink feels: the texture of the drink (thick or thin), if it is hot, cold or painful (indicating temperature or the presence of a painful compound like capsaicin, present in peppers or alcohol above around 30%) and which tongue taste it has.

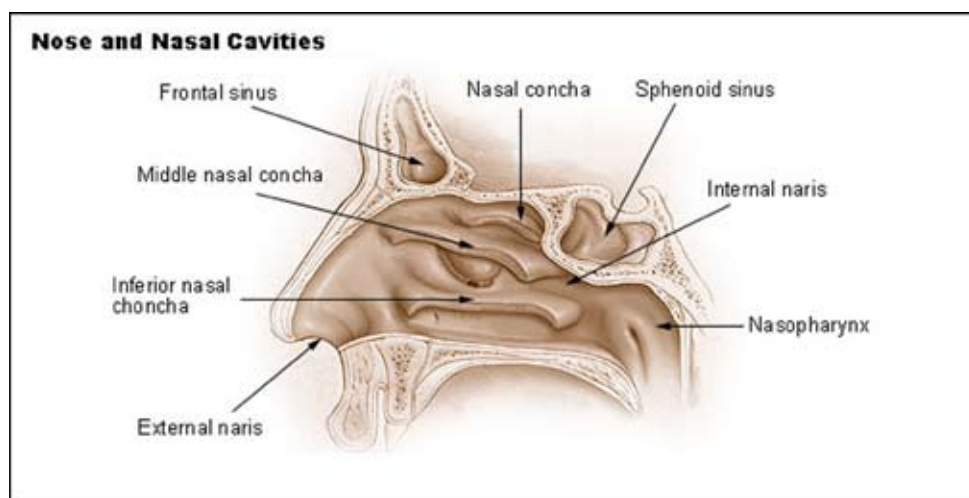
**The tongue tastes** are: sweet (indicating the presence of sugars), sour (indicating the presence of acids), bitter (alkaloids), salty (salt) and umami (glutamate, the savoury, meaty flavour). Your tongue tastes change, subtly, monthly as tastebuds die out and get replaced, and your general taste preferences can change quite a bit as you get older for the same reason.

You can taste all the tongue-tastes all over your tongue, but you may find some tastes are more pronounced on different **areas** of your tongue.



# The Nose

**Aromas** enter the nose through the nostrils, but also through the mouth, via the “nasopharynx” which links the back of your mouth to your nasal cavity. Tiny hairs in your nose slot aroma molecules into shapes like a lock into a key, and can determine thousands many more different sensations than your mouth. All these are transmitted to your brain through the nasal membrane.



# Preference

Until the nerve transmissions from your nose and mouth go through the nasal membrane and reach your brain, you have no preferences except for the ones that are genetically determined. **Humans evolved to have a genetic preference for sweet and salty flavours and to be repelled by bitter flavours:** sugar was a great energy source, salt an essential mineral and bitter things (like berries) were frequently poisonous.

However, **these preferences can be overridden by socialization.** Italians, for instance, “learn” from a young age that bitters like Campari and bitter tastes like Italian espresso are tasty. Hence most Italians enjoy bitter flavours more than the inhabitants of many other Western countries where bitters is not such a cherished flavour, and foodstuffs often contain a lot more sugar than in other countries.

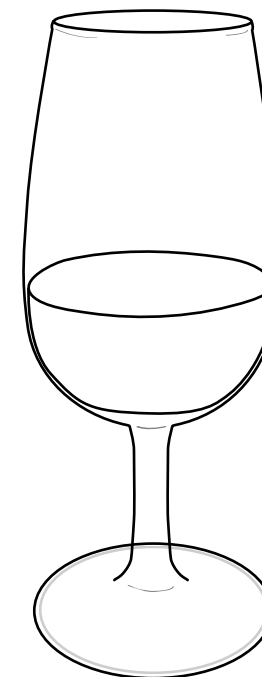
# Tasting Gin

You must drink gin, to enjoy it, however you wish – no connoisseur would argue with that! But it is equally fun to evaluate gin. It’s a good idea to **get two or more different gins so you have something to compare each one to.**

First add a little water to them: any alcohol over about 30% triggers the pain reflex on your tongue, making it impossible to evaluate it fully. If you add 30ml (1oz.) of water to 30ml (1oz) of a 40% alcohol gin, you will have diluted it to 20% alcohol, which is great for evaluating. Pour it into a wine glass if you have one – bonus points if you have a proper **tasting glass**, which resembles a **sherry copita**.

## Nose

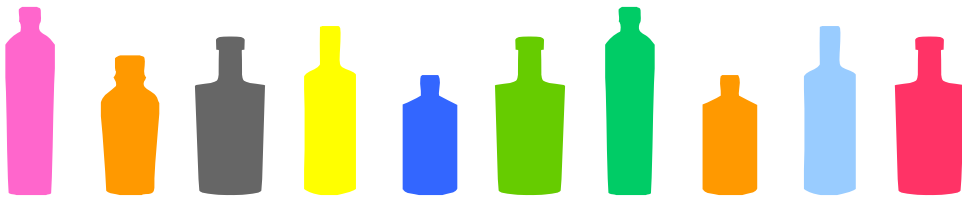
Sniff about an inch above the rim of each glass. Which aromas can you



distinguish? Go from one gin to the other, sniffing a glass of water in between to “reset” your nose. Juniper and citrus are very common, but what else is there?

## Taste

Swirl the liquid – gently – in the glass, then let it settle and wait at least thirty seconds before raising it to your lips. Merely wet your lips with it, then put it down. How does it taste? Keep your mouth open and breathe in: aromas will present themselves. Neutralise your nose and palate by first sniffing and then drinking a little water, then taste the other gin. What are the differences?



After the initial lip-wetting, return, nose again, then take a decent drink of the gin. Hold it inside your mouth for ten seconds, then swirl it around, all over your tongue. Spit it out and breath in. What mouthfeel do you have? Can you identify sweet, sour, salty, bitter or umami? How does it “finish” (linger in your mouth)? How strong is the alcoholic “burn”? Neutralise your nose and palate and move to the next gin.

After you have done this with two or three gins, return to them and – carefully – repeat the tasting but without diluting them. Alcoholic burn will of course be greater, so be careful, but you may well discover some aromas so volatile that they can only be restrained by stronger alcoholic strength, aromas that evaporated when you evaluated the gin at 20% instead of full strength.

# Cocktails & Mixology

Cocktails, after a Golden Age in the 1800s and a dark period during Prohibition in the 1920s, are **in a second Golden Age right now**. Bars all around the world are making excellent drinks, modeled on classic recipes and updated for contemporary palates with the cornucopia of herbs, fruits and spices available nowadays.



# General MiXology

Hereunder, in no particular order, some general tips and tricks for making great cocktails.

1. Always use **freshly-squeezed** lemon, lime, orange and grapefruit juices when they are called for, ideally squeezed just before you make the cocktail.
2. Use **good quality ice and lots of it**. Never use the ice that was in the shaker or mixing glass in a drink: throw it away.
3. In terms of ingredients, **less** is usually more.
4. **Measure** your ingredients. All of them.
5. **Stirring**: fill a mixing glass or metal shaker completely full of ice, add the ingredients and slide a bar spoon down the inside of the glass or shaker. Gently move the spoon in circles around the inside of the glass or shaker, moving the ice and the liquid with it, for about twenty second before pouring out through a strainer.
6. **Shaking**: pour the ingredients into a Boston mixing glass or metal shaker, then fill it completely with ice, seal the shaker, shake hard for at least ten seconds, open the shaker and pour the drink out through a strainer.
7. **Muddling**: crush the fruit in a toughened glass or the shaker using a muddler, extracting juice as well as oils from the skin.

## Mixology Principles

Skilled mixology is **real alchemy**: mixing flavours together to create a cocktail that is much more than the sum of its parts. While you may learn hundreds of recipes, you'll be lost until you understand the underlying principles of mixology. The three most important such principles are Quality, Balance and Alchemy.



## Quality

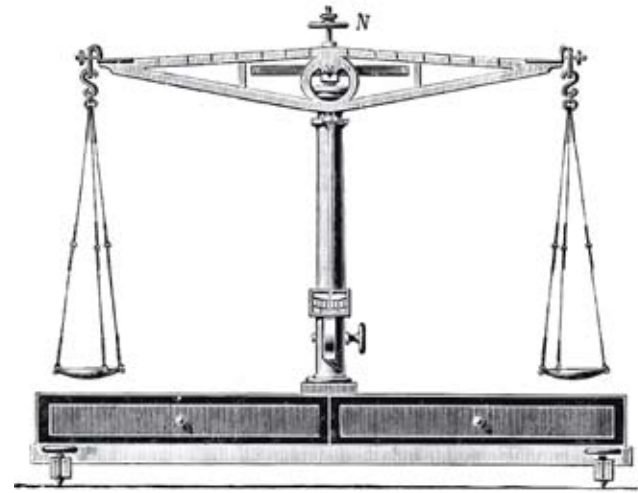
The simplest of drinks – like a gin and tonic – can be utterly transformed by using the correct good-quality ingredients. These do not necessarily have to be mega-expensive or super-premium, and the small extra expense and trouble involved in getting hold of good ingredients is more than balanced out by the superior drink they make.

Compare and contrast: an 8oz glass quarter-filled with small, half-melted lackluster ice cubes with holes in them, barely tickled by a miserly measure of cold-compounded gin drowned in a mass-market tonic and carelessly finished with a paper-thin slice of dried-out lemon, compared to a 12oz. longdrink glass full of gorgeous, large, solid, deeply cold ice-cubes from a Hoshizaki or Kold-Draft machine, over which you cascade a generous measure of quality modern distilled gin, filled and fizzed with a freshly-opened small bottle of a premium tonic from Q, Fentimans or Fever Tree, finished with a squeeze of fresh-cut citrus and a garnish matching the botanicals. Especially when refreshment through a simple longdrink is your goal, quality is a requirement, not an option.

Exercise: make and taste the two Gin & Tonics listed above.

## Balance

By balancing flavours in the background of a cocktail, you allow gin's great botanicals to shine through, providing a stage for them to show off. Classic background balances are sweet-sour (such as in the Sour and Collins) and bitter-sweet (as in the Negroni and Jasmine). Other flavour balances such as salty and umami are



rare but not unheard-of: the original Bloody Mary was a gin drink called the Red Snapper, which has both salty and umami flavours to it. For example, The Sour is a very useful evaluation tool when you

have a new gin: simply slot it into a classic Sour recipe (2 shots liquor, 1 shot freshly squeezed lemon juice, half a shot of rich sugar syrup (made by dissolving two cups of regular sugar completely into one cup of hot water), shaken with ice and strained) and see what flavours emerge.

A key element in Balance is dilution; spirits in cocktails require **light dilution** so we can enjoy them better. This dilution can come through the water added in drink preparation through stirring, shaking or blending, or by using ingredients rich in water such as syrups, juices and fruits. Too little dilution and the flavours are restrained by the base spirit's alcohol: too much, and the drink tastes watery and bland.

Exercise:

1: Make two gin sours with different gins – say, a classic London Dry and a modern gin. Which differences are apparent? After tasting both Sours, add half a shot of water to each and taste again. Are the drinks better? Worse? Why?

# Alchemy

This is the most difficult principle of mixology to master – and the most rewarding when you do. The ancient alchemists combined exotic substances in a quest to create the quintessence, a compound with magical properties that exceeded those of all the ingredients combined. This is the goal of Alchemy as a mixology principle: **bring out the hidden flavours of your ingredients, combining them to create a cocktail that is tastier than the sum of its ingredients combined.**

Make, for example, a cocktail that is delicious because it contains gin, not despite the fact that it does. Certain flavour combinations just “work” together. Discovering and choosing these flavour combinations is very much a personal odyssey, but with gin so many botanicals lend themselves easily to obvious flavour combinations: citrus + cranberry, ginger + chocolate, cassia (cinnamon) + apple. What makes Alchemy more difficult than the other two Principles is that it requires you to know a lot about all your ingredients, how they are made and



what the “hidden” flavours are. Once mastered, Alchemy lets you create cocktails that can make a guest “switch” to enjoying a spirit they had never previously cared for, probably because they had never tasted a cocktail that successfully showcased otherwise “hidden” flavours in the spirit.

## Exercise:

1. Make three Brambles, the hugely successful modern gin cocktail from celebrated bartender Dick Bradsell. The recipe is 2 shots good gin, 1 shot freshly squeezed lemon juice, half a shot of rich sugar syrup (made by dissolving two cups of regular sugar completely into one cup of hot water), shaken without ice, poured into a crushed-ice-filled short-drink glass, dribbled with half a shot of blackberry (mure) liqueur for a “bleeding” effect, garnished with two blackberries and a lemon slice, and served with a short straw. Make two with different premium gins and one with a vodka. Taste and compare. What is the difference? What does each different gin “bring to the table”? What is lacking in the vodka version?

2. Make two Jasmynes with the same two different gins you used for the Brambles. This is an excellent cocktail as the cocktail truly is more than the sum of its parts: it has a powerful aroma reminiscent of grapefruit, although it contains no grapefruit. Use this recipe: 1½ shots gin shaken with half shots each of Cointreau, lemon juice and Campari, strained into a martini-cocktail glass. Which gin expresses its botanicals better in a Jasmine than in a Sour or a Bramble? Research that gin’s botanicals: more than likely it will have more bitter botanicals that complement the Campari and lemon juice better, while a gin with “sweeter” botanicals will function better in a Sour.

# Gin In Cocktails

Gin is **the king of white spirits in cocktails**: it is at once classy, strong, flavourful and rogueish, imparting flavour to cocktails and with a charm all its own. Gin has powered some of the world's greatest cocktails and we will examine the two most famous.

## Long**drink**: The Gin & Tonic

This simple drink evolved **from 1858** onwards: **English colonial officers in India** drinking their quinine-laced anti-malaria “tonic” drinks with gin to make it palatable (and also because the evenings in India were very long). Once back in England, the Gin & Tonic became an iconic drink. Gin had undergone a transformation from being a working-class drug to being the preferred tippie of the middle- and upper-classes, and this drink, favoured by the aristocratic officers of the East India Company, was an instant hit.

The Gin & Tonic is a **perfect mix because the tonic is both bitter** (from quinine, an alkaloid) **and slightly sweet**, perfectly **complementing the gin botanicals**, and diluting the gin to make it more refreshing. Experiment with your G&T by adding a couple of dashes of bitters that match the botanicals: citrus, cardamom and ginger bitters are all available these days, for instance.



# Cocktail: The Martini

The cocktail that has become a hallowed icon for the whole world of cocktails, **the Martini, started out life as a Manhattan**. Yes, you heard us right. The original mix of whiskey, bitters and sweet vermouth, with occasional dashes of curacao orange liqueur and/or maraschino, is the daddy of the gin version.

The early Martinis were made with **Old Tom gin**, but by 1896 dry gin was being used and the Martini as we know it was born, initially with sweet vermouth but quickly surpassed by the new craze for **dry vermouth**, which blended far better with gin, complementing the botanicals without overwhelming them. Although the **Turf Club (1884) and Martinez (1887)** are ancestors of the Martini, they are a very different animal, so for argument's sake we will date the Martini to the first accepted outing of the name in a drink using a dry



gin, which was 1896 in America, with a bartender named di Taggia's recipe for a Dry Martini.

## Martini Mixology

You must make your martinis – as all your other cocktails – **as you like** them. For maximum liquid pleasure, a gin martini should be a seamless blend of gin, bitters and dry vermouth, so you can hardly tell where one starts and the other begins, like the shoulder/sleeve seam on a beautifully tailored suit. As time went by, the Martini began to be so iconic people lost sight of what it was. By the 1960s, martinis were being made with just a drop of vermouth and an awful lot of gin, which stripped out the flavour of the drink, as well as its romance and sophistication. This, perhaps, is what left the martini vulnerable to being hijacked by vodka, and it is only in recent years that gin has regained its place as the rightful ingredient in the martini, with generous lashings of vermouth and spiked by the flavourful edge of bitters.

## The Connoisseur's Martini

Place a small cocktail glass, no more than 4oz. (12cl) in a freezer an hour in advance. Fill a mixing glass or shaker completely full with large, cold, hard, solid ice cubes. Pour in two shots of gin and at least three-quarters of a shot of good dry French vermouth that has been recently opened, accompanied by two good dashes of orange or lemon bitters. Stir this mixture gently for twenty seconds, then strain out into the frozen glass. Finish with a lemon zest (sprayed, rimmed and dropped in) and serve immediately. **Experiment** to find the perfect balance of vermouth and gin, and do not be alarmed if it turns out to be 40/60 or even 50/50.