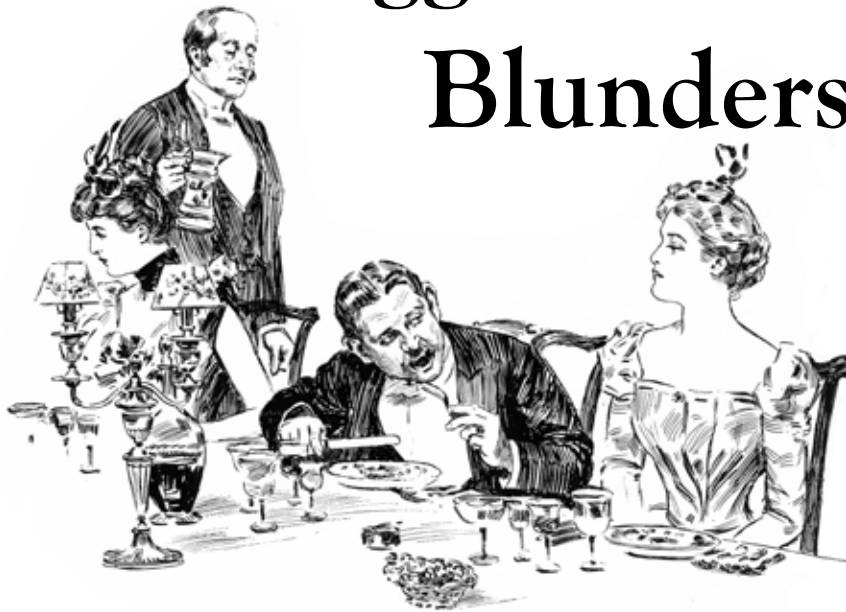


Unbalanced — Biggest Cocktail Blunders



Anyone who has attempted to create the next cocktail sensation will appreciate the difficulties involved. Attempting to devise a concoction that a broad spectrum of consumers will find extremely appealing a daunting task. The cocktail can't be too potent, too tart, or too sweet. If it has too little flavor and the drink is perceived as lackluster; too much flavor and it becomes oppressive.

Daunting as a road it is, many others have successfully traversed it. Indeed, there likely has never been a better time to be a mixologist, bar chef, or a drinks enthusiast for that matter. Today's class of new cocktails is every bit as soul satisfying as any that have come before it.

One well-intended piece of advice about creating cocktails is to begin by pairing the spirit(s) with the base mix, be that a fresh lime or lemon sour mix, a juice of a sort, or some sundry

beverage acting as the drink's foundation. The spirit and base need to be harmonious and fully complementary for the cocktail to have legs.

Next comes the modifier, which is an essential ingredient in any cocktail. Its role is to seamlessly meld the flavor of the spirit with base into a well-balanced drink. The modifier should never dominate a recipe rather act in a supporting role, giving the cocktail dimension and personality. Often drinks will have more than one and therein enters artistry.

Drink experts have been consulted and the following list of the five most frequently observed cocktail blunders has been assembled. Traveling as we do and being frequent visits of this nation's pubs, bars and cocktail lounges, compiling it is as much a collective cry for relief, as it is a primer for the advancement of the craft.

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- **Too Soon To Tire** — There's one quality that all great cocktails share in common and that's sessionability. It's a term used to describe a drink that people can drink sip on throughout the course of a visit. That's difficult to create. Ultimately it means that it tastes sufficiently engaging to keep consumers interested and wanting another.

Balance is arguably a most telling success factor in a cocktail. Balance means that all character dimensions can be perceived. There are portioning considerations. The goal is to taste the spirits in the drink, not feel the burn of the alcohol. A cocktail with a light and effervescent nature trumps one that's heavy and cloying. Balance means that all flavors are tasted somewhat equally.

Seasoned mixologist and spirits authority Sean Ludford of BevX.com thinks it's a prevalent mistake to invest significant effort and cost in a drink's glitz. "Extravagant and sometime cumbersome presentation may evoke a wow or chuckle, but it does nothing to improve the sessionability of the cocktail. Flair over substance runs counter to the care and quality of premium spirits."

- **Crossing The Line** — There are several immutable laws governing the crafting of cocktails. One of these undeniable truths is the better the liquor, the better the drink. While some may see committing the world's finest spirits to cocktails a sacrilege, others see it as an act of creative genius. The sustained popularity of super-premium spirits has strapped a booster to the cocktail boom. The cocktail's uncomplicated and unfettered structure makes it an ideal vehicle for showcasing the enhanced character and unsurpassed quality of top-shelf spirits.

"Innovation for the sake of innovation always drums hollow," contends Ludford. "The world's best cocktails were born spontaneously, a spark bringing together symbiotic ingredients that were there all along. The cocktails I've created that went on to be most successful have always evoked an 'of course' sort of response from

people, a recognition of the inherent synergy of the components that came together to build the drink."

Another guideline to etch in stone is that a cocktail is only as good as its lowest component. Look to save a few cents using a lesser product and that will invariably be the ingredient that prevents the cocktail from reaching its fullest potential. Shortcuts diminish the end result, which is why mixologists are more frequently making their own flavored sweeteners and drink mixes for use in their cocktails.

Last is the inviolate truth is that the fresher the ingredient, the more vibrant and enjoyable the drink. "Look to your kitchen to help determine a flavor 'voice' for seasonal specialties," recommends Tim Kirkland, manager for bar and beverage development at Rock Bottom Restaurants. "Seasonality is well represented in the kitchen by ingredients such as fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs. Even ingredients like fresh basil, pumpkin and aged balsamic vinegar are jumping behind the bar at different times of year."

- **Resistance To Muddling** — Increasingly mixologists are reaching for the bar muddler when constructing their specialty drinks. Examples abound. The application of the century old drink making technique has elevated the craft to fresh new heights. While it takes longer to prepare a drink made with muddled ingredients, the results are worth it.

The Mojito and Old Fashion are illustrative of how to best incorporate fresh ingredients on a per cocktail basis. In their preparation ingredients such as cut limes, oranges, or fresh mint sprigs are muddled, thus releasing their succulence and essential oils. Sugar is added to balance out the acidic pith. The cocktail is then ready to receive the spirits and various modifiers that make it a singular creation.

In addition to being delicious and thirst quenching, these drinks have enhanced production value and the muddled ingredients in the glass makes for an interesting appearance.

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“Our emphasis on quality and freshness has helped all of our restaurants achieve longevity,” suggests Barry Gutin, owner and operator of such 32° Luxe Lounge and Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar. For example, at Cuba Libre we press our own sugar cane juice and combine it with fresh mint, fresh lime juice and Cuba Libre brand premium rum in our Mojitos. This gives them a distinctly refreshing flavor that our guests can’t find anywhere else.”

Muddling is a beverage trend of significant and long-lasting magnitude.

Fizzling With Spritz — Adding a fine effervescence in a drink is a marvelous thing, a centuries old practice. Today, however, drink designers far too often commit a splash of club soda to a cocktail. Mere carbonation is passé, now it’s about adding quality effervescence. Spritz helps achieve all-important balance between the various elements in a cocktail. It enhances a drink’s mouth feel and most importantly, effervescence energizes a libation, transforming it from flat and lifeless to teeming with vibrancy and pizzazz.

One thing that will immediately improve ones drink-making abilities is looking beyond carbonated water from the beverage gun. Artificially charged water created on-site can hardly compare to the natural effervescence of sparkling waters, source derived products like San Pellegrino, or Perrier. These famous waters have an abundance of fine bubbles and mild acidity that invigorates a cocktail. Club soda can’t begin to measure up.

There are a growing number of interesting ingredients that mixologists are using to imbue their drinks with effervescence and panache. So put down the siphon bottle and consider your options. For example, Champagne-laced cocktails are light, effervescent and exceptionally delicious. Although celebrated, Champagne is not the only variety of sparkling wine that can be used in the construction of these cocktails. What’s important to note is that when you change

the flavor and character of the sparkling wine in a cocktail, the resulting cocktail is creatively altered as well.

• **Technique Matters** — How one crafts a cocktail is telling in the finished drink. In the day, if you shook a Martini you were said to have “bruised” the drink because of its cloudy appearance. Slight cloudiness aside, a shaken Martini is still imminently healthy and robust.

Vigorously shaking a cocktail is typically a good thing. One primary objective is dropping the temperature of the ingredients to serving temperature. While only the genuinely obsessed would bother sticking a thermometer into the drink to ensure that it is sufficiently chilled, the proper serving temperature for a Martini is around 37-38°F.

Thoroughly mixing the various ingredients into a homogenous cocktail is equally important. Distilled spirits have specific gravities lighter than water, while ingredients such as fortified wines and liqueurs are heavier than water. The gentle act of stirring is often insufficient to mix the various ingredients into solution.

According to Rock Bottom’s Tim Kirkland there is another important aspect to vigorously shaking cocktails. “One of the unheralded benefits of thoroughly mixing a libation is that it aerates the drink. A cocktail that sports a bit of froth on top communicates freshness, coldness and good technique to the drinker.”

The last and rarely acknowledged purpose behind stirring is to add a healthy measure of water to the cocktail. The water seamlessly melds with spirits and modifiers. It softens the blend and further dulls the edge of the liquor. For that reason it’s advisable to only use quality ice made from spring or mineral water. The taste of the water will play a part in the finished cocktail.

The final piece advice is to seek as many opinions during the process as possible, each carrying as much weights as any other. Some

people won't care for what you are championing as the best of the bunch. Be prepared to be outvoted.

"If you are relying on others to help sell your cocktail, their opinion of it is of paramount importance," says Kirkland. "You can have the greatest recipe in the world, but if the service

staff doesn't "buy in" they won't recommend it enthusiastically to their guests and it will wither on the menu."

The absolute final piece of advice is to adopt the habit of swirling and spitting while devising drinks. It will prove to extend your career by light years.

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