

THE DIRTY DOZEN

THE MARTINI IMPLIES SLEEKNESS, STYLE AND SOPHISTICATION - TRAITS SYNONYMOUS WITH ROYALTY, CELEBRITY AND INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE, HERE AT *THE WORD* WE DON'T PRETEND TO POSSESS ANY OF THOSE THINGS, SO WE PREFER OURS DIRTY. TO TRACK DOWN THE BEST ONES IN THE CITY JULIAN AJELLO GETS DOWN AND DIRTY. PHOTOS BY KHOA TRAN

American writer HL Mencken once claimed that the martini was "the only American invention as perfect as the sonnet." The origins of this invention, however, aren't as clear as the drink itself. The most popular legend suggests it evolved from a cocktail called the Martinez, which was invented in 1862 at the Occidental hotel in San Francisco by famous American bartender Jerry "Professor" Thomas. Considered the 'Father of American Mixology,' Thomas wrote *The Bar-Tender's Guide*, the first drink book to be published in the US.

The story goes that a gold prospector was leaving for Martinez, California, and put a gold nugget on the bar and asked Thomas to mix him up something special. Thomas made a cocktail with gin,

vermouth, bitters and maraschino, and dubbed it The Martinez for the prospector's journey. From that point on the martini has evolved to include the vodka variety as well as many twists on the concept.

One version is the dirty martini. What makes the dirty martini so is the inclusion of olive brine in the cocktail. The martini is a simple, elegant cocktail. Made correctly it is spectacular, but made incorrectly it's atrocious. The dirty martini is no different. Too much, or too little, olive brine ruins an otherwise sterling elixir.

With this in mind we set out to judge 12 popular places who serve dirty martinis in Ho Chi Minh City.



THE UNDERDOGS

SANDALS

93 Hai Ba Trung, Q1

Using Gordon's gin, and despite also adding Grey Goose to their vodka martinis, Sandals' dirty martini had little else going for it. Their martinis are stirred and garnished with three small olives. The charge is VND100,000, which is very reasonable as it turns out. Unfortunately, there was a lack of skill in incorporating the ingredients. The martinis we had contained almost no brine, which misses the point of a dirty martini. A fine atmosphere and attentive service weren't enough to overcome that.

SCORE: 

BLU BAR & GRILL

53 Vo Truong Toan, Riverside Apts, Q2

Set on the water in District 2, Blu is an amazing backdrop for a cocktail. They use Bombay Sapphire and Absolut for their martinis. At VND80,000 Blu's martinis are less expensive than most. We knocked off the points in two areas. The olives, which were the largest of any of the bars visited, were also the only ones that contained pits. We consider this a cardinal sin. Furthermore, there was not enough brine to really make it dirty.

SCORE: 



Blu Bar & Grill



MIDDLE OF THE PACK

ALIBI

5 Nguyen Sieu, Q1

Using Smirnoff and Gordon's, Alibi stirs their martinis and garnishes with three olives that were a bit mushy. What we loved was not just the attractive environment but that they were the filthiest of the martinis we tried. The bartenders get their elbows up at Alibi making for a potent cocktail. At VND110,000 they're pretty good value, too

SCORE: 

2 LAM SON

Park Hyatt Hotel, 2 Lam Son Square, Q1

Located in the Park Hyatt this bar has quite a scene and is very well appointed. Absolut and Gordon's are their spirits of choice to mix martinis. They shake and garnish with 3 small olives that were too soft on our visit. We also felt that they could be dirtier than they were. The second round was an improvement, but where they lost points was on value. For VND200,000 one can easily have a martini in Los Angeles. At that price you need to impress *and* be consistent.

SCORE: 

THE DECK

38 Nguyen U Di, Q2

Another District 2 bar set on the water, The Deck makes a solid dirty martini. They use Gordon's and Smirnoff (which isn't our favourite) and stir their martinis. There was a fair amount of brine and the pour was generous and garnished with two olives. For VND120,000 value-wise they were pretty good.

SCORE: 

VASCO'S

The Crescent, 103 Ton Dat Tien, Q7

Looks-wise the District 7 incarnation of Vasco's is far different from what we have come to know in the courtyard off Hai Ba Trung. They use Smirnoff and Gordon's in their martinis, which were shaken and had the perfect amount of brine in them. This was topped off with a garnish of three small olives that were unfortunately a little on the soft side. The taste was excellent as was the presentation. At VND95,000 this cocktail was among the best for value of those we tried.

SCORE: 



The Deck



Vasco's

THE WILD CARD

FLOW

88 Ho Tung Mau, Q1

Theirs were the most interesting of all the dirty martinis we sampled. We were completely surprised and not altogether sure how to rate this one. There was more debate about this martini than any other. Flow uses Stolichnaya and Gordon's in their mix and shake their martinis and garnish with three small olives. Flow's bartender uses Bianco vermouth, which is infused with vanilla, and that is what sets them apart. It gives the dirty martinis here a salty-sweet combination that makes them good to drink *after* dinner as well as before. At VND150,000 they are a little pricier, but the atmosphere as wonderful as the service.

SCORE: 



THE CONTENDERS



Level 23

THE SCORING

Both gin and vodka versions of the dirty martini were sampled, and all the cocktails were graded on a scale of one to five olives (five being the highest) and judged on five criteria:

PRESENTATION

This includes the stemware and overall appearance of the drink. Too much brine makes it too cloudy and not enough makes it too clear, or clean

MIXOLOGY

Includes taste, strength and whether it was shaken or, as the phrase goes, stirred*

DIRTINESS

Depending on the amount of brine a martini could be less dirty, dirty or just plain filthy

OLIVES

We looked at the size, how many were included, and whether or not they were stuffed

VALUE

We judged value by considering the quality of the martini, the price and intangibles such as service and environment

**Shaken vs stirred is tantamount to a theological debate. Shaking cools the drink more quickly, but it also allows small slivers of ice into the liquid and will dilute the mix more than stirring. Shaking a martini will also agitate, and therefore aerate, or 'bruise,' the alcohol giving it a sharper taste and more zing. Both are perfectly acceptable, it all depends on preference.*

CLOUD 9

6th & 7th floor, 2bis Cong Truong Quoc Te, Q3

They use Gordon's and Kettle One at Cloud 9. They garnish the drink with three medium-sized stuffed olives, one of only two bars where we encountered stuffed olives, and Cloud 9 stirs their martinis. There was a fair amount of brine that put it in the dirtier range. For VND120,000 it was well-priced, especially when you consider the attractive rooftop environment.

SCORE: 

LEVEL 23

Sheraton Hotel, 88 Dong Khoi, Q1

Located at the top of the Sheraton hotel, this was easily the best setting for a martini. Using Absolut and Gordon's they give you a generous pour into what we felt was the most attractive stemware we encountered. Level 23 stirs their martinis and garnishes them with 3 olives to make a filthy martini. At VND185,000 they were the second most expensive on our list, but they were well made cocktails.

SCORE: 

TRADERS

76bis Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, Q1

Shaken with either Absolut or Gordon's the martinis here were garnished with two small olives that were a bit soft. The stemware was smallish, but the taste was on the money. Where Traders really impresses is that at VND70,000 this was without doubt the best balance of cost versus quality.

SCORE: 

XU

71-75 Hai Ba Trung, Q1

This downtown location uses Larios gin and Russian Standard vodka. We really enjoyed the excellent presentation that included a jaw-dropping five olives. They are plenty dirty enough and the service is excellent. At VND110,000 these martinis were easily some of our favourites.

SCORE: 



THE CHAMPION



MARTINI BAR

Caravelle Hotel, 19 Lam Son Square, Q1

Nestled into a nook on the third floor of the Caravelle Hotel, this was the most unassuming setting of all the bars. The martinis are made by a gentleman who wheels a martini cart to your table and makes them right in front of you while a duet plays the piano and cello. Your martini will be stirred with either Ciroc vodka or Tanqueray gin, and each martini will be tended to with its own bar spoon and strainer to make sure the taste and mix are not tainted. Garnished with three stuffed olives, these were the tastiest of the dozen we had the pleasure to sample. For VND165,000 they are on the pricey side, but you will know where that extra money went when you have one.

SCORE: