

9 Easily Confused Cocktail Terms You Should Know...

Our friends at seriouseats.com have this to say about the lexicon of mixology:

Apéritif / Digestif

These terms describe drinks served before (*apéritif*) and after (*digestif*) a meal. These forms are French words; in Italian, they're *aperitivo* and *digestivo*.

An apéritif is meant to stimulate the appetite, and therefore it's usually dry and low in alcohol. Vermouth, aromatized wines, and dry sherry are common in Europe. A cocktail can count as an apéritif, too, but of course after too many, you probably won't have much appetite for dinner.

A digestif is meant to stimulate digestion. Examples here include brandy, whisk(e)y, port, cream sherry, amari (like Fernet, Averna, and Cynar), bitters (like Becherovka and Underberg), sweet liqueurs such as Grand Marnier, and dessert cocktails.

Spirit / Liquor / Liqueur / Cordial



[Photo: Robyn Lee]

People often use the terms spirit and liquor interchangeably, and sources differ on whether this is accurate. Some people use spirit to refer only to distilled beverage alcohol. Others say that spirit refers to any distilled alcohol, even the non-potable stuff, whereas liquor is reserved for the drinkable hooch.

I think this is hair-splitting. In this column, I by default am talking about drinkable booze, not methanol or butanol. So I use both spirit and liquor to refer to any unsweetened distilled alcoholic beverage: vodka, gin, brandy, whiskey, tequila, and the like.

Liqueur, on the other hand, is used for sweetened distilled alcoholic beverages: pastis, triple sec, amari, Chartreuse, Benedictine, etc.

Cordial, in the United States, is generally used interchangeably with liqueur, although you may find that the word cordial tends to appear more often on dessert-like products: liqueurs flavoured with coffee, cream, chocolate, etc.

In another example of two lands divided by a common tongue, though, cordial is used in the UK to mean any syrupy or very sweet non-alcoholic beverage. So the product that we Americans call Rose's Lime Juice is, in its native England, called Rose's Lime Cordial. It of course is alcohol-free.

Dry / Sweet / Perfect



[Photo: Jennifer Hess]



Man, you vermouth haters have really done a number on the poor word dry. I don't know what you have against vermouth in the first place, but leave dry alone. Today, everyone thinks a dry martini is one made with the least possible amount of vermouth. That's a misconception.

In the earliest ages of cocktail history, the martini as we know it didn't exist. The primary gins available in the United States were Holland's (or genever) and Old Tom, both of which were mildly sweet. London dry gin didn't get a foothold here until the late 19th century. Dry vermouth came into vogue at about the same time.

The precursor to the martini, the Martinez, was made with Tom gin (mildly sweet) and sweet vermouth. As the martini evolved, it gradually moved through various permutations before arriving upon a combination of London dry gin and dry vermouth. That combination of dry on dry became known as a dry martini, to distinguish it from any version made with sweet ingredients.

So a dry martini isn't a martini made without vermouth; it's a martini with dry gin and dry vermouth.

Now, very few people today talk of drinking sweet martinis. A martini made with dry gin and sweet vermouth, for example, isn't very good. And no one speaks of drinking sweet Manhattans. A Manhattan, by default, is made with sweet vermouth. What some odd souls do, though, is drink dry Manhattans (that is, Manhattans made with dry vermouth.) Why? Ask your gods, I guess. I have no idea.

A common source of controversy, however, is the perfect Manhattan. It's not named so because it's the Platonic ideal of Manhattans, and nor does your bartender have a massive ego. It's simply a Manhattan made with equal parts sweet and dry vermouth. I happen to love them. Others think they're an abomination akin to the Cosmopolitan, the Flirtini, and the career of Carrot Top.

Just remember the following rules, though, and I don't care how you drink anything:

- Dry: made with dry vermouth
- Sweet: made with sweet vermouth
- Perfect: made with a 50/50 blend of both

If you need a martini that holds hardly any vermouth whatsoever, call it ultra-dry or extra-dry or Super Sonic Dry or whatever. Just please don't insist that a dry martini contains no vermouth. Because I will mock you if you do.