



As Seen On
Cocktailians.com
May 11, 2011



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Ultimate Cocktail Challenge Judging

The Irish comedian [Dylan Moran has a great routine about wine](#):

"There are two types of wine essentially, and everybody knows this. There's the one where you drink it and go, "Mmmm, well that's ok, can we get eight of those please, give us eight of those." There's the other one, you know, where you go "Ga...bt...Jesus, WHAT is that?"

But with spirits, 'tain't always that easy. There are lots of different kinds of spirits, distilled from many different things, and the range of flavors is enormous. And there's been an explosion in the spirits market lately, what with the renewed interest in cocktails: there are more vodkas, rums, gins, whiskeys, than ever. So how are you supposed to figure out what's what? To separate the plonk from the good stuff? And would the same spirit work in very different cocktails?

To address these kinds of questions, there are various judging panels and organizations that have sprung up to rate spirits, kind of the modern equivalent of the gold medals awarded by expositions of yore – the Stolichnaya vodka and Angostura bitters bottles bear these medals proudly, for instance. And the [Ultimate Beverage Challenge](#), which invited me to drop by their cocktail judging recently, is attempting to go one better. Not only are they identifying what they say are the best examples of various spirits – they're trying each of the spirits in classic cocktails to see which one comes out on top. As [David Wondrich](#) told me, the same tequila might not work as well in a Paloma or a Tequila Sunrise as in a Margarita. So, it was the judges' task to taste them all. (Wondrich also noted, a touch wearily, that they'd tasted twenty Palomas so far that day -- the second of three days of judging -- and that they'd been going since 10am.)

And, this year brought another changeup: not only was the UCC evaluating [spirits on their own](#), and spirits in various classic cocktails, but this year they also added signature cocktails: recipes that a liquor brand presented to showcase their own spirits. These were judged head-to-head on the basis of which recipes were most appealing and tasted best, but obviously they weren't going to try, say, Old Raj gin in a cocktail specifying Hendrick's.

When I walked into the judging room, the cocktail dork in me was impressed by the star caliber of the judges: the owners and managers of some of the best bars in the country were there, as well as spirits writers, beverage consultants, and other exponents of the mixological art. (DeGroff! Saunders! Sharpe! Bezuidenhout! Meehan! Tello! Hess! Wondrich! Reiner! Regan! Shine! Pacult! All of whom looked as fresh as daisies, and most of whom I'd seen not-terribly-long before at the [Bulleit Rye launch](#) the previous night!) Several tasting panels huddled around bars where bartenders turned out several identical drinks from [standardized recipes](#). (Because it's a double-blind competition, the bartenders were mixing from [numbered carafes](#), not labeled bottles.)



The judges were encouraged to talk among themselves, and the discussion was particularly intense where judges were evaluating different Scotches in [otherwise-identical Rusty Nails](#). Even people like [aka wine geek's Steve Olson](#), who have tasted hundreds of different whiskies, were [learning new things](#) and discussing various aspects – smokiness, smoothness, woody flavors – of their favorites. Elsewhere, judges stuck their noses in a succession of mint juleps and talked about what made the ideal bourbon for one.



I wasn't allowed to participate in the official judging, but they still set me up with three gin and tonics (not bad before lunchtime) and a modified judging form so I could see what the judges' experience was like. But I couldn't just knock them back and totter off to work: first I had to evaluate each of the drinks (identical but for the gin...right down to the width of the lime-wedge garnish and the number of Kold-Draft ice cubes), and judge how appealing they were visually. I had to take my time and smell them all, and write down my impressions of each.



And the tasting was interesting too: there are so many different gins out there that deciding what makes the best gin and tonic means that one has to consider what the Platonic ideal of a G&T actually is. My fellow media judges and I all hated one of the gins right off the bat, and so it was easy to write that one off; its sour pungency meant it was destined straight for the spit cup. But the other two were tougher. One was a classic London dry gin – I had my guesses on what I tasted, but we'll see if I'm right – and one was softer and lighter, with some vaguely floral botanicals in a New World style. Both were really good, and I wouldn't kick either one out of my glass on a hot day, but is the ideal G&T one with a dry bite or one with summery flavor? I ultimately went with my favorite – the softer, more floral gin – even though I wouldn't necessarily pick that same gin for a Martini, or a Negroni, or a Tom Collins.

Interestingly enough, of the three gin and tonics I tasted, I couldn't identify any of them -- the London dry that I thought was Beefeater ended up being Tanqueray 10, and made a very nice dry G&T. The middle one, the one that I thought was a New World one like DH Krahn? Good old Plymouth, my go-to standby for gin cocktails. And the one that I hated? In a true surprise, it was Beefeater 24, [a gin that I've really liked](#) and often use in mixed drinks.

The [Ultimate Cocktail Challenge results can be found here](#), and make for some interesting reading. The [results for the signature cocktails are here](#), and the recipes are included as well. These seem like they'd be a good jumping-off point for some new drinks and ways of thinking about familiar ingredients.

Online at: <http://www.cocktailians.com/2011/05/ultimate-cocktail-challenge-judging.html>