BARS | FEB. 12, 2024

# Alt-inis, Ranked

## They're called martinis, but each of these drinks is something else entirely.

*By Robert Simonson, a writer whose new book is The Encyclopedia of Cocktails.*

Photo: Hugo Yu; Food Styling: Michelle Gatton

There's never been a better time for the King of Cocktails: Every new restaurant or bar now must include a signature martini on the menu. (Sometimes there's an entire section.) The thing is, even though these drinks adopt the moniker, they bear little resemblance to the classic gin- and vodka-based templates. Instead, they are evolved, high-concept recipes created by bartenders who, over the past 20 years, have absorbed every ingredient and mixology technique available to them.

This is the new normal in Martini Land, and who are we to argue? We'd rather sift through to sort out the true gems from the rhinestones. Mere riffs (a bit of sake added here, a dash of sherry there) didn't cut it for this list — we wanted the true outliers that nevertheless live up to the martini mantle. Here, in order, are the ten best alt-inis in town.

## 9. Lesser Key Martini

The tiki-tini is a true unicorn drink, a rare sighting indeed. Created by Kavé Pourzanjani, this martini is a mix of matcha-infused gin, rum that's "washed" with coconut and pistachio fat, Japanese vermouth, plantain eau-de-vie, and orgeat. The finished drink arrives in a Nick & Nora glass; the sidecar is served in a coconut. It's like wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a bow tie.

Paradise Lost
*100 Second Ave.*

## 8. Golden Swan Martini

The original Golden Swan, a Village dive also known as the Hell Hole, was home to artists, writers, and gangsters. They likely wouldn't have known what to do with the martini served at the restaurant that now bears the same name: The drink's base is mezcal. Ancho Reyes Verde chile liqueur adds some heat, while pineapple liqueur cools it down. A single, long-ass pepper provides the garnish.

The Golden Swan
*314 W. 11th St.*

## 7. Citrus Martini

Inside Mads Refslund's Nordic fantasia, beverage director Bobby Murphy builds this drink with Ki No Bi gin, Iichiko Frasco shochu, Bordiga dry and bianco vermouths, and Douglas fir tincture. But this is the rare martini where the garnishes steal the show: wedges and twists of blood orange, kumquat, Tahitian pomelo, and more, some sweet and some quite tart. You take a bite, you take a drink, then you repeat. Yes, the drink costs $45 — far more than any other cocktail on the menu — but the upside is that every sip tastes like something different.

Ilis
*150 Green St., Greenpoint*

## 6. Sixty-Forty

Can a martini and a Manhattan co-exist? Shingo Gokan, one of the people behind the West Village's new bifurcated bar, decided to find out when he created the Sixty-Forty. The stirred drink is a gin martini mixed with a rye Manhattan, with two nonalcoholic "spirits" by Seedlip binding it all together. This is a drink that grows on you as you sip it, and of course, it's garnished with an olive and a cherry on the same pick.

Sip & Guzzle
*29 Cornelia St.*

## 5. Green Mango Martini

Ignacio "Nacho" Jimenez was inspired by the fresh-fruit stands of Mexico when he put together this drink. A double dose of fruit flavor arrives via mango-infused tequila and mango eau-de-vie. This is softened and sweetened by accents of honey syrup and some Sauternes. A final drop of costeño chile oil wakes up the drink and the drinker.

Superbueno
*13 First Ave.*

## 4. Mischa Martini

The terse menu description reads, "Axberg vodka, carrot sticks." Surely those carrots are a side snack? Wrong: Beverage director Noah Small has put them in the drink. They are pickled and they are the garnish. (The vegetable makes more sense when you realize the vodka is blended with carrot eau-de-vie made by Austrian distiller Hans Reisetbauer.) A touch of Riesling completes the drink. Pair it with the restaurant's Russian-dressed iceberg salad.

Mischa
*157 E. 53rd St.*

## 3. Bird's Beak Martini

The house martini served inside Superiority Burger's new home is the work of managing partner, and longtime martini lover, Sheryl Heefner. She pickles mild, colorful bird's-beak peppers from Campo Rosso Farms and pairs the peppers' brine with dry vermouth plus gin or vodka. Three additional peppers serve as garnish. The elegant drink is light, fruity, savory, seasonal, and very food-friendly.

Superiority Burger
*119 Ave. A*

## 2. Mini-tini Trio

The Rockefeller Center location of a long-standing Tribeca cocktail nook is doing its best to bring the three-martini lunch back to midtown: Its mini-tini trio, by beverage director Robert Krueger, is a gin-vodka Vesper with sherry and blanc vermouth; a 50-50 made of Hayman's Royal Dock navy-strength gin and Mattei Cap Corse quinquina blanc; and a mix of mezcal, sotol, herbal génépy, lime-leaf aperitif, and grapefruit bitters. All are available in full-size versions, but why do that when you can have the full flight for $27?

Smith & Mills
*30 Rockefeller Plaza*

## 1. Cigarette Martini

At Sauvage in Greenpoint — now gone — William Elliott created the exquisite Sauvage Martini using "Luli" Chinato Moscato, an Italian product of extremely limited production. Now, at Tigre, the '70s-themed boite on the Lower East Side, Elliott has devised another martini that relies on an evasive ingredient: Empirical Spirits' "Charlene McGee," made with smoked juniper, which gives the drink its name and its sleek (nicotine-free) flavor. The remainder of the drink is made of Truman vodka, dry vermouth, and Cap Corse quinquina.

Tigre
*105 Rivington St.*

Photographs by **Hugo Yu; Food Styling: Michelle Gatton**

*This post has been updated. It originally misidentified Shingo Gokan as an owner of Sip & Guzzle.*

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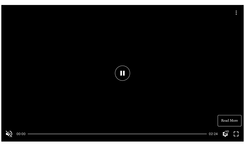


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