

Barnett on Business Travel: Coming to a table near you (if you're in London) - the #32 martini

by Chris Barnett

London is abloom today with bustling bars and stylish saloons. The cocktail safari has replaced the pubcrawl as a civilized way to drink in the charms of this, the most electric city in the English-speaking world.

China Tang, a sleek, new, high-voltage Asian bistro-bar, recently opened in the venerable Dorchester Hotel to rave reviews. The Dorch is hip? Why not? The fabled British pubs perched on almost every corner, now all owned by breweries, are mostly boring; the publican just pulls draughts and collects quids.

When I'm in London to unwind over something ice-cold and spirited, I want a refuge that's calm and clubby but not comatose. Where the paneling is at least 100 years older than my whiskey. Where the bartender is part alchemist and part ambassador, with great stories who tells them while mixing and pouring without spilling a drop.

For my money - and bring lots of it - Dukes Hotel Bar at 35 St. James's Place (www.dukeshotel.com) is the perfect libational sanctuary. It has the looks, the lore, the intimacy and the cocktail craftsmanship I thirst for in a great bar without the pretentious decadence in the drinking dens of London's newer hotels. Dukes also has an extraordinary, well-seasoned head barman named Tony Micelotta, a smooth Italian seemingly capable of negotiating truces between warring nations.

Micelotta, who apprenticed at the American Bar of the Savoy Hotel under the legendary head barman Peter Dorrelli, longtime president of the U.K. Barman's Guild, says his job, above all, "is to make people feel at home."

The setting helps. The bar at Dukes, originally a private home built in 1780 that became a hotel in 1908, is essentially three cozy sitting rooms (one for nonsmokers), filled with leather armchairs and tables and one sofa. The decor is very British traditional with mahogany paneling interspersed with a subdued blue-striped wallpaper and four original paintings of various dukes - Wellington, Cumberland and lesser-known royals in sporting scenes - so you never drink alone.

Micelotta, stationed behind a tiny bar without bar stools, is a maestro of the classic dry martini and a former winner of the World Martini Championship. He is also quick to protect the cocktail's honor. He dismisses as rubbish the legend that Sir Ian Fleming coined the phrase "shaken, not stirred" for his 007, James Bond, while sipping a Dukes' martini.

"Ian Fleming was a customer," Micelotta says, "but that's a myth."

Aficionados have long debated the birthplace of the martini, but Micelotta insists it was "officially born in 1910 at the Knickerbocker Club in New York by an Italian barman named Martini who substituted dry Martini and Rossi vermouth from Italy for Noilly Pratt vermouth from France." Around the world, a martini was made only with dry gin, preferably distilled in London, until World War II, "when Americans started asking for a vodka version made with Smirnoff."

Today, ordering the potent cocktail at Dukes is the first step of a ritual that has made it "one of the most expensive martinis in the world - 15 pounds sterling or \$32 including service," says Micelotta rather proudly. He begins by opening a big freezer cabinet behind the bar where the most popular gins - Bombay Sapphire, Tanqueray 10, Plymouth Navy Strength 108 proof - and vodkas - Belvedere, Potashki from Poland - are stored along with the glassware. He loads all the ingredients onto a small trolley called a gueridon, rolls it over to you and prepares it tableside, like a Caesar salad.

"At Dukes, we go to the customer, they don't come to us," he explains. "Into a chilled glass I put a drop of dry vermouth. Then I pour 125 milligrams or five ounces of either gin or vodka. I don't stir, I don't shake. Then, with a potato peeler, I carve a zest from a fresh lemon, twist it to release the lemon oil and drop it in the glass and serve an olive on the side. The customer usually orders two but we dissuade them against drinking a third. We want them to come back."

Micelotta, who is penning his own book on the martini, contends Dukes is a "very classic bar and we avoid fancy, trendy drinks. We serve Manhattans, Rob Roys, Bellinis, sidecars, Negronis and we can't refuse a Cosmopolitan. But if someone orders a mohito, we send them to Cuba." All cocktails are about \$30 apiece, including service.

For wine lovers, he pours a French chardonnay and chablis and an Italian pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc at \$19 a glass, including service. A flute of Pol Roger champagne is a hefty \$30 at today's exchange rate.

Just two bottled beers are available, an Italian lager called Peroni and Becks, \$12 a piece. No warmish English draughts? "We don't have beer on tap," he smiles. "We send them over to the Red Lion pub."

Tony Micelotta is not much of a name-dropper but he did tell me Paul McCartney has dropped by for a drink. "He ordered a margarita with a splash of orange juice and we spoke Italian. He was very gracious and excused himself for not having a martini."

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