

Chapter

3

Top It Off and Mix It Up: Garnishes and Mixers

In This Chapter

- ◆ Garnishes and how to make them
- ◆ Some mixers basics
- ◆ Techniques for tipplers

A Manhattan without some bitters and a maraschino cherry is like ... Bella Abzug without a hat. Bono without sunglasses and a cause. Woody Allen without neuroses. It's just not the same. An original is the sum of all its many exciting parts. The garnish in a drink is no exception. And what about mixers? Is it enough to twist open a bottle of margarita mix and dump it in a blender? Heavens no! Why do that when, really, using fresh juices and fresh ingredients is so easy—and usually pretty inexpensive? Put it all together with a little mixing know-how, and you'll be ready to start mixing it up and throw a great cocktail party.

The Must-Have List

Plain and simple, this list of garnishes and other bar-related items is pretty much all you'll need to make just about any cocktail in this book—or any other, I'd imagine:

- ◆ **Cherries.** Red maraschinos are a must, but green are nice to keep on hand, too.
- ◆ **Cinnamon sticks.** For hot drinks or for grating.
- ◆ **Cucumbers.** A thin slice or strip of cucumber is gorgeous in any sake concoction, and it's also a must in one of my favorites, a Pimm's Cup (recipe in Chapter 12).
- ◆ **Granulated sugar.** For mixing and rimming.
- ◆ **Kosher or bar salt.** This thick-grained salt is the right touch for a fresh margarita and other drinks well-complemented by a little salty zing.
- ◆ **Lemons and limes.** You'll likely use these more often than any other fruit garnish.
- ◆ **Mint.** For muddling or visual and aromatic decoration.
- ◆ **Nutmeg.** Freshly grated, please.
- ◆ **Olives.** Green and pitted are the most popular, but other stuffed versions are fun, too, from pimento to jalapeño!
- ◆ **Onion.** A sophisticated touch on a sophisticated tippie.
- ◆ **Oranges.** Great for tropical drinks and fantastic flavor.
- ◆ **Pineapple.** Fresh is the best. (Later in this chapter I give instructions on how to wrangle one into garnishing perfection.)
- ◆ **Superfine sugar.** Just like granulated, important for mixing and rimming, but also a key ingredient in simple syrup.
- ◆ **Table salt.** For occasional flavoring.



Cocktail Conversation

This might cause a little controversy with purists, but as far as olives go, I say ... use what you like. Many mixologists would rather be dragged naked by a bus down Broadway than serve a pimento olive in their martinis. Actually, I kind of like them. Does this make me such a bad person? Well, no. I like 'em all. So do as you will. Be pure, be indiscriminate, but do garnish.

Lemony Slice-It

Don't know your twist from your wedge? No problem. Follow these instructions for perfect citrus sight and sampling adornments every time. I'll use a lemon as an example here, but the same applies to limes and oranges as well:

For twists:

1. Using a sharp kitchen knife and cutting board, cut off the nubby end on each side of the fruit. Place the fruit right side up, so one of the cut ends is flat on the cutting board.
2. Use a channel knife in a top-to-bottom swipe to slice off pieces of the fruit's skin. Or use a pairing knife to slice off ½-inch-thick peels of the skin and then cut those into ¼-inch twists.
3. Don't throw the rest away! Reserve the skinned fruit for juicing purposes.

For slices:

1. Using a sharp kitchen knife and cutting board, cut off the nubby end on each side of the fruit. Place the fruit right side up, so one of the cut ends is flat on the cutting board.
2. Next, cut the fruit in half lengthwise.
3. Place it fruit side down, skin side up on the cutting board.
4. Cut the fruit horizontally into ½-inch slices.



Cocktail Conversation

When cutting oranges, you might have to slice off much more of the ends than you would for lemons or limes.

For wedges:

1. Using a sharp kitchen knife and cutting board, cut off the nubby end on each side of the fruit. Place the fruit right side up, so one of the cut ends is flat on the cutting board.
2. Next, cut the fruit in half lengthwise.

3. Cut the halves in half lengthwise once more, so you have cut the fruit into four lengthwise quarters.
4. Finally, slice the quartered pieces in half horizontally.

For wheels:

1. Using a sharp kitchen knife and cutting board, cut off the nubby end on each side of the fruit. Place the fruit right side up, so one of the cut ends is flat on the cutting board.
2. Turn the fruit on its side. Firmly hold it down with one hand and cut the fruit into nearly ½-inch slices.
3. Make a single slit from the center outward. (This is how you anchor it onto a glass when you are ready to garnish.)



Spills

Remember those cut-proof gloves I told you to buy in Chapter 2? This would be a good time to use them! However, if you don't have a pair, when you hold down the fruit, be sure you curl your fingertips in slightly, so if your knife slips you won't slice your fingertip.

A Word About Juice

Fresh juice can make an ordinary drink a truly extraordinary imbibing experience. For kicks one day, I would even recommend you make two margaritas—one with fresh lime juice and one with a bottled or canned mix. The difference is astounding. Once you go fresh, you'll never go back.

With that said, you should know a few things about juicing. For one—and this bears repeating—always rinse your citrus fruits before using them. This isn't always the first thing that comes to mind with citrus fruits because we don't eat the skin; however, bacteria can live on the outside of a lemon, lime, or orange, and you really don't want to be messing around with that. Your stomach will thank you for the courtesy.

Next, believe it or not, room-temperature citrus fruits are easier to juice than super-cold refrigerated ones. Store your citrus fruits in the

fridge, but remove them an hour or two prior to prepping for your desired cocktail.

Finally, unless you're making ceviche, trying to store juice overnight or long-term doesn't work. It gets ... yucky. Acidic. Pungent. It's not going to yield the same effect as when it's freshly squeezed.

The Pine-Apple of My Eye

You might be inclined to pick up a can of sliced pineapple and call it a garnish. Certainly, that's fine. But if you plan on making tropical drinks for your cocktail cohorts, why not buy the real, fresh thing? There's nothing in the world quite like the aroma of fresh pineapple—and it's really good for you, too. Lots of vitamin C in there. But don't be intimidated by the often-heard conundrum with pineapples: how do you cut it open and make garnish-worthy wedges? That's easy:

1. Using a sharp kitchen knife and a cutting board, turn the pineapple on its side and cut about 1½ inches off each end.
2. Next, you can do one of the following:
 - a. Leaving the outside skin on, slice the pineapple horizontally into 1-inch rounds. Then, cut each round into 6 or 8 wedges (3 or 4 side-to-side cuts around the circular slice).
 - b. Cut the pineapple in half lengthwise. Then, cut the halves in half lengthwise. Make 1-inch horizontal slices from each quarter section.



Spills

While I'm on the topic of tropical drinks, let's talk for a second about blended concoctions and the fruit that goes into them. When using berries, just like with any other fruit, *wash them first*. But just like with citrus juice, you really don't want to prep your fruit and let it sit overnight. Washed berries, no matter how well drained, will get mushy and kind of gross. Bananas turn brown; mango does okay overnight. But the best rule of thumb with fruit is the fresher the better.

Oh, Brandy, You're a Fine Fruit

If your recipe calls for brandied fruit, this will take a little time. It's very, very simple to make, but it requires at least a month storage time before it'll be ready. You can brandy berries, peaches, cherries, pineapples, and melon. However, apples and pears do not fair well—they get mushy.

To brandy fruit:

1. Add 2 cups sugar to 2 cups fruit in a large, sealable jar.
2. Add 1½ pints (24 ounces) brandy (or rum or bourbon, which technically doesn't make the fruit “brandied” anymore, but the results are just as tasty).
3. Allow the mixture to sit unrefrigerated for at least 3 weeks and up to 1 month prior to using.

In a Muddle

From cobblers to caipirinhas and other fruity concoctions, muddling is *the* technique to know. First, you need the obvious tool: a muddler. This is simply a wooden pestle with a nubbed, rounded end to get the job done (see the muddler pictures in Chapter 2). Muddling releases the precious oils in a mint leaf or citrus skin and melds flavors to create new flavors. In short, it's a must-learn technique. And hey, lucky you, it's easy! Simply drop your to-be-muddled fruit or botanical in the bottom of a mixing glass, grab your muddler, and grind away. That's it. Obviously, a lemon wedge will take more muddling than, say, a delicate mint leaf; use common sense.



Cocktail Conversation

I can't discuss muddling without bringing up the name Nick Mautone, a double-decade mixologist veteran of some of New York's most respected bars. His book, *Raising the Bar: Better Drinks, Better Entertaining* (Artisan, 2004), not only has some incredible, original drink recipes that will wow your guests, but he also is the king of the muddle. From rosemary to ginger, Mautone will teach you how to add extraordinary flavors to any cocktail.

Sir Mix-a-Lot

I'll say it yet again: fresh mixes are the way to go. Here are a few basic recipes for staple mixers that will make your cocktails go from ho-hum to yum!

Bloody Mary Mix

Makes about 12 drinks.

46 oz. tomato juice
10 oz. beef bouillon
1 TB. celery salt
2 tsp. fresh black pepper
3 TB. Worcestershire sauce
2 tsp. Tabasco sauce
2 oz. lemon juice

In a large, sealable jar, combine tomato juice, beef bouillon, celery salt, pepper, Worcestershire sauce, and Tabasco sauce. Give it a good stir. Add fresh lemon juice to the mix when you're ready to serve. Lemon juice-less mix can be stored in the refrigerator for 1 week.

Simple Syrup

4 cups sugar
2 cups water

In a large saucepan, pour in water and add sugar. Heat over low heat until sugar is completely dissolved. Allow to cool and then store in a quart-size sealable jar in the refrigerator for up to a year.

Sour Mix

6 oz. lemon juice
6 oz. lime juice
18 oz. water
¼ cup sugar

Combine lemon juice, lime juice, water, and sugar in a sealable quart-size bottle or jar. Give it a good shake. Store for up to a week.

Variation: For a frothier sour mix, add an egg white to the mix.

It's All in the Wrist and the Twist

Of course, you'd never admit to any of your friends that you've watched that cinematic crime on humanity, *Cocktail*. And you most definitely wouldn't admit to having watched it more than once. But all that

shaking and pouring and fancy under-the-leg, over-the-shoulder bartending work was downright exciting, wasn't it? Okay, okay. I've watched it, too. More than once (heaven help me). But you've probably also seen fantastic bartending at your favorite watering hole. To see a skilled, practiced bartender in action is a beautiful thing. A ballet of booze, if you will.

Although I'm not going to turn you into the next Baryshnikov of the bartending world, I can give you a few easy instructions to get you mixing, stirring, shaking, and pouring. Grab an apron (because the first few times might be messy), a bar towel, and let's get mixing.



Cocktail Conversation

Some drinks call for lighting things on fire. I haven't included those in this book, because that's a technique best left to the pros. But I highly recommend checking out super-master-mixologist Dale Degroff's *The Craft of the Cocktail* (Clarkson Potter, 2002). It'll teach you all about fiery garnishes, for which he is famous, and it's a beautiful book to have on your bar. You can also check out his website, www.kingcocktail.com, for great cocktail news and tips.

Shaking

To shake a drink:

1. Fill a mixing glass $\frac{1}{2}$ full with ice (filling it all the way cuts down on your shaking action and, thus, lessens the desired result of the whole effort).
2. Take main shaker part of a metal cocktail shaker set and snugly place it over the top of the glass.
3. Using *two hands* (yes, I know, Tom Cruise used one—but don't do that), pick up the shakers and shake about 10 times. (This is what I mean when I say “give it a good shake” in the recipes.)
4. When mixing cocktails that require egg whites, egg yolks, or whole eggs, increase the amount of shakes. You want to make absolutely certain the egg has been properly mixed into the cocktail.



Spills

You might be thinking, *Eggs? Raw eggs? Is that safe?* Well, here's how it is: no, I can't guarantee the safety of your local supermarket's consumer health practices. Generally, if an egg is used within the appropriate time period, as stamped on the expiration date label of the carton, heaven hoping, you should be A-OK. But ... eggs are perishable items. You don't know if, or how long, that egg carton in your refrigerator sat out somewhere, unrefrigerated.

Stirring

To stir a drink:

1. Fill a mixing glass or drink glass $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ full with ice.
2. Pour in your ingredients.
3. Using a bar spoon (see Chapter 2), give the drink 5 to 8 stirs. If the drink has champagne or another alcoholic or nonalcoholic sparkling beverage, stir less so as not to diminish the effervescence.

Pouring

To pour a drink:

1. Place a strainer (see Chapter 2) firmly atop your mixing glass.
2. Pick up the mixing glass, and use your index finger to hold the strainer in place.
3. Tilt and pour.



Cocktail Conversation

Before I got the hang of it, I used to spill some of each and every cocktail I made when I poured it. My tilting and pouring just weren't up to snuff. I discovered a little cheating technique I'm happy to share with you: assuming you're making at least two cocktails, place the glasses next to each other. Pour one, positioning the shaker so the back of it is over the mouth of the second glass. That way, any dripping runoff goes into the other glass—not all over your bar or countertop.

Blending

To blend a drink:

1. Fill a blender $\frac{1}{4}$ full with ice. (Any more will make it hard to crush and blend it all and, potentially, burn out your blender's motor.)
2. If using fresh fruit or other whole ingredients, add those first.
3. Next add juices, creams, simple syrup, or sour mix.
4. Add alcohol, if using any, last.
5. Blend on medium speed for about 15 seconds.

Popping

Champagne or sparkling wine is a lovely way to start out an evening or, of course, celebrate a special occasion. But those corks! Some people find the whole process of popping a cork, no matter how fun the sound, a bit intimidating. Really, it's no big deal. Here's all you need to do:

To open a champagne bottle:

1. First and foremost, *always* point the bottle away from people, animals, glass, or any potentially breakable or hurtable object.
2. Gently remove the foil wrapping and metal twisty and cap, keeping one hand palm side down over the top, just in case the bottle has been improperly corked and can potentially shoot out before you actually loosen it.
3. Grab the neck of the bottle with one hand and place your other hand, palm side down, over the cork. If you like, you can use a towel to do this, as it will doubly ensure the cork will not fly out and will also absorb some of the requisite spillage.
4. Slowly twist the cork until it pops.



Spills

Although the look of a popping cork shooting into the air and champagne overflowing is certainly the romantic ideal of celebratory behavior, it's kind of wasteful. And more important, it's potentially dangerous. Follow the instructions here, and you'll still get that great, popping sound—safely—and you won't waste any precious bubbly.

To open a wine bottle:

1. Remove the bottle seal by running a knife around it and peeling it off.
2. Center the corkscrew in the middle of the cork.
3. Twist down until the corkscrew is completely submerged in the cork. Use the arms of the winged corkscrew or leverage handle of the waiter's corkscrew to slowly pull out the cork.

Unfortunately, some corks, due to improper storage or sealing, are so dry they either crumble or break in half when opening, leaving you stuck with half a cork in your bottle. What do you do? Well, there's no guaranteed trick for this. I don't think pushing the cork into the bottle is ever acceptable. It's a mess, and the cork can have sediment or mold on it, which you don't really want bobbling around in your *vino*. I try to *gently* re-insert and twist in the corkscrew into the left-over, stuck cork and *slowly* pull it out. Usually, it works.

Chillin'

You have a few options when it comes to chilling or frosting a cocktail glass:

- ◆ Fill the glass $\frac{3}{4}$ with ice and a little cold water, and let it sit to chill while you prepare whatever cocktail you're making. When you're ready to pour, dump out the ice and water.
- ◆ Simply put the glass in the freezer $\frac{1}{2}$ hour prior to mixing your desired drink.
- ◆ If you want the glass frosty, run it under water first and place in the freezer for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour.



Cocktail Conversation

There's nothing like a frosty beer mug or pint glass. Always keep a few in your freezer for a chilly mug of ale whenever you feel the need for a cold one.

You probably started out this chapter less than comfortable with at least a couple techniques. But see? That wasn't so hard. Whether you are muddling mint or popping champagne, it just takes a little instruction and a little practice before you're lookin' like a pro!

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Garnishes aren't just extras—they are key components to a drink. Take stock of your bar to be sure you have the proper components for your favorite cocktails.
- ◆ When juice is involved, fresh is always best.
- ◆ To get the hang of mixing and stirring techniques, try using non-alcoholic (i.e., inexpensive!) substitutes to get comfortable with the tools and moves.
- ◆ When opening champagne or sparkling wine, always be sure to point the bottle away from people, animals, light fixtures, glass—anything that could potentially be hurt or broken.