

Charlotte Voisey's guide to drinking

By Sarah Rufca

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British mixologist Charlotte Voisey knows her way around a cocktail. After opening the celebrated Apartment 195 in London in 2002, Voisey was named UK Bartender of the Year in 2004, earned silver at the World Female Bartending Championships in 2006, was recognized by the prestigious James Beard Awards as a top mixologist in 2009, and has helmed bars in Barcelona, Buenos Aires and New York. Voisey stopped by Ill Forks in Houston to debut a couple of drinks she concocted for the occasion, the coral-hued Ill Forks Houston Martini and the Scottish Pair. In between sips, the lovely Voisey gave us a run-down of her favorite drinks, what's the next thing in mixology and how to make a mean cocktail. (Aspiring mixologists and cocktail connoisseurs can find her recipes below.)



Q: What's the difference between the drinking philosophy in the U.S. and the U.K.?

A: There's definitely a difference. America is where cocktails were really invented and they have a much longer history here, so you take them really seriously. In Europe we didn't really have cocktails until the Prohibition period, when all the American bartenders came over and started these bars that are legendary now, like the Dorchester Hotel bar in London, and really introduced that to us. So in Europe, the UK, even Australia, there's a sense of experimentation with cocktails, whereas in America it's much more oriented towards the craft and the history of the drink.

Q: What are your favorite drinks?

A: In the summer, of course I like things that are light. A mojito, for example—actually I really like a drink called a Southside, it's like a mojito but made with gin instead of rum. Also champagne cocktails, Lillet. In the winter I go for warm flavors, like scotch or whiskey, rather than warm drinks. And year round I love big, spicy red wines—I'm partial to Malbecs because I lived in Argentina. That doesn't have much to do with being a mixologist, but I'm only human.

Q: What drink trends do you like, and what's overrated?

A: I really like almost everything that's happening in mixology right now, because people are really looking backwards to those pre-prohibition cocktails and taking time to craft and appreciate those complex flavors. One fun thing in big cities I'm starting to see punch bowls that are big enough for four people to split, so a group will get one and no one can leave until it's done.

I don't really think the world needs so many flavored vodkas, but if that makes bartenders start to think about flavor profiles, that's a good thing. And I hate shooters on a bar menu. A shot glass is designed to bypass the taste buds and to get the drink down and get drunk as fast as possible. Everyone does them sometimes, but I don't like promoting them on the menu.

Q: What makes a great drink? How do you come up with new drinks?

A: There are so many factors in a good drink, but it's not just about what's in the glass, it's the whole experience. If you have a great drink in front of you, but you can't get the bartender's attention or they aren't friendly, or the place is not so great then you can't really enjoy it the same way. And vice versa, if the atmosphere is great but the drink is off. Start with a nice bar, a friendly bartender, and you want it to look good and smell good—that's all before you take a sip.

With a new cocktail, sometimes I want to match it to the place or occasion I'm making it for. Sometimes I get a new ingredient and I want to see what I can do with it. Sometimes I even start with a name and work from there. Like, for example, if I want to make a drink called a Candlestick, I think, what would that taste like? What would it have in it? And I work from there. And then when drinking a cocktail, to really judge it I can't just have one sip, I drink the entire thing and then make another. That's when you know a drink is good, when you can have one and want another and another.

Q: What's your most memorable bar experience?

A: There's a bar in Barcelona called Dry Martini that has this big altar, like for a church—white cloth and everything. And the only thing they make on it is a classic dry martini. Anything else, like if you order a martini extra dry or dirty doesn't go on the altar. They let me go up there one time to make a martini. The whole time I was like, I better not screw this up!



Ill Forks Houston Martini

- 1 ¼ oz Stolli Gala Applik
- ¼ oz Campari
- 1 oz pink grapefruit juice
- 1 oz pineapple juice
- ¾ oz simple syrup
- 3 basil leaves
- Combine ingredients and shake well
- Serve up in a martini glass
- Garnish with a tiny basil leaf and/or small grapefruit spiral

Scottish Pair

- ¾ oz Hendricks
- ¾ oz Glenfiddich 12
- 2 oz pear juice
- ½ oz agave nectar
- ¼ oz fresh lemon juice
- Combine ingredients and serve over ice in a rocks glass
- Garnish with a slice of pear