

hip sips

MARTINI MADONNAS MICHELLE HUNT AND LAURA PANTER

ARE THE REIGNING QUEENS OF COCKTAIL CREATION. BY MICHAEL DOJC

COCKTAIL DEVELOPMENT IS EQUAL PARTS ART, alchemy and inspiration, as any mixologists worth their swizzle sticks can tell you. Toronto-based drink designers Michelle Hunt and Laura Panter, also known as The Martini Club, use words like "gorgeous" and "beautiful" when describing their marvellous concoctions. The splashy descriptors are apropos.

Whether they are soaking up the glitz behind the bar at a Toronto International Film Festival party (where they are as ubiquitous as Atom Egoyan), teaching bartending seminars or chilling with beverage industry insiders, these suave women know how to shake things up.

The Martini Club serves Frank Sinatra-smooth cocktails, satisfying blends that electrify the palate and beg for further study. These are not ordinary drinks – they alter moods and start conversations. Hunt and Panter describe their creations in almost Zen-like terms, "where the cocktail is the party."

The M. Club's naked martini offers some insight into the Tao of their martini mastery: it's two ounces of vodka (straight from the freezer), an atomizer of vermouth, garnished with a fresh-cut sprig of rosemary.

"Rosemary's essential oils are said to help if you've got a hangover," says Panter. ("Or a headache; it's a pick-me-up," pipes in Hunt. They have this cute tendency of finishing each other's sentences.) "It's naked except for this little sprig, [which acts] like a fig leaf," says Panter, continuing on about the drink whose recipe came to her in a dream. "It woke me up in the middle of the night, it was so strong. I started smelling rosemary and going, 'Oh my God, this is it, the naked martini!'"

Many famous drinks had equally auspicious beginnings. Legend has it that in 1898, amidst a break in fighting during the Spanish-American War, an American captain poured rum into his Coke, and voila, a college staple was created. This is why in Castro country the drink still goes by its original name, Cuba Libre.

Time will tell if one of The Martini Club's hundreds of creations will have the same staying power. One such contender is The Persuader, a delectable vodka-based cocktail infused with sour raspberry and lychee liqueurs, with a splash of cranberry juice, served tall and icy, topped off with frozen blueberries. "You will get hooked on these things," assures Hunt.

The secret to a great martini is keeping it cool. It's always in the details. Many people have been turned off the drink because they've struggled to down a lukewarm martini, which is about as appealing as windshield wiper fluid. "We fill our mixing bowl to the brim with fresh ice, even for one martini, and we stir or shake depending on what the customer wants," says Hunt.

"Usually we like to stir because it doesn't froth and break up all the alcohol molecules. We'll give it a nice vigorous stir so that the sweat is just cracking on the silver side of the shakers," she adds.

"We do ice seminars, that's how weird we are about it," says Panter. "Nobody has ever sent a martini back for being too cold."

Like dog owners who mysteriously morph to resemble their pets, Hunt and Panter are personifications of their favourite drinks – well, at least certain elements of them. They have even given thought to what they'd taste like in a conical-shaped glass.

"I'd be pure and hard and clear. I'd be a naked martini for sure," says Hunt.

"Something complicated," posits Panter.

"We'd have to call it the Avril Lavigne," goads Hunt.

"It would certainly have to have gin in it," Panter continues.

"Ooh, party remover!"

For recipes and more martini musings and madness, visit the gals online: martiniclub.com



LAURA PANTER (LEFT) AND MICHELLE HUNT.
SHOT AT BLOOD LIQUID THEATRE, TORONTO