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TO LEVEL UP YOUR MARTINI, TRY THESE TOP-RATED GINS

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The iconic martini has stood the test of time for a few reasons. For one, it's instantly recognizable—everyone knows the V-shaped glass. It's also unmistakably bracing, crisp and versatile, a pristine canvas to customize with varying amounts of vermouth (dry, wet, 50/50?), garnishes (olive, twist, onion?) and flavorings from olive brine to dashes of liqueurs. With an always-expanding constellation of martini variations, no wonder it's one of the most popular drinks around the world.

But while some reach for a vodka bottle when mixing a martini (no judgment), gin is the drink's classic foundational spirit. And for these, the type of gin one chooses greatly impacts the resulting drink's flavor profile.

How does one go about choosing the right one? Here's everything you need to know—from gin basics to bottle picks.

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What Is Gin?

Gin is a distillate flavored with botanicals, notably pine-like juniper berries. The botanicals are usually the most distinctive part of the gin. In addition to juniper (which can be nuanced or pronounced, but is required to be part of the mix), common gin flavorings include spices (coriander, cardamom, anise), flowers (rose, lavender) and citrus peel (lemon, grapefruit). Some distillers select botanicals with specific concepts in mind, such as forest-like, tropical or ocean-inspired flavors.

While juniper-forward London Dry gin is the best-known type of gin, gin can be made anywhere (not just London), with a wide range of raw materials in the base distillate (grain, grapes, whey, etc.), and is made in a wide range of styles.

Best for a Martini with a Twist: Uncle Val's Zested Gin

Warm star anise, cinnamon bark and a teasing whiff of cocoa nibs perfumes this gin. The palate opens with a sweet, tingly mintiness that lifts off the palate, winding into a citrusy finish laced with lime peel. -K.N.

UNCLE VAL'S / ZESTED GIN