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A Newbie's Guide to the Bars

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Your first time at the bar can be a tricky rite of passage. We share our beginner tips so your friends won’t find you in the corner Googling “proper bar etiquette,” or “best drinks to order at the bar” the night of your 21st birthday.
speak the lingo

By now, you’ve probably walked down Welch a few times and passed signs that read “$3 wells and $2 draws” only to pause and think, “What’s up with all this bar lingo?” Study these key terms to look less like a newbie.

**Wells:** Drinks made with off-brand, in-house liquors that are significantly cheaper than name-brand. Instead of ordering a Jack and Coke, simply ask for a whiskey and Coke.

**Top shelf:** This refers to the more expensive name-brand alcohol that is placed on the top shelf behind the bar. This includes brands like Grey Goose, Patrón and Crown Royal.

**2fers:** Two drinks for the price of one, hence the name 2fer. They are the BOGO (buy one, get one) of alcohol.

**Domestic:** Beer from the U.S., such as Budweiser, Miller Lite and Coors Light.

**Imports:** Beer from other countries, such as Heineken, Corona and 312.

**Draws/Drafts:** This refers to how beer is served—from the tap.

pick your poison

On her 21st birthday, Angela Christianson, senior in journalism and mass communication, says she was afraid to order anything at the bar because she had no idea what to get.

“Often times you’ll get people, especially girls, who say, ‘I want a shot of something. I don’t know what, but I don’t want it to taste strong,” says Michelle Boettcher, bartender at Cy’s Roost.

Both Christianson and Boettcher suggest learning some specific drinks and going to the bar knowing exactly what you want.

Boettcher says the most popular drinks are rum and Coke, whiskey and Coke and Dirty Shirleys. If you want to shake things up a little, try ordering a Moscow Mule—vodka, ginger beer and lime—or a Nerd Bomb, an Ames original consisting of strawberry vodka, Red Bull and apple, grape and watermelon pucker.

keep it open

Opening or running a tab is when the bartender keeps a running charge of your drinks for a one-time bill. This is a convenient way to pay if you know you will be ordering multiple drinks throughout the night. The bartender may also ask you if you would like to “keep it open,” which is a subtle way of asking if you are planning on ordering more drinks and need to keep a tab running. However, you’re also likely to spend more than if you pay with cash for each drink.

Keep in mind that some bars set a minimum when paying with a credit or debit card. Boettcher says that at Cy’s, bartenders can’t close a tab unless it meets the minimum of $10, which can put people in an awkward position. She suggests only opening a tab if you’re certain you will order at least two or three drinks.

Be careful: Reality hits hard the morning after a foggy night when you realize you never closed your tab. If you do forget to close your tab, the bartender will close it at the end of the night and you can go back the next day to grab your card. No need to be too embarrassed either—it’s likely you won’t be the only one. However, not all bars are forgiving; at some places, the bartender can close out your tab at the end of the night and automatically add a 20 percent gratuity.

get creative

### Cocktails

**Long Island Iced Tea:** Don’t let the name fool you, this drink is strong. It consists of vodka, tequila, rum, gin, triple sec, sour mix and a splash of Coke.

**Dirty Shirley:** The grown-up version of a classic childhood drink. It’s made up of vodka, lemon-lime soda and grenadine.

**White Russian:** Made famous by the movie “The Big Lebowski,” this drink is a sweet blend of coffee liqueur, vodka and cream or milk.

**Sex On The Beach:** A fruity drink consisting of peach Schnapps, vodka, cranberry juice and either pineapple or orange juice.

### Shots

**Redheaded Slut:** The name says it all; this shot consists of cranberry juice, peach Schnapps and Jägermeister.

**Dirty Girl Scout:** A creamy shot made of coffee liqueur, Irish cream liqueur, creme de menthe and vodka.

**Kamikaze:** A popular shot consisting of vodka, triple sec and lime.

here’s a tip

Don’t forget to tip and do so generously. Some first time bar-goers forget that bartenders make less than minimum wage filling your mugs and mixing your drinks. Instead of trying to calculate the tip at the end of the night, just follow the general rule of $1 per drink.