The Home Bar Handbook

The Educated Ice Guide

What to buy, what to skip, and ten drinks you can make tonight.

The ice remembers...

by H. Finch

01

The Cocktail Napkin Version

Octavius scribbling tonight's idea.

Educated ice is bartender slang for ice that has already done a turn through one drink and carries traces of it into the next pour - a kind of seasoning. I think of advice the same way. The kind that has actually been through something is the kind worth using. This guide is mine.

> **I am H. Finch.** Thirty years of attentive drinking, with notes on roughly a hundred bottles at any given time. A stretch running a restaurant with a full bar - which is a working view of how bottles move through a hospitality business, not a bartending career. No formal certifications. What I have is three decades of pouring carefully and writing it down. This guide is the short version of what I tell friends when they ask where to start. As for the octopus? That is Octavius and he is our mascot - because octopuses are cool. See our homepage at educatedice.com for more color on Octavius.

A reader writes in almost every week with some version of the same question: “I want to start making drinks at home. Where do I begin?” And every time, I talk them out of the 30-bottle list they found on some lifestyle blog. That list is how people end up with $600 worth of bottles they never open and a fancy bar cart that makes nothing. Here is what I tell them instead: start with ten bottles, four tools, and one weekend.

THE COCKTAIL NAPKIN VERSION

- Total budget: ~$246-$293 for everything (bottles + tools)
- Bottles to buy: 10 (a Foundation Six + an Expansion Four)
- Tools to buy: 4
- Drinks you can make: 20+ classics - I feature ten
- Time to set up: one weekend

02

The Shopping List: Bottles

Buy these in order. Not all at once - in order. The Foundation Six get you making drinks this weekend. The Expansion Four open up tequila, rum, and the Martini. You can stop after the Foundation Six and still make more classics than most home bars do, or commit to the full ten.

The Foundation Six (~$121-$146)

Buy these first. With these six bottles you can already make an Old Fashioned, a Whiskey Sour, a Manhattan, a Negroni, a Boulevardier, and about a dozen other classics.

1. **Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon (~$22-$26)** - The workhorse. Good enough to sip, sturdy enough for cocktails, high enough proof that it does not disappear when you add ice. This is the bottle every bartender I know has at home.

2. **Rittenhouse Rye Bottled-in-Bond (~$25-$28)** - You need rye for a proper Manhattan and for anything that calls for a spicy backbone. Rittenhouse at 100 proof is the standard for a reason. Punches above its price every time.

3. **Beefeater London Dry Gin (~$18-$24)** - Classic juniper-forward profile. It plays well in a Gin and Tonic, a Negroni, a Martini - pretty much anything. Some people reach for Tanqueray here and that is fine too.

4. **Dolin Rouge Sweet Vermouth (~$16-$20)** - Clean, balanced, and it does not overpower the spirit. Dolin is the sweet vermouth bartenders actually use. Keep it in the fridge once you open it. Seriously - vermouth is wine. It goes bad.

5. **Campari (~$28-$34)** - Nothing else tastes like Campari. It is bitter, it is red, and it is non-negotiable for a Negroni. Also makes a Boulevardier (just swap the gin for bourbon). One bottle lasts a long time.

6. **Angostura Bitters (~$12-$14)** - A few dashes of this turns bourbon and sugar into an Old Fashioned. One bottle lasts months. If you buy nothing else on this page, buy the bourbon and the bitters.

The Expansion Four (~$94-$110)

These four bottles nearly double the drink list. They unlock the Martini family, the Margarita template, and the daiquiri-and-mojito side of the rum world. If your budget is tight, stop at the Foundation Six for a month, drink through the first few recipes, and add these when you are ready.

7. **Dolin Dry Vermouth (~$16-$20)** - The second half of the vermouth world. With Dolin Rouge you make Manhattans and Negronis. With Dolin Dry you make Martinis. With both you can split the difference (the Perfect Manhattan, the 50/50 Martini). Same refrigeration rule: once it is open, it belongs in the fridge.

8. **Cointreau (~$34-$38)** - The only orange liqueur worth buying as your first one. It is drier, cleaner, and more consistent than the bar-rail triple secs. Cointreau is what makes a Margarita taste like a Margarita instead of like tequila mixed with sugar water. Also builds the Sidecar, the Cosmo, and the White Lady. Worth every dollar.

9. **Espolon Blanco Tequila (~$26-$30)** - 100% blue agave at a price that does not punish you for wanting to make a Margarita on a Wednesday. Espolon Blanco punches well above its category - clean, grassy, a little peppery. Also what you want for a Paloma.

10. **Planteray 3 Stars White Rum (~$18-$22)** - A blend of three Caribbean white rums with real character, unlike the sweeter name-brand white rums that taste like sugared water. Makes a proper Daiquiri, an honest Mojito, and a Cuba Libre that is not embarrassing.

“Ten bottles. Four tools. Twenty-plus classics. That is the whole game - everything past this is personal taste.”

Fresh ingredients (the day you plan to make drinks)

- **Lemons & limes** - lemons for the Whiskey Sour; limes for the Daiquiri, Margarita, Mojito, Paloma
- **Fresh mint** - for the Mojito (one small bunch)
- **Grapefruit soda** - for the Paloma (Jarritos, Squirt, or Ting all work)
- **Simple syrup** - equal parts sugar and water, stirred until dissolved
- **Good ice** - not the freezer-tray stuff that has been absorbing onion smell

03

The Shopping List: Tools

Octavius and his four favorite tools.

You need four things. Not eight, not twelve, not a 15-piece Amazon cocktail kit with a bamboo stand and a muddler you will never use. Four.

THE ESSENTIAL FOUR

About $30 Total

- **Boston Shaker (tin-on-tin, ~$12)** - Two metal tins that fit together. Non-negotiable.
- **Hawthorne Strainer (~$6-$8)** - Fits in your shaker tin. Catches the ice.
- **Japanese Jigger (~$8-$10)** - Tall, narrow. Free-pouring is how you make bad drinks.
- **Bar Spoon (~$5-$7)** - Long, twisted handle. Stirs and measures.

Nice to Have (But Not Required)

A Y-peeler for citrus peels (~$4). A large-cube silicone ice mold (~$8) - big ice melts slower, which means less dilution and a better drink. That is it. Everything else is a want, not a need.

Skip These

Muddler (use the back of your bar spoon). Lewis bag and mallet (use a zip-lock bag and a rolling pin). Citrus juicer (squeeze by hand unless you are hosting a party). Cocktail smoker (novelty, not a tool). Any “complete bartender kit” from Amazon (you will use half of it and the rest sits in a drawer).

Do Not Forget

Fresh limes and lemons (buy weekly, not monthly). White sugar for simple syrup (equal parts sugar and hot water, stir until dissolved, refrigerate). Decent tonic water for G&Ts - Fever-Tree Indian Tonic or Q Indian Tonic, not the $1 store brand.

04

Your Total Investment

Here is the damage. Tax and shipping will shift these around a bit depending on where you live, but this is the ballpark.

Foundation Six

Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon	~$22-$26
Rittenhouse Rye BiB	~$25-$28
Beefeater London Dry Gin	~$18-$24
Dolin Rouge Sweet Vermouth	~$16-$20
Campari	~$28-$34
Angostura Bitters	~$12-$14
Foundation subtotal	**~$121-$146**

Expansion Four

Dolin Dry Vermouth	~$16-$20
Cointreau	~$34-$38
Espolon Blanco Tequila	~$26-$30
Planteray 3 Stars White Rum	~$18-$22
Expansion subtotal	**~$94-$110**

Tools (from Section 03):	~$31-$37
Grand total (bottles + tools):	**~$246-$293**

If that feels like a lot, split it. Buy the Foundation Six plus tools (~$152-$183) and stop for a month. Then grab the Expansion Four when you are ready. Even the Foundation Six alone is more capable than 90% of home bars I have seen.

05

Shaken or Stirred?

Octavius mid-shake.

James Bond orders his martini shaken, not stirred. It sounds suave. By classic cocktail convention, it is also wrong - a martini is spirit and vermouth, nothing else, and that drink gets stirred. The kind of bartender who would quietly correct Bond is the kind I learn from.

But I am also the kind who knows that what you pour for yourself in your own kitchen is nobody's business but yours. Here is what each technique is actually for.

Stir when every ingredient in the drink is a spirit. Manhattans, Martinis, Negronis, Boulevardiers, an Old Fashioned built in a mixing glass. The job is to chill and dilute with control, without aerating. Thirty seconds with a bar spoon, long enough that the outside of the glass frosts.

Shake when the drink contains citrus juice, egg white, cream, dairy, or anything that needs to be emulsified. Whiskey Sours, Margaritas, Daiquiris, Sidecars. Shaking drives the liquid through ice, chills faster, dilutes more, and introduces the air bubbles and ice shards that give a sour its frothy cap and cold bite. Twelve seconds, hard enough that the tin hurts to hold.

THE RULE OF THUMB

See through it? Stir it.

Cannot see through it? Shake it.

Clear spirits stirred. Juices and creams shaken. That rule will carry you through 95% of the drinks you will ever make at home. Bond's shaken martini muddies it, but the convention exists because it usually produces the better result. Break it on purpose, when you know why.

06

Ten Drinks You Can Make Tonight

You have the bottles. You have the tools. Here are ten drinks that use exactly what you just bought - no extra shopping beyond the fresh ingredients list.

Octavius pouring rounds.

I ordered them so foundational drinks come before the drinks that riff on them - Negroni before Boulevardier, for example - and then worked roughly outward from whiskey through gin, tequila, and rum. Start anywhere. Work through them in a weekend or a month. Either way, by the time you hit the last one you will know what you actually like to drink, which is the whole point.

RECIPE 1

The Old Fashioned

Whiskey-forward, stirred, served over ice

- 2 oz Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon
- 1/4 oz simple syrup (or 1 sugar cube, muddled with a splash of water)
- 2-3 dashes Angostura bitters
- Orange peel for garnish (optional)

Add the bourbon, simple syrup, and bitters to a rocks glass with one large ice cube. Stir gently for about 15 seconds. If you have an orange, peel a strip, give it a twist over the glass to express the oils, and drop it in.

> **H. Finch note:** *Do not overthink this one. The Old Fashioned is just whiskey, sweetener, and bitters - the original cocktail formula. If it tastes too strong, add a tiny bit more syrup. If it tastes too sweet, back off. You will find your ratio in about three tries.*

RECIPE 2

The Whiskey Sour

Citrus-forward, shaken, served up or over ice

- 2 oz Rittenhouse Rye (or Wild Turkey 101)
- 3/4 oz fresh lemon juice (about half a lemon)
- 3/4 oz simple syrup

Add everything to your Boston shaker with ice. Shake hard for about 12 seconds - you want it cold. Strain through your Hawthorne strainer into a rocks glass over fresh ice, or into a coupe if you have one.

The silky white head you see in the photo comes from one optional egg white. If you want that texture, crack a fresh egg and add the white to the shaker along with the rye, lemon juice, and simple syrup - no ice yet. Dry-shake hard for 10 seconds to whip the egg into foam, then add ice and shake another 12 to chill. The dry shake is what builds the cap that floats. Skip the egg if you prefer the cleaner non-egg version - the drink is still a Whiskey Sour, just without the cap.

> **H. Finch note:** *This is the drink that teaches you to shake. Fresh lemon juice is the key - bottled lemon juice tastes flat and chemical. Squeeze it yourself, it takes 30 seconds. The ratio here (2:3/4:3/4) is the sour template. Once you know it, you can make a Daiquiri (swap rum for whiskey, lime for lemon) and a Margarita (tequila, lime, Cointreau instead of syrup).*

RECIPE 3

The Manhattan

Whiskey and vermouth, stirred, served up

- 2 oz Rittenhouse Rye
- 1 oz Dolin Rouge Sweet Vermouth
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Brandied cherry for garnish (optional)

Add everything to a mixing glass with ice. Stir for about 30 seconds - Manhattans are stirred long. Strain into a chilled coupe or Nick and Nora glass. Drop in a cherry if you have one.

> **H. Finch note:** *The Manhattan is the test. If your vermouth is fresh and your rye has backbone, it tastes like an old-world drink that has been cold for two minutes. If your vermouth has been sitting open on the shelf for six months, it tastes like medicine. This is why I keep banging on about refrigerating vermouth.*

RECIPE 4

The Negroni

Bitter, balanced, stirred, served over ice

- 1 oz Beefeater Gin
- 1 oz Campari
- 1 oz Dolin Rouge Sweet Vermouth
- Orange peel for garnish (optional)

Combine everything in a rocks glass over a large ice cube. Stir for about 20 seconds until well-chilled. Garnish with an orange peel if you have one.

> **H. Finch note:** *The Negroni is equal parts everything - the easiest ratio in cocktails to remember. If the bitterness is too much on your first try, that is normal. Give it three attempts. Most people go from "I do not think I like this" to "this is my favorite drink" in about a week.*

RECIPE 5

The Boulevardier

Whiskey, bitter, stirred, served over ice

- 1.5 oz Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon
- 1 oz Campari
- 1 oz Dolin Rouge Sweet Vermouth
- Orange peel for garnish

Add everything to a mixing glass with ice. Stir for about 20 seconds. Strain over one large cube in a rocks glass. Express an orange peel over the top and drop it in.

> **H. Finch note:** *The Boulevardier is the Negroni's whiskey-drinking cousin - same three-ingredient structure, bourbon swapped for gin. (Published in Paris in 1927, a few years after the Negroni itself showed up in Florence.) Note the ratio: 1.5 oz bourbon to 1 oz each of Campari and vermouth, not the strict equal parts you use in a Negroni. Gin is light enough that 1/1/1 holds up; bourbon is heavier-bodied and gets buried at equal parts, so I push it half an ounce up to let the whiskey assert itself against the Campari. The original 1927 specs varied (some house specs run 1.5/0.75/0.75, the IBA is 1/1/1), but this is the modern bartender consensus and what whiskey-preferring friends - who think they do not like Campari - tend to come back for a second of.*

RECIPE 6

The Martini

Clean, cold, stirred, served up

- 2.5 oz Beefeater Gin
- 1/2 oz Dolin Dry Vermouth
- Lemon peel or olives for garnish

Add gin and vermouth to a mixing glass with ice. Stir for 30 to 40 seconds - the Martini is the longest-stirred drink in this book. You want it very cold and slightly diluted. Strain into a chilled coupe. Express a lemon peel over the top and drop it in, or drop in an olive or two if you prefer. And a splash of olive brine is a nice savory addition making it a “dirty martini.”

> **H. Finch note:** *Three things people get wrong. First, they skip the vermouth or use too little - a Martini without vermouth is just cold gin, which is not a cocktail. Second, they shake it - do not shake, stir. Third, they use warm glasses - put the coupe in the freezer for 10 minutes before you start.*

RECIPE 7

The Margarita

Tequila, citrus, sweet, shaken, served up or on the rocks

- 2 oz Espolon Blanco Tequila
- 1 oz fresh lime juice
- 3/4 oz Cointreau
- Salt for the rim (optional)

If you want a salted rim, run a lime wedge around half the rim of a rocks glass and dip it in a plate of kosher salt. Add tequila, lime, and Cointreau to your shaker with ice. Shake for about 10 seconds. Strain over fresh ice in the rocks glass, or into a chilled coupe if you are going up.

> **H. Finch note:** *Skip the bottled margarita mix forever. The fresh version takes 45 seconds longer and tastes like a completely different drink. The 2:1:3/4 ratio is the template - adjust the Cointreau up or down by a quarter-ounce to find your sweet spot.*

RECIPE 8

The Paloma

Tequila, grapefruit, bright, built, served tall over ice

- 2 oz Espolon Blanco Tequila
- 1/2 oz fresh lime juice
- Pinch of salt
- 4-5 oz grapefruit soda (Jarritos, Squirt, or Ting) to top

Fill a tall glass (a Collins or highball) with ice. Add tequila, lime juice, and salt. Stir briefly. Top with grapefruit soda. Garnish with a lime wedge if you want.

> **H. Finch note:** *In Mexico, the Paloma is the tequila drink people actually order. The Margarita gets the tourist traffic; the Paloma gets the weeknight. It is lighter, less sweet, and it does not beat you up the next day.*

RECIPE 9

The Daiquiri

Rum, lime, sugar, shaken, served up

- 2 oz Planteray 3 Stars White Rum
- 3/4 oz fresh lime juice
- 3/4 oz simple syrup

Add everything to your shaker with ice. Shake hard for about 10 seconds. Strain into a chilled coupe.

> **H. Finch note:** *The classic Daiquiri is the Sour template applied to rum. No blender, no strawberries, no frozen slushie from a resort pool. Just rum, lime, and sugar, shaken cold. This is what you order at a serious bar when you want to check whether the bartender actually cares.*

RECIPE 10

The Mojito

Rum, lime, mint, sparkling, built, served tall

- 2 oz Planteray 3 Stars White Rum
- 3/4 oz fresh lime juice
- 1/2 oz simple syrup
- 8-10 fresh mint leaves
- Soda water to top

In a tall glass, gently press the mint leaves with the back of a bar spoon - do not pulverize them, just bruise them enough to release the oil. Add lime juice, simple syrup, and rum. Fill with crushed ice if you have it, or regular ice cubes. Top with soda water. Stir briefly from the bottom up. Garnish with a mint sprig.

> **H. Finch note:** *The Mojito gets a bad reputation because it is usually made badly - mint pulverized into a green smear, too much sugar, no lime. Done right, it is one of the most refreshing drinks in the book. The gentle-press move on the mint is the whole technique.*

07

What Comes Next

Octavius reading up on what's next.

You have the ten bottles. You know ten drinks. Here is how your bar grows from here - not from a list, but from what you actually drink.

After a Month With the Ten

Pay attention to which shelf you keep reaching for. That is your signal. Bourbon going fast? Add a single-malt scotch (Laphroaig 10 for smoke, Glenfiddich 12 for something lighter, ~$45-$55) to open the Rob Roy family. Gin the star? Add Lillet Blanc (~$20-$24) for the Vesper and lighter aperitif drinks. Rum disappearing? An aged rum (El Dorado 12, ~$30-$40) for sipping and the Old Cuban. Love tequila? A reposado (Cimarron or Arette, ~$30-$35) alongside the Espolon Blanco.

The One Rule

Only add a bottle when you know what drink you are going to make with it. Not “it seems interesting.” Not “I saw it on a list.” “I want to make a specific drink, and I need this bottle to do it.” That is how you build a home bar that stays useful instead of becoming a shelf of regrets.

“A great home bar has 15 bottles you use every week, not 30 bottles you look at.”

KEEP GOING

The Complete Guide to Your Home Bar

This PDF is the quick-start version. For the full breakdown - glassware philosophy, organization tips, the Well / Call / Top Shelf trade-up ladder, and the ingredients most people forget - read the complete guide on the site.

educatedice.com/home-bar/guide/

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“The best home bar is not the most expensive one. It is the one that makes you want to use it.”

- H. Finch

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