



A bride walks into a bar...

Trust us, you haven't heard this one before. From wine to whisky, cava to champagne, we asked the pros for their tippable tips to help you stock your bar in style

the basics

How much of our budget should we allocate for drinks? Your total bar bill depends on a wine-cellarful of factors, including how boozy your mates are, how fancy you get with your offerings and how many hours your celebration lasts. "Around 15% of the total wedding budget will typically go into an open bar," advises Lesley Grainger of Ettington Park Hotel, a neo-gothic mansion venue in Stratford-upon-Avon (handpickedhotels.co.uk). If you're limiting things to just beer and wine, or your venue allows you to stock the bar yourself and you hunt for bargains, that figure could be more like 5%.

How many bartenders do we need?

Nothing kills a party vibe quite like a mile-long queue for a glass of cabernet, so be sure you've got sufficient staff. For every 120 guests, Adam Solomon of mobile bar company LiquidChefs (liquidchefs.co.uk) suggests two bartenders plus three servers who'll pass drinks on trays and clear up empties. "Drinks need to look good, taste good and be served quickly," he says.

Can we bring our own booze? It's up to your venue, says planner Kelly Chandler (thebespokeweddingco.com). Privately owned spaces like country manors, farmhouses and barns are more likely to let you DIY the bar, but on the flipside, city hotels and restaurants generally require you to use their bar services. "If you have the option of supplying your own drinks, take it, because you do save a lot of money," Kelly says. For 100 guests, plan for $\frac{3}{4}$ a bottle of bubbly and half a bottle of wine per person for the drinks reception.

WE'LL DRINK TO THAT

and wedding breakfast, then another 24 bottles of wine, 150 bottles of beer, two or three bottles each of your spirits and six large bottles of each mixer, like fruit juice, lemonade and tonic.

And if we can't afford an open bar?

"Just offer a selection of beer and wine as well as a signature cocktail – which are really fun to create in the run-up to the wedding," Lesley says. Guests can then buy off-the-menu mixed drinks from the bar if they're thirsty for something specific. Or, if you're having a cash bar in the evening, spring for a complimentary welcome drink or put an allowance towards beer and wine (say £200) to get the party started.

the wine

How many varieties should we offer? One each of a nice red and white is perfectly sufficient, says Stephen Finch, founder of London wine shop and tasting bar Vagabond (vagabondwines.co.uk). If budget allows, extend that to two of each plus a rosé, but make sure you stock enough of each to meet demand. "If one's popular and runs out, it can be awkward to have to serve the second choice," he says. As a rule of thumb, start with a 50/50 split of red to white, adjusting the ratio to include rosé or more white in spring and summer months.

Any good choices for crowd-pleasing reds and whites? You want versatile vino that can stand alone during cocktail hour, then pair nicely with your meal. Stephen rates Picpoul de Pinet by Domaine La Croix Gratiot (£105 per case of 12) as a crisp white that also works well with food, as well as a complex Spanish red, like Monastrell by Juan Gil (£10740 per case of 12). "You'll find better value outside the well-known regions and grapes," he explains. "It doesn't mean you save money, but you get better wine for your budget."

Can we return unused bottles? "It's always better to have too much than too little, so be sure your supplier has a buy-back policy," says Stephen. "We'll buy back 25-50% of unused bottles so long as they're in good condition." N.B. Plunging bottles of white into ice buckets will damage the labels and direct sunlight can spoil wine fast.

What about bubbly? "Champagne's got such a stranglehold on people's conception of sparkling wine, and it can eat up a lot of your budget," Stephen says. Instead, explore sparklers from other regions of France, such as Crémant d'Alsace or Crémant de Limoux (a £13 bottle of this stands up to a £30 champagne, says Stephen). Babot, a £10.45 dry cava (from Spain) beat out pricier champagnes at the shop's recent blind taste test, while quality Italian prosecco can be had for under £10.

the beer

What varieties should we stock? "Make guests interested, but don't frighten them with

only unknown beers," advises beer guru Rupert Ponsoby (beergeenie.co.uk). "Try a national brand of lager which pays homage to sweet barley and a local brand of ale that vibrates with perfumed, lemony hops. If you're adventurous, try a fruit or honey beer as well – they're great with puddings and chocolate cake." It also helps to think seasonally: refreshing, light-coloured ales work best in summer; while dark ales with warm toffee flavours are better in autumn and winter.

How can we display the bottles so it doesn't feel like a night at the student union? "A sense of theatre is vital," says Rupert, who recommends oversized buckets or large wooden casks brimming with ice. And size does matter: "75cl bottles of beer add the champagne experience without the price and are now available in many supermarkets."

Do we have to use boring pint glasses?

Definitely not. "Instead, use stylish glasses you'd like to see in your wedding photos. Champagne flutes can actually bring out the flavour of delicate lagers, red-wine tulip glasses are great for ales, and brandy balloons are perfect for old ales or barley wines."

the cocktails

Which spirits do we need? To appeal to everyone from the martini lover to the whisky sipper, a balance of boozes is essential. "Vodka, gin, whisky and rum are the four main ones to stock," says Adam of LiquidChefs. If budget allows, consider expanding to brandy, tequila and malt whisky, which are also frequently requested.

Will our venue provide designer cocktails?

"Some venues won't serve mixed drinks beyond basics like rum and Coke or G&T, or they will limit you to one special cocktail that will be pre-made and served in jugs," Adam explains. If you've got your heart set on more glamorous quenchers, consider hiring a mobile bar company like LiquidChefs, who'll shake up sophisticated drinks such as lychee lavender martinis using fresh fruits and juices and top-quality spirits.

What about guests who don't drink alcohol?

It's simply a matter of thinking ahead about virgin alternatives to other drinks you're serving – for a virgin mojito, just swap lychee juice for Bacardi, or pre-mix some sparkling elderflower and garnish with a fresh raspberry. "Every time we set up a cocktail bar, the non-drinkers are really chuffed that they're being looked after and aren't stuck with orange juice," Adam says. It won't cost you a penny extra, but you'll score major hospitality points.

Any tips for saving on booze? If your venue lets you BYO, plan ahead and shop around. "I had a bride call me from Morrisons to say there was a father's day special on vodka," says Adam. "I told her to grab 12 litres! Every bit counts."

A SIP FOR ALL SEASONS

Drine cocktail recipes just right for your big day, by the mixologists at LiquidChefs (liquidchefs.co.uk)

WINTER

NUITS & CARAMEL

You'll need: 5 or 6 walnuts; 12ml caramel syrup; 50ml Gold Label whisky

To make: Muddle the nuts with caramel syrup in a cocktail shaker. Add the whisky. Fill the shaker $\frac{1}{2}$ full with cubed ice. Shake and strain into a glass filled with ice.

SPRING CRASHA

You'll need: 1 lemongrass stick; $\frac{1}{4}$ red chili; 4 fresh basil leaves; 25ml tequila; 50ml pineapple juice; 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ml Gomme (a sweet syrup); 1 red chili to garnish

To make: Muddle the basil, lemongrass and chili with the Gomme in a cocktail shaker. Add the tequila and pineapple juice. Fill the shaker $\frac{1}{2}$ full with cubed ice. Shake and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with a chili.

SUMMER VANILLA & PASSIONFRUIT DAIQUIRI

You'll need: 1 passionfruit; 25ml passionfruit juice; 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ml vanilla syrup; 35ml Bacardi Superior rum; 10ml fresh lime juice; orange rind

To make: Scoop out the insides of the passionfruit, blend with the rest of the ingredients in blender. Add crushed ice and blend until smooth. Serve in a martini glass and garnish with an orange rind.

AUTUMN

CHOCOLATE MINT MARTINI

You'll need: 25ml vodka; 25ml chocolate liqueur; 25ml Baileys Irish Cream; 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ml Gomme; 8 fresh mint leaves; cocoa powder

To make: Muddle the mint and Gomme in a cocktail shaker. Add the vodka, chocolate liqueur and Baileys. Fill the shaker $\frac{1}{2}$ full with ice. Shake and strain into a martini glass. Dust cocoa powder on top.