



For Kimberly and Jonathan White (*below*), the annual walk is really just an excuse to gather friends and see their neighborhood up close.



## March of the Martinis

It's a block party with a twist—of lemon, plus gin, vermouth, ice, and great neighbors. **LAURA FRASER** on the delightfully icebreaking tradition known as the Martini Walk.

SOME PEOPLE, WHEN THEY'RE NEW TO TOWN, INVITE the neighbors over for cocktails. But when Jonathan and Kimberly White bought a house in Hillsborough, California, in 1998, they brought the cocktails—martinis, to be precise—right to their neighbors. “We’d just moved in, we were sipping our drinks, and I said, ‘Let’s take a walk around the neighborhood,’” recalls Jonathan, a mergers and acquisitions adviser. Strolling

the leafy streets with a long-stemmed glass seemed to invite interaction and inspired them to ask others to join the parade. Soon Kimberly and Jonathan were regularly filling their baby stroller with martini shakers, glasses, and olives, and rambling around the neighborhood, acting as the Pied Pipers of the after-work set. Neighbors who’d never spoken to one another were clinking glasses, laughing together, and trying not to ▶





In the spirit: The buffet table is set with giant martini-glass bowls; a guest arrives ready to join the fun (left).



spill. (Walking with a martini requires practice.)

Thus began the first “Martini Walk,” a (very) loose tradition now in its seventh year with eight chapters sprinkled up and down both coasts. Jonathan—the “Grand Martini” of the organization—says his walks have shaken up what otherwise might be a rather chilly neighborhood just south of San Francisco, where houses are hidden behind trimmed hedges and neat gates. “Most people drive into their garages and never see their neighbors.” But by hosting a moving block party, he says, “we get to meet everybody.”

**T**HIS EVENING THE WHITES are holding the Martini Walk season opener, leading up to a cookout at the Tudor-style home they share with their three young sons. (Martini season, according to the Grand Martini, runs from the first Friday in May through the Friday after Thanksgiving—though Jonathan admits to practicing in the off-season.)

About 50 martini aficionados are gathered by the pool, munching on snacks from bowls shaped like oversize martinis. Some of the guests are neighbors (including an 84-year-old widower from down the block who likes his with an olive), some are colleagues, old friends, and friends of friends. “The Martini Walk is for all walks of life,” says Jonathan. Many of the guests arrive decked out in martini-patterned pants and hats commemorating previous walks. Jonathan presents the

“olive award” for Outstanding Achievement in Martini Walking to the Portland, Maine, chapter, which held nine walks during the season. Then the bartender loads up a red wagon with shakers for the martinis (gin or vodka), cosmopolitans, and sodas for the kids.

And they’re off. The Grand Martini leads the walk out his driveway with the bartender pulling the wagon behind. No sooner do they round a corner than there’s a refreshment stop. People in cars wave and smile; even a policeman once gave them a friendly nod (it must be said that strolling with open alcohol in hand is often frowned upon—and illegal—in many parts of the country). For the Whites, the walk is an opportunity to peek into neighbors’ blooming gardens at a relaxed pace.

Halfway through the three-quarter-mile walk, a couple step out of their house and join the group. The red wagon stops, and the bartender pours them a couple of cocktails. As the procession

## The Martini Walk Martini

Jonathan White likes his martini so dry, he omits the vermouth and adds a 1/16-inch sliver of fresh jalapeño for a “jalapini.”

### 3 ounces Beefeater gin\* Ice

**1. Pour gin over ice in a shaker. Swirl contents until shaker is almost too cold to touch. (To make a classic martini, add a capful or less of dry vermouth, to taste.)**

**2. Strain and serve with a lemon twist or olive.**

\* An MW martini can also be made with vodka.

continues, one veteran guest recalls the time the walkers waved hello to a guy with hedge clippers, offered him a drink, and soon everyone was jumping into his backyard pool.

After the walk, the party continues at the Whites’ house. Guests dig into the Texas barbecue of ribs, chicken, cornbread, baked beans, and coleslaw, chatting and swapping stories about previous years’ gatherings. Some stay for a final nightcap—the beauty of a Martini Walk is that no one’s driving home.

The evening ends on a bittersweet note: This season’s opener is something of a closer for the Whites, who are moving to Denver for Jonathan’s new job. They plan to open a Mile High chapter of the Martini Walk as soon as they get settled. They know there’s no faster way to meet the neighbors than to offer them a perfectly dry welcome martini. ●

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