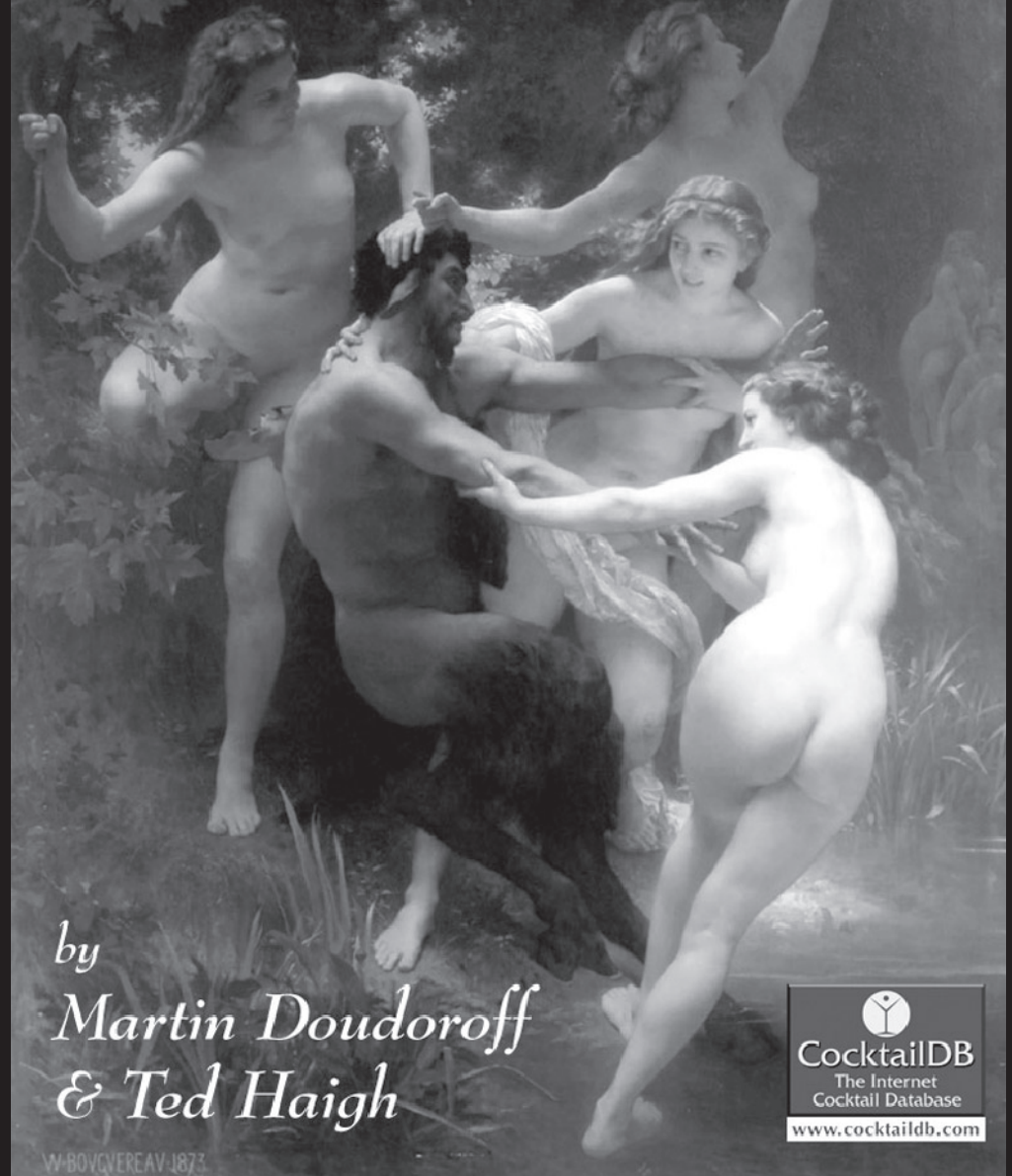


AN APPRECIATION OF
Aperitif Wines



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Tales of the Cocktail Edition

*Compliments of
The Internet Cocktail Database*

by
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An Aperitif Wine Primer

Venues that feature aperitifs

Aperitifs, wine or spirit-based in some forms are easy to find. Restaurants, for instance will often carry Dubonnet, dry sherry, and Campari, and always vermouth. A wider range may be occasionally found in traditional Italian, French, or Basque restaurants. If you reside in New York, the likelihood is even greater that your quest will end successfully.

Other aperitifs to look out for in the liquor store and online

Fortified wines:

- Dry sherry, such as fino or manzanilla
- Cora Amaro

Spirit-based aperitifs:

- Italian amari (Fernet, Campari, Cynar, etc.)
- other lesser-known aperitif bitters in comparable styles (Suze, Unicum, Amer Picon, Torani Amer, Calisaya, etc.)
- pastis (Pernod, Ricard, Herbsaint, Pastis 51)
- Absinthe is also an aperitif and, while not legal in the United States, has an extensive Internet presence. Information is a mere mouse click away.

Aperitif wine is fortified, aromatized wine infused with botanicals and fortified with neutral (or near-neutral) brandy (grape) spirits. All aperitif wines have a grape wine (white wine, almost always) base. Red/dark/opaque aperitif wines achieve their coloration through the addition of other ingredients. This classification includes all vermouths and an assortment of proprietary-formula wine products.

“Aperitif” derives from the Latin *aperire*, which is the verb “to open” in the sense of “opening up” the appetite.

Aperitif wines are relatively low in alcohol content (usually 16-19%) when compared to spirits, but rather higher than non-fortified wines which generally have a strength of about 12%. and are comparable, strength-wise to non-aperitif fortified wines like Port, Madeira, or Sherry. Also like other fortified wines, aperitif wines are typically enjoyed in smaller servings than wine (2-3 oz.) The vast majority of aperitif wines are quite reasonably priced (\$10-14 for 750ml).

In liquor stores, aperitif wines are typically found on shelves near sherries and ports, although this is not always the case. Aperitif wines are regulated as “liquor” in New York State, and are less likely to be available at stores that just sell wine. Unfortunately, even the best liquor stores are unlikely to have more than a haphazard assortment of aperitifs wines, and are even less likely to have anyone on staff that actually knows anything substantial about these products.

While there is no such thing as “the best aperitif wine” (or any other liquor) some products are definitely more celebrated than others. We are blessed with a wealth of fine products with individual characters, and that diversity should be valued.

Vermouth

The term “vermouth” was derived from “wormwood”, which was once one of its primary infused botanicals. Wormwood’s key action was not one of flavor, but of bitterness and all aperitifs carry a subterranean – sometimes almost undetectable – bittersweet character that stimulates the production of gastric juices and promotes appetite. Vermouth originated in Turin, Italy, in the late 18th Century, as a moderately sweet, herbaceous, dark red or brown wine; this red style is what we know as Italian (or “sweet”) vermouth. In the United States, Italian-style vermouth is most strongly associated with the Manhattan cocktail.

The French style of pale straw-colored “dry” vermouth emerged in the mid-to-late 19th Century. In the United States, French-style vermouth is most strongly associated with the Martini cocktail. Dry vermouth is also useful in the kitchen as a cooking ingredient, and it makes a particularly nice alternative to white wine in pan sauces.

The Italians also have a style of vermouth called “bianco” (white) that looks somewhat like dry vermouth but is also a sweet vermouth. Bianco vermouth is uncommon (though sporadically available) in New York and elsewhere in the country; it enjoyed some popularity in the 1950s and ‘60s.

Italian-style	red, somewhat opaque	sweet	Vya Sweet Vermouth, Carpano Antica, Cinzano Rosso
Bianco	straw, clear	sweet	Cinzano Bianco
French-style	straw, clear	dry	Vya Extra-dry Vermouth, Noilly Prat Dry Vermouth

Almost all modern-day vermouth producers manufacture both sweet and dry vermouths. However, it is generally fair to say that French producers are better known for the light, dry French-style vermouths, and Italian producers for the red, spicy Italian-style vermouths. Major exceptions are Vya (California), which produces outstanding sweet and dry vermouths, and Cinzano (Italy), which makes very respectable vermouths in the dry, sweet and bianco styles.

Reverse Martini

2 oz aperitif wine (again, try any of them)
1 oz dry gin (again, Plymouth or Beefeater recommended)
Stir with large ice cubes and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.
Garnish with a lemon twist.

Manhattan

2½ oz rye (or Bourbon) whiskey
1/2 oz to 2 oz of the highest quality sweet vermouth available (try it also with other aperitif wines, and don’t be hesitant to use the ones that aren’t red)
1 dash Angostura bitters
Stir with large ice cubes and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.
Garnish with a cherry macerated in whiskey and/or a lemon twist.

Rob Roy

2½ oz Scotch whisky
1/2 oz to 2 oz of the highest quality sweet vermouth available (try it also with other aperitif wines and, as with the Manhattan, don’t be hesitant to use the ones that aren’t red)
1 dash Peychaud’s (or Angostura) bitters
Stir with large ice cubes and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.
Garnish with a cherry macerated in whiskey and/or a lemon twist.

Rose Cocktail

2 oz dry vermouth
1 oz kirschwasser
1 teaspoon raspberry syrup
Shake in an iced cocktailshaker and strain into a cocktail glass
Garnish with a cherry.

While, of course, Martinis can also be made with vodka, the special flavor interaction between gin and aperitif wines would be lost. Manhattan-like cocktails are sometimes made with Canadian whisky and other blended whiskies or with Irish whiskey, but they tend to lack the natural balance characteristic of the drinks as made with rye or Bourbon.

Cocktail recipes

In addition to enjoying aperitif wines unadulterated, (either at room temperature or chilled,) they are featured in a huge number of cocktails. Here are a few examples.

The most fundamental aperitif wine cocktail to try is the Vermouth Cocktail. Simply stir two or three ounces of the aperitif wine of your choice and a dash of aromatic bitters with ice, strain it into a chilled glass (preferably small-bowled stemware) and twist a lemon peel over the surface of the drink. This is a classic low alcohol cocktail that is sophisticated, contemplative, and an effective, refreshing aperitif.

Next, try combining any two aperitif wines that strike your fancy in equal portions. Simply stir them together with ice and strain into a glass. A lemon twist is suitable. We particularly recommend trying combinations of one “red” aperitif wine and one “white” aperitif wine.

For something stronger, the two most essential cocktails that feature aperitif wines are the Martini and the Manhattan. These are drinks that pair aperitif wines, respectively, with gin and American whiskey. Setting aside the posturing, pontificating, *sturm und drang* over how to make “the best” Martini or Manhattan, these are both cocktails that encourage variation and experimentation. Beginning with a quality aperitif wine and a good gin or whiskey (be it rye, Bourbon or Scotch), ANY ratio can be employed and result in a very drinkable, enjoyable cocktail. Here are some ideas:

Martini (Prohibition ratio)

2 oz dry gin (we recommend Plymouth or Beefeater)

1 oz the finest dry vermouth available (then try it again with other aperitif wines, even the red ones)

Stir with large ice cubes and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Garnish with a lemon twist.

A dash of orange bitters is optional.

Celebrated vermouths include:

- Vya
- Carpano Antico (a recreation of 18th Century-style sweet vermouth)
- Cinzano Rosso (their sweet vermouth)
- Cinzano Extra Dry
- Cinzano Bianco
- Martini & Rossi Rosso (their sweet vermouth)
- Martini & Rossi Bianco
- Noilly Prat Original French Dry
- Boissiere dry vermouth

Cinzano is pronounced chinZAHno. Noilly Prat is pronounce NWAH-ee PRAW. Boissiere is pronounced bwah-ZAIR.

The more dubious and “me too” vermouths (perhaps worth trying, but *caveat emptor*):

- Stock sweet vermouth
- Stock dry vermouth
- Martini & Rossi dry vermouth
- Noilly Prat sweet vermouth
- Boissiere sweet vermouth
- Tribuno sweet vermouth
- Tribuno dry vermouth

Travels in France and Italy, will reveal additional regional vermouth brands and vermouth-based products that do not make it across the Atlantic. Experimentation is encouraged.

Punt e Mes

Carpano Punt e Mes deserves special attention. Though an aperitif, this venerable product is technically not a vermouth, but a bottled vermouth *cocktail*. Basically, it's a mix of Italian-style vermouth with added bitters and citrus. The name "punt e mes" means "point and a half," which derived from an anecdote whereby, in 1870, a beleaguered stockbroker allegedly ordered the aperitif in the form of a stock order – "a point and a half!" when requesting his preferred quantity – as with drops of aromatic bitters. Carpano Punt e Mes is a classic libation that can be used like a heavier, thicker sweet vermouth. It pairs extremely well with high-proof whiskies, such as bonded/100-proof rye or Bourbon. Punt e Mes is also – we are told – a fine accompaniment to a cigar.

Quinquinas

There are a number of venerable aperitif wines that are not vermouths, but have much in common with them. These wines are classified as "*quinquinas*", because historically these wines feature (or at least include) Peruvian chinchona bark ("quina" in the native Quechua tongue) amongst their botanicals. Chinchona bark is the world's primary source of quinine (the pharmaceutical and taste component of Tonic water). Quinine became the wonder drug of the 18th Century when colonizing Europeans realized that it was beneficial in warding off malaria, and these products are direct survivors of that era.

Each of these wines is a unique brand with its own special flavor and history.

- Lillet Blanc (be sure the liquor is straw colored, not red)*
- Dubonnet Rouge (be sure the liquor is red, not straw or green colored)*
- St. Raphael
- Byrrh (pronounced beer)

**Caveat emptor*: the respective producers of Lillet and Dubonnet—in an arguably misguided imitation of the vermouth manufacturers—have introduced relatively new products under the same brand in the opposite "color" as the original product. Lillet has introduced a "red" Lillet product to complement their traditional straw-colored wine. Dubonnet has introduced a straw-colored wine (usually with a green label) to complement their traditional red-colored wine. These "me too" products are regrettable for creating confusion and diluting these venerable brands. This marketing ploy would be more forgivable if these newcomers were more distinctive and had their own names.

Storage

As with other wines, aperitif wines oxidize once they're opened. They may take on different flavor characteristics in as little as 15-20 minutes. While open bottles of aperitif wines tend to gradually lose their more refined qualities over time, they have just enough alcohol in them that they tend to take years to go decisively bad. Open aperitif wines can keep almost indefinitely if they are tightly capped, in the refrigerator (or a cool place), and away from light. The wine may not be quite as good down the road as when first opened, but it will still be usable (especially for cooking).

The longevity of aperitif wines may be extended by using a "wine pump" or inert gas system to excise the oxygen in the bottle, or sterile marbles to bring up the level of the liquid. When possible, it can be advantageous to buy small bottles (so to replace them more frequently).

Aperitif wines do not tend to sell in high volume in the United States, so there is some risk of buying bottles that have been sitting in the distributor's warehouses or retail stores for a long time under less-than-optimal conditions; while old product is seldom ruined, it may have lost some of its *joi-de-vivre*. Avoid dusty bottles that look like they've been kicking around since the *Belle Epoque*.