The Art of Aperitivo

A guide for exploring the classic aperitifs of Europe

Presented by:

wines and spirits for the discerning drinker
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Forward from an Importer

Traveling the streets of Mediterranean Europe before mealtime can be quite a sight. People of all ages, shapes and sizes flood sunlit streets to partake in an exercise of opening one’s pallet. I first experienced it while roaming Oporto on an enchanting visit to the famous port houses of the Douro Valley. We have since seen it from Jerez to Barcelona to Aix to Venizia; the same general human desire manifesting under the wide array of culinary cultures and traditions that populate Europe. A structure for everything, including drinking and eating, which is not dictated by hours and work schedules – in fact the other way around.

I quickly became fascinated with this fact of life, what we have come to call the ‘Art of Aperitivo.’ It seemed that everywhere I went in Europe light, stylish and delicious sips reflective of the local palate would appear all around me in an act of preparation for more drinking and eating. Thousands upon thousands of expressions of apéritif, each as good and as different as the next. And all passed over the counter alongside savory snacks with a strict expectation for light grazing while one drank.

When I returned to America on periodic pilgrimages from my then adopted home of London, I wondered why we had never developed our own apéritif tradition in the United States. Yes, we have ‘happy hour,’ a time when hordes of workers escape the grips of air conditioned offices to celebrate the end of a workday with a few discounted drinks. But the objective here is typically quick and inexpensive inebriation, often by the hand of sweet and boozy drinks paired with greasy and heavy snacks. No one seemed to be concerned with encouraging a structure to consumption that would enhance the basic, hedonistic pleasure of eating and drinking.

My best friend and now business partner decided we would change all that. Americans, with our adoration for stimulating eating and drinking adventures, deserve to experience the apéritif traditions of Europe. And we – Lars Fasel and Leith Shenstone – would help them do it by making available in the United States a range of authentic, high quality and iconic European apéritifs.

We spend over 200 days a year in amazing and creative bars and restaurants across America, and another few dozen scouring apéritif productions regions for new imports. But most people don’t have this luxury of pursuing the ‘Art of Aperitivo’ for sport. This booklet is our attempt to distill what we have learned and share it in a convenient and accessible format. As such, this guide is an important step towards our larger vision of an aperitivo rich America. Understanding the history, styles and applications of European apéritifs is a key first step to enjoying them. Hopefully this guide sets you off on the right foot and enriches your drinking and eating experiences. Salud!
The Sum of All Parts

Mixing drinks, making drinks, bartending, crafting, mixology cocktailing - whatever you call this act of combining ingredients to fashion a beverage - is the culmination of a series of decisions that start long before ice hits the base of a glass. Because a libation is only as good as the sum of all decisions preceding it, we decided to provide some step-by-step guidance to help you make good decisions all along your aperitivo journey.

**Liquid Decisions:** the decisions you make at the wine & liquor store will make or break a cocktail. Here are a few rules to help you try new and different things without ending up disappointed. 1) Good aromatized wines are rarely under $15 because good base wine is expensive, so don’t buy cheap; sub-par aperitifs will have a more pronounced negative effect in a cocktail than a sub-par spirit. 2) Explore different styles from different producers and different regions. Changing your aperitif product will drastically change the nature of your drink. 3) Do your homework on new brands / their importers. It becomes clear pretty quickly which products are worth exploring.

**Organic Decisions:** buy good produce, ideally from a local fresh market. The quality of fruit and herbs varies considerably from store to store. If it does not look good enough for a snack, don’t buy it for your drink. We look for small-medium sized fruit with good density and consistently lush peels. Blemished or wrinkling suggest the fruit or vegetable might be aged, and this is not cheese people, so age is bad. If garnishing with herbs like mint or rosemary, be sure to use the fresher and younger leaves and give them a good smack in your palm first.

**Frozen Decisions:** ice is probably the most neglected ingredient in a cocktail, yet it is possibly the most important. First off, think carefully about the size of ice you want to use. Larger and denser cubes melt slowly, meaning less dilution. Crushed ice melts fast, meaning more dilution, but sometimes dilution is desirable. There really are no excuses since one can purchase nifty and colorful ice trays of many different shapes and sizes online or in any decent kitchen store / department. Make a conscious decision about the ice based on the style of drink, the season, your preferred taste and the concentration of ingredients. For example, viscous and sweet liqueurs like dilution while lighter vermouths may not. Finally, when making ice at home, try to use filtered water and try not to freeze it next to bananas, fish, coffee - anything in your freezer that might impart fragrance and flavor into your ice. It sounds crazy, but ice will take on flavors of things around it. No one likes a fish and green pea flavored Negroni.

**Durable Decisions:** glassware is the first impression of a cocktail experience. Before allyour effort is judged on what is in the glass, it will be judge by the glass it is in. The glassware will also impact the tasting experience. First and foremost use the right glassware. You really only need four styles - tumbler, highball, coupe, wine glass. Be sure to invest in some nice glasses. Vintage shops are an excellent source of low-cost yet beautiful cocktail glassware. Alternatively, try a specialty home retailer like Williams Sonoma. Curvature on the rim and comfort in the hand combine with other perceptions like flavor, aroma and appearance for a single sensory experience. In terms of tools, you can have as many or as few as you want. We tend to mix aperitif cocktails right in the glass to simplify the process. So just be sure to have a decent bar spoon.

**Decorative Decisions:** garnishes are important, but keep it simple. A fresh peel, pinched or twisted to express the juice in the skin is sufficient in most cases. We love using our simple ten dollar tomato peeler for peeling fruit. It pulls the perfect peel every time, and the blades are replaceable. For thin peels, you can either buy a special peeler or just cut smaller strips from peels pulled with your nifty tomato peeler and manipulate them into twists. It just depends how many tools you really want.

**Storage Decisions:** if it has a wine base put it and keep it in the fridge after opening, if it is a liqueur or spirit, don’t bother. This is a simple yet crucial rule. Following it will mean consistent results for your mixing. For anything wine-based, try to use it within 4 weeks. Higher quality products last longer (we figure you get about a day for every dollar you spend), so if it is old but you think it is still good just give it a whiff and a taste first to double check. Stickiness / lack of acidity signals deterioration.
The world of aperitivo can be divided into three major categories, each with a number of sub-categories, defined by certain production choices. Below is our mental map of the categories and an illustrated overview of how they are produced (using aromatized and fortified wines as the example).

**i) Aromatized Liqueurs**
- Amaro
- Aperitivo Liqueur
- Gentian Liqueur
- Other aromatized liqueurs

**ii) Fortified + Aromatized Wines**
- Gentian Wines / Americano
- Chinato
- Quinquina
- Vermouth

**iii) Fortified Wines**
- Marsala (not all)
- Mistelle
- Pineau des Charentes
- Sherry
Botanical Garden

Playing in the world of aperitifs necessarily involves interaction with and understanding of a range of plants and herbs - botanicals. We thought it might be nice to have a visual point of reference for the botanicals referenced throughout this booklet. What do all these strange things look like?
Vermouth

Vermouth is among the oldest wine-based aperitifs in existence. The word 'vermouth' derives from 'wormwood,' a bitter plant ingredient that provides a distinct tannic backbone. The category name is inherited from earlier Hungarian and German wormwood-infused wines of the same nature. Spain is the single largest consumer of vermouth per capita, while Italy is the largest producer. Styles from different European countries vary significantly, as do consumption habits. The quality of any vermouth is a function of the quality of base-wine and extract ingredients. Make sure to buy a good one, as it will make or break a cocktail, and be sure to try pairing different vermouths with a base spirit for new expressions.

**The Vermouth Formula**

White wine + botanical extract + sugar (if sweet) + caramel (if sweet red) + neutral alcohol (grape, grain or fruit based)

Typical herbs and spices for extract: wormwood, gentian root, angelica root, bitter orange peel, vanilla, cinchona bark

Base Wines: Moscatel, Macabeo / Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc

Types: dry, rosé (rare), sweet white, sweet red

**Key Production Regions**

France: southern Alps (Chambery); Cognac region

Germany: minimal production; Black Forest region

Italy: typically in the north (e.g. Milan, Turin, Asti)

Spain: most notably Catalonia, Madrid area and Rioja Alta

New World: USA (Oregon + California mostly), Australia, UK

**The Art of Vermouth Apéritifs**

**Barca Connection**

3oz Yzaguirre Vermouth Rojo

Tumbler

Medium ice cubes

Olives + Orange Wedge

Build in a glass on ice

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**Adam & Eve**

2oz Lacuesta Vermut Rojo

3oz quality tonic

Highball stuffed with ice

Grapefruit wheel + rosemary sprig

Build in a glass on ice

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**Better Spritz**

2oz Mancino Vermouth Bianco

1/4oz Big Gin or similar

1/4oz Rinomato Aperitivo

2oz dry sparkling wine

1oz San pelegrino

Grapefruit wheel + lemon peel + raspberries

Build in a glass on ice. One quick stir
Chinato (key’ not toe) traces its roots to the late 19th century. As tradition has it, a pharmacist from Serralunga d’Alba named Giuseppe Cappellano blended numerous herbs and spices into a slightly sweetened aged Barolo wine. The earliest Chinati gained popularity due to the kingly status of Barolo wines in Italy. Today, Chinato is made on a number of different Piedmontese base wines and often involves fortification. A mysteriously sweet, dry and spicy elixir, Chinato straddles the line between digestivo and aperitivo. Its bitter root ingredients prepare the palate yet a good Chinato can also tie the entire evening together. Try it with tonic.

**The Chinato Formula**

Red wine + cinchona bark + other botanicals for infusion + sugar + neutral alcohol (grape or fruit)

Wine base: Piedmontese red varietals, including Barbera D’Asti and Nebbiolo (some producers use DOCG Barolo wines)

Typical herbs and spices: cinchona bark, cinnamon, vanilla, star anise, gentian, rhubarb root, fennel, juniper, citrus peel

**Key Production Regions**

- Chinato wines are produced exclusively in Piedmont, Italy. The most traditional region of production is Langhe, which sits due south of Alba and the River Tanaro in the province of Cuneo.
- Most classic producers use Nebbiolo grapes, although some more modern entrants into the category are experimenting with other Piedmontese grape varietals like Barbera d’Asti.

**RinoKina**

1oz Mancino Vermouth Chinato
1oz Rinomato Aperitivo
1-2oz Tonic Water
Build in a high-ball glass over ice. Grapefruit peel

**Vintage Negroni**

1oz Mancino Vermouth Chinato
1oz Mancino Vermouth Rosso
1oz Rinomato Aperitivo or similar
1oz Low ABV gin
Stir in mixing glass and serve in a rocks glass. Lemon peel or wedge

**Chinotto Aperitivo**

2oz Mancino Vermouth Chinato
1oz Old Tom Gin
2/3oz Lemon Juice
1/3oz Honey Syrup (1:1)
Top up with Soda water
Shake all the ingredients with ice expect the soda water, double strain into a high-ball. Long lemon zest twist

**The Art of Chinato Apéritifs**
Malaria proved a persistent problem for French soldiers and colonials in new African territories. While authorities knew that quinine, extracted from the bark of the cinchona tree, worked effectively to counteract the virus no one could stomach its extremely bitter nature. Apparently French authorities offered rewards to anyone who could create wine-based recipes that would help make the quinine more palatable. A new aperitif category was born. Quinquina is essentially the French alternative to tonic water. Oddly enough, these two make exceptionally good bedfellows in the glass.

**The Quinquina Formula**

Wine + mistelle (see below) + botanicals for infusion + sugar + neutral alcohol (grape or grain)

Mistelle: made by adding alcohol to wine in mid-fermentation. Fermentation halts, leaving more sugar and fruity flavors behind

Typical herbs and spices: cinchona bark, chicory bark, angostura bark, orange peel, vanilla, cocoa

Types: white, amber, rosé and red

**Key Production Regions**

Quinquina aperitif wines are produced exclusively in France. The notable producers still in business today are from the following regions:

- **St Raphael**: Lyon, France  |  Established 1830
- **Byrrh**: Thuir, France (near Cote Catalanes)  |  Established 1866
- **Lillet**: Bordeaux, France | Established 1872

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**The Art of Quinquina Apéritifs**

**Spritz de Lyon**
1oz St Raphael Gold or Rose
1oz Rinomato Aperitivo
2/3oz Mancino Vermouth Bianco
3-4oz Soda water
Build in a wine glass with ice. White grapefruit wheel and edible flour (optional!)

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**Sbagliato Léger**
1oz St Raphael Rouge
1oz Mancino Vermouth Rosso
2oz Cremant or Prosecco
Stir quinquina and vermouth on ice. Strain into highball. Top with sparkling wine. Orange twist

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**The Golden nEGGroni**
1oz St Raphael Amber
1.5oz Mancino Vermouth Bianco
1oz London Dry Gin
Lowball
Stir in mixing glass. Serve over medium ice cubes. Lemon peel.
Gentian liqueurs have a long history as a popular apéritif in France, specifically in the region of Auvergne where the drink was originally created in the 1880s. To create gentian liqueur, the root stalks of gentian plants, along with a few other key botanicals and flowers of the Massif Centrale region of France, are macerated in grain alcohol. Gentian wines (called Americano if Italian) are a similar concept only they feature more quinine and are typically less sweet. The wine base also makes them less viscous and higher in acidity. On that note, vermouths with high gentian content can act like gentian wines and are worth a try in their place.

**The Formulas**

Gentian Liqueur: alcohol + gentian root + other infused botanicals + sugar + water

Gentian Wines (incl. Americano): wine (sometimes mistelle) + gentian root + other infused botanicals + sugar + alcohol

Typical herbs and spices: gentian root, quinine, wild mountain flowers, citrus peel

**Key Production Regions**

France:
- Auvergne (Aveze, Suze - liqueur)
- Limousin (Salers - liqueur)
- Chambéry (Bonal - a wine made by Dolin)

Italy:
- Asti, Piedmont (Rinomato Americano)
- Turin (Cocchi Americano - wine)
- Trento (Cappelletti Aperitivo - wine)

**The Art of Gentian Liqueur & Wine Apéritifs**

**Gentian Soda**
2oz Rinomato Americano
2-3oz tonic or soda water
Glassware: High-Ball
Build in glass filled with ice. Orange peel or twist.

**Negroni Bianco**
1.5oz Rinomato Americano
1oz Mancino Vermouth Bianco
1oz Big Gin or similar
Glassware: Rock Gobbler
Stir over ice in mixing glass. Double strain. Lemon wedge

**Vesper**
1oz Rinomato Americano Bianco
1.5oz Vodka
1oz London Dry Gin
Glassware: Presidente / Coupe Method:
Shake with ice and double strain. Lemont twist
**Aperitivo Liqueur**

The Aperitivo Liqueur category is driven by gentian root and bitter orange peel, which create an exceptionally bitter flavor when macerated in alcohol. As with most things Italian, Aperitivo Liqueurs vary widely in style as one traverses regional and cultural boundaries. What all of them do share in common is a balance between bitter and sweet, a notable presence of root plants, flowers, herbs and spices, and origination in the northern mountainous regions of Italy. The formulas out there today vary wildly from very sweet to very bitter, and production varies from downright industrial to charmingly artisinal. Get exploring.

**The Formulas**

Aperitivo Liqueur: alcohol (grain or fruit based) + botanical extract + sugar + color (artificial, carmyne or plant)-based + water

Bitter expressions (15-30% ABV): gentian is the primary focus, with a strong presence of other bitter herbs like angelica, cinchona bark, cascarilla, wormwood and ruhbarb. High sugar to offset the bitterness.

Light expressions (10-15% ABV): bitter orange peel is front and center. Other common ingredients are vanilla, cinchona bark, chirata.

**Key Production Regions**

- Asti, Piedmont, Italy (Rinomato, Contratto)
- Milan, Italy (Campari, Aperol)
- Trieste Italy (Aperitivo Select)
- Trento / Venice, Italy (Luxardo)
- Turin, Italy (Gran Classico)
- USA (Leopold Bros in CO / St George’s in CA)

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**Han Solo**

3oz Rinomato Aperitivo  
Glassware: Rock Gobbler  
Stir Rinomato over ice and strain into glass. Fill with medium or large ice chunks. Wedge of Lemon

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**Rossetto**

2oz Rinomato Aperitivo  
Top up with quality Ginger Ale  
Glassware: High-Ball  
Build over ice. Gentle single stir. Fat lemon peel

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**Agitato**

2oz Rinomato Aperitivo  
1/2oz Big Gin  
Glassware: Presidente / Coupe  
Method: Shake with ice and double strain. Orange zest, oil only  
Wedge of Lemon
Mastering the art of aperitivo is not complicated.

Meaning 'to open' - referring to your palate - the concept of aperitivo encompasses a broad range of drink styles and flavor profiles. They are typically dry, bitter-sweet, sparkling, or a combination of these elements. They are designed to awaken your palate and induce appetite.

Be sure to use authentic, quality ingredients made for the discerning and educated drinker. Your cocktails are only as good as the ingredients you use.

If you would like to learn more about apéritifs, the Fasel Shenstone portfolio, or are interested in working together, please contact us.

Fasel Shenstone is a leading importer of quality apéritifs working across the United States.

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