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Italian vermouth revival

An Italian vermouth with an American name steps in for a French mate

April 17, 2011 | By Zak Stambor, Special to Tribune Newspapers

Change is not always for the better.

Take Kina Lillet, the French aperitif wine that was one of the five ingredients that made up the cocktail Corpse Revival No. 2. (A corpse revival was a category of cocktails in the 19th century. Version No. 2 is the variation that survived thanks to Harry Craddock's "The Savoy Cocktail Book.")

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In the 1980s, Kina Lillet's makers changed the aperitif's formula, cutting back on its bitter and sweet melange of flavors.

They cut back on the amount of bitter cinchona bark in its recipe and renamed the product Lillet Blanc. Now, in its current incarnation, it is a more benign, less alcoholic version of its former self that is apparently aimed at the modern palette.

While Lillet Blanc may taste better on its own to some, it lacks the distinct bitter, spicy qualities that made it work in cocktails like the Corpse Revival No. 2, says Mike Ryan, head bartender at Sable Kitchen & Bar in Chicago.

"Making a cocktail is a lot like cooking," Ryan says. "When one ingredient changes, it alters the balance of all the other elements."

Which is why mixologists have long sought a substitute for Lillet Blanc.

That's where Cocchi Americano fits in. The Italian aperitivo has long been thought to be the closest thing to the original Kina Lillet.

The aperitivo, which has been produced since 1891, is made from a base of moscato wine that is fortified with brandy, then infused with gentian root, cinchona bark, orange peels and herbs before being aged for a year in a wooden barrel.

The problem was, it had been several years since it had been available in the United States. That is, until last year, when its makers found a U.S. distributor.

Now Cocchi Americano, which is similar to dry vermouth, can serve as a substitute for Kina Lillet or Lillet Blanc, in just about any cocktail, Ryan says.

"It adds a distinct citrusy, barklike, bitter element," he says.

Try it on its own, with ice, soda or tonic water and a lemon wedge. Or in this revival of the Revival.

Corpse Revival No. 2

¾ ounce gin

¾ ounce Cocchi Americano

¾ ounce orange liqueur
¾ ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice
¼ ounce absinthe
Maraschino cherry

Fill a cocktail shaker halfway with ice. Add the gin, Cocchi Americano, orange liqueur, lemon juice and absinthe. Shake well. Strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with the cherry.

-- Adapted from Harry Craddock's "Savoy Cocktail Book."

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