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Vermouth and the Lost Art of the Aperitif

By [Jeremy Parzen](#) Thu., Aug. 11 2011 at 3:00 PM

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Many might think that vermouth should be covered by one of my excellent cocktail blogging colleagues like [Nicholas Hall](#) (as a fan of all things Italian, I loved [his recent post on Fernet Branca](#)). In the U.S. we only think of vermouth as a liqueur and an ingredient used in cocktails (and sometimes in cooking).

In fact, vermouth is white wine that has been infused with herbs (the word vermouth comes from the French *vermout*, which, in turn, comes from the German *wermuth*, meaning *wormwood*, one of the early ingredients used to infuse the wine with flavor). And in Europe, particularly in France and Italy, sweet white vermouth is still served on its own, often garnished with a lemon wedge, as an aperitif: "An alcoholic drink taken, before a meal," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to stimulate the appetite" (from the Latin *aperitivus*, from *aperire*, meaning to open).

The other night, when a friend produced a bottle of Cocchi white vermouth (available at [Spec's](#) for around \$20) and suggested that we enjoy an *aperitivo* (in Italian) before dinner, I was transported back to my university days in Europe in the '90s, when no meal began without an aperitif of sweet vermouth or a bitter like Aperol or Campari (both also made from white wine infused with herbs).

Historically in the U.S., vermouth was marketed to consumers as a cocktail ingredient, and many of the classic cocktails we enjoy today were concocted by the marketing departments of savvy European vermouth producers who wanted to break into the Bourbon-dominated U.S. liquor business. The Manhattan (Bourbon, sweet red vermouth, Angostura bitters,

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lemon zest, and maraschino cherry) is a wonderful example of this.

"It's Cinzano," reads the 1937 advertisement (pictured right), "for Manhattan's Manhattans."

"Cinzano vermouth is widely enjoyed in Manhattan (and, of course, in Manhattans). There is [sic] two reasons for this. First: New York has so many cosmopolitan travellers from lands where vermouth is part of good living... Second: Native-born New Yorkers are great cocktail consumers."

The gentle alcohol in vermouth and the intense flavors help to stimulate the appetite by prompting the stomach to produce acid, alerting the digestive tract that a meal will begin shortly.

Don't get me wrong: I love vermouth in my Manhattan, and I love a Martini where the glass has been primed with dry vermouth.

But the next time you visit Milan or Paris, stop in a café and order an *aperitivo* or *aperitif* of sweet vermouth on your way to the restaurant where you'll be dining. It's always served with a snack -- salty potato chips or nuts, *pizzette* or *bruschette*, or maybe even a pig-in-a-blanket. You'll discover how it enhances the main event before it even starts.

And in the meantime, please try this at home. *Buon appetito!*



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