



APRIL 21, 2010, 5:31 PM

Case Study | Cocchi Americano: Waking the Dead

By **TOBY CECCHINI**

Amy Sussman

It is a universal truism, not to mention a bedrock commercial ploy, that when you tell someone they can't have something, they'll likely become obsessed with obtaining it. This is readily demonstrated by liquor fanatics, who will cross the globe for a bottle of the most obscure and often pointless spirits, just to say they've tasted them. I am as guilty of this as anyone, and need only point to my several-year hunt for the elusive Cocchi Aperitivo Americano (pronounced co-key), for which I've buttonholed friends heading to Italy and Oakland, Calif., where it was once rumored to have an importer, all in vain.

This aperitivo — something along the lines of a vermouth — has been made since 1891 from moscato d'asti, a sweet white wine fortified with a touch of brandy, then flavored with gentian, cinchona bark and other bittering aromatics, along with orange peels and herbs. There are any number of similar products on the market, but what has cocktail enthusiasts excited about Cocchi is that it is secretly acknowledged to be the most similar product in existence to the old-formula Kina Lillet.

In 1986, Lillet reformulated its famous digestif wine, Kina Lillet, to a less-alcoholic and less-bitter version, removing the "Kina" from the name and marketing it as Lillet Blanc. (*Kina* or *quinquina* is the French shorthand for cinchona, the spectacularly bitter bark from Peru that makes quinine.) The company's Web site still cites cinchona as one of Lillet's ingredients, but you'd be hard pressed to taste it. Those with the requisite memory say that while the change made the new, milder Lillet arguably more quaffable, it left a hole where Kina Lillet stood in several classic cocktails, primarily the Corpse Reviver #2 and the Vesper.

Maybe that's why the Vesper has never done much for me. "Invented" by Ian Fleming in his 1953 James Bond novel "Casino Royale," it calls for three parts of Gordon's gin (or the Gordon's of that time, which was stronger than today's) to one part vodka and a half measure of Kina Lillet, with a long, thin peel of lemon for garnish and, of course, shaken, not stirred. It has its fans, but to me it's never seemed like much beyond a tub of alcohol. I always felt the Lillet was a laggard, but then I hadn't known that Lillet used to be a different animal.

The Corpse Reviver #2 is a game-changer, however, one of my all-time favorite cocktails and the sole reason I've been slaving to find Cocchi Americano. It is one of a small family of drinks originally concocted as hangover remedies, of which Harry Craddock, cataloging them in the "Savoy Cocktail Book" in 1930, wrote, "To be taken before 11 a.m., or whenever steam and energy are needed." (He also famously cautioned: "Four of these taken in swift succession will quickly unrevive the corpse

again.”) The Corpse Reviver #2 has been having a bit of a renaissance, and you can now occasionally find it on better cocktail lists. But there’s no point in waiting on chance: learn to make this drink for yourself and those you hold most dear. It is dead simple, being equal parts of four ingredients: gin, fresh lemon juice, Cointreau and, historically, Kina Lillet, plus a dash of absinthe, shaken wildly and taken frostily. It is a thing of perfection — a sharp slap followed by a butterfly kiss of absinthe — so many times greater than the sum of its parts. But each of those parts is crucial. To be fair, a Corpse Reviver #2 made with Lillet Blanc is still a fine thing, but the more forthright bitterness, the denser body and spice of the Cocchi Americano, brings this drink home again.

Roberto Bava, a genially chatty Italian who runs the Bava family winery with his brothers in Asti, came to New York recently with some samples, among which, almost as afterthoughts, were his stellar Vermouth di Torino, a plump, chocolaty Barolo Chinato, and the holy grail: the Cocchi Americano. The name is a bastardization of the term for making a bitter, and has nothing to do with our fair country — except that as of this week, it is available here. Look for it on shelves at Crush Wines, Astor Wines and Spirits, and Union Square Wines. For \$18 to \$20, I can finally hold it in my hands. Bava seemed bemused by all the fuss over cocktails, and proffered me a glass of the Americano the way the Italians take it: two parts strong with one part soda water, over ice, with a slice of orange. With my blinders on, I was shocked by how tasty it was. You mean there are other uses for this stuff?

Corpse Reviver #2

3/4 ounce gin

3/4 ounce lemon juice

3/4 ounce Cointreau

3/4 ounce Cocchi Aperitivo Americano

Scant bar-spoon-ful quality absinthe (see note).

Combine ingredients over ice, shake vigorously and strain into cocktail coupe or pony glass. A garnish is unnecessary, but different recipes call for either a twist of lemon or a real maraschino cherry.

Note: When absinthe was unobtainable, the drink was routinely made with pastis, and a dash or even a rinse in the glass was the call. Good absinthe, though much stronger in alcohol, is far more nuanced, so I prefer a scant bar-spoon-ful in the shaker itself.