

COCKTAILS

WHET BAR: YOUR GUIDE TO
LIGHT, BRIGHT APERITIFSBy *MIX* EditorBy PAUL CLARKE
Photography by MIKE DAVIS

You wouldn't commence an elaborate meal with a slab of cheesecake, and yet many diners still start the evening with the palate-thumping power of a potent martini. We love our cocktails, but we also love good food, and Americans are slowly discovering what Europeans have known for more than a century: The path to gustatory bliss often begins with a light, bright, gently bitter aperitif.

RECIPE
Grüner's **Aperitivo**
Bianco cocktail
recipe

Classic European aperitifs are typically wines (though some are spirit-based) that have been fortified with higher-proof spirits and flavored with a mix of herbs, spices and other botanicals, many chosen for alleged medicinal properties as well as their reputation for stoking the appetite and aiding digestion.

Aperitifs are increasingly popping up in craft bars and restaurants such as **Cocotte**, which fortifies its drink menu with a varied selection of French and Italian aperitifs. For co-owner Levi Hackett, aperitifs contribute to a more

relaxed, Old World style of dining. "People come here and eat and drink for three hours, and aperitifs are a way to introduce that casual, stay-all-night experience, where you drink the appropriate drinks that help you enjoy your meal," he says.

The availability of aperitifs has blossomed in recent years, making the selection both exciting and confusing. What's the difference between them? How are they best consumed? Straight? Rocks? In a cocktail? To dispel the confusion, here's a primer on some of the more interesting aperitifs available in Oregon stores.



COCCHI VERMOUTH DI TORINO

Vermouth has long been the neglected child of the drinks world, ubiquitous in bars as a cocktail ingredient but rarely taken seriously on its own.

That's changing, thanks largely to flavorful bottlings such as Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, made in the aperitif wine's ancestral home of Turin. Unavailable in the U.S. until earlier this year, this classic Italian rosso vermouth is russet in appearance.

What it tastes like: Lightly sweet with a gentle, spice-tinged bitterness.

How to serve: With an ice cube or two and a slice of lemon. This vermouth also classes up cocktails such as Manhattans and Negronis.



DOLIN BLANC VERMOUTH

Turin is the home of Italian-style sweet red vermouth, and Marseillan, in the south of France, is the birthplace of the French dry-style vermouth typically deployed in martinis. But the more floral and herbaceous blanc vermouth has its origins in the town of Chambery, in the French Alps, where it was created in 1821.

What it tastes like: Unlike the more familiar dry vermouth, Dolin Blanc has a mellow sweetness and an airy, flowery character.

How to serve: Lovely when chilled, it's also a

welcome ingredient in cocktails such as the Americano Bianco served at Gruener.

COCCHI APERITIVO AMERICANO

Another relative newcomer to local bars, Cocchi (pronounced co-key) Aperitivo Americano has been a hit in northern Italy since its 1891 debut. The crisp aperitif wine is made using a base of moscato di asti. While vermouths take their bitter notes from the use of wormwood, Italian chinati such as Cocchi Americano are rendered bitter by the use of cinchona bark, the source of quinine, which gives tonic water its bitter bite (in France, this style of aperitif is called a quinquina).

What it tastes like: Crisp, with bright notes of citrus and spice.

How to serve: Try it on its own or with a splash of soda. Or mix it in equal



parts with another aperitif wine for your own house aperitif cocktail.



LILLET

This familiar French quinquina first appeared in 1887, and it quickly developed an international audience. Lillet's blond version is more commonly found in shops and bars, and is made from semillon and sauvignon blanc grapes from Bordeaux, flavored with herbs and fruits and fortified with brandy. (A

slightly more robust rouge version is also available, and next year will see the American debut of Lillet Rose, a crisp, floral aperitif that's excellent in summer drinks.)

What it tastes like: Gently sweet, with bright notes of citrus and stone fruit.

How to serve: Chilled with a slice of orange, or mixed in classic cocktails such as a Corpse Reviver No. 2.



BONAL GENTIANE-QUINA

Made since 1865 by the same producer as Dolin vermouths, Bonal is a gentiane-quina, a double-threat aperitif flavored with both gentian and cinchona bark. It's built on a base of mistelle -- partially fermented grape juice mixed with higher-proof alcohol -- and flavored with additional spices and botanicals.

What it tastes like: Complex and nuanced, it manages to be simultaneously dry and juicy. Unusual? Yes, but also very, very tasty.

How to serve: Pour it over ice with a splash of club soda. It can also take the place of sweet red

vermouth in many classic cocktails.

RABBARO ZUCCA

Famously served at Caffè Zucca in Milan, Zucca is a rabarbaro, a style of Italian aperitivo that is flavored primarily with Chinese rhubarb, along with other herbs. Though it was created in 1845, it's a recent addition to Portland's liquor stores.

What it tastes like: Moderately rich yet still brisk with an engaging earthiness, a mild bitterness and an alluring hint of vanilla and coffee.

How to serve: Traditionally served over crushed ice with a little club soda.

APEROL

First introduced in 1919, Aperol is immensely popular in Italy, though it has only been in the last five years or so that this brilliant orange aperitivo has caught on in the States. Flavored with Chinese rhubarb, orange peel and

cinchona bark, Aperol is a spirit-based aperitif (though it weighs in at a modest 11 percent alcohol), and is mildly sweeter than its more familiar cousin Campari.

What it tastes like: Sweeter than Campari, with a crisp bitterness and a complex, citrusy flavor.

How to serve: Mix it with orange juice, grapefruit juice or club soda, or go all out and add a nice pour of prosecco for an Aperol Spritz.

RECIPE

Americano Bianco

Most aperitifs are made to be sipped on their own or with ice or club soda, but aperitif wines also make an excellent and low-alcohol base for cocktails. At **Grüner**, bar manager Sue Erickson serves the Aperitivo Bianco, a mixture of two aperitif wines with an Italian amaro and sparkling wine, a flavorful combination that ties in with the restaurant's regional focus on the cuisine from northern Italy and Alsace.

- 3/4 ounce Dolin Blanc Vermouth
- 3/4 ounce Cocchi Aperitivo Americano
- 3/4 ounce Amaro Nonino
- 3/4 ounce chilled brut sparkling wine (Grüner serves Trocadero)

Place two or three large ice cubes in an old-fashioned glass and add first three ingredients; stir to combine. Top with sparkling wine and twist a thin piece of lemon peel over the drink; use the peel as garnish.

— Sue Erickson, Grüner, Portland

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