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## Bartenders find complexity in new aperitifs

Paul Clarke, Special to The Chronicle  
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With drinks, as with biology, most change is incremental.

While it can be a slow evolution from a vodka and soda to single malts and amari, sudden leaps of palate are possible. The recent premiere of two highly anticipated aperitif wines might give Bay Area drinkers just such a big step forward.

"People are always looking for complexity, whether it's on its own or in cocktails," says Todd Smith, a bartender at Dalva in San Francisco's Mission District.

Smith says more bartenders are satisfying this desire by dipping into the little-known well of French aperitif wines known as quinquinas and their Italian counterparts, chinati.

Quinquinas and chinati acquire their complexity from a blend of herbs and botanicals, making them similar to vermouth. While vermouth's subtle bitterness traditionally comes from wormwood, quinquinas and chinati acquire their bite from quinine, a substance found in cinchona bark that is also used to flavor tonic water.

Along with the distinctive flavor, these wines share with tonic water a history as a pharmaceutical. Cinchona bark was used to treat malaria since at least the 17th century, and when quinine was extracted and identified in the early 1800s, the substance was dispatched to mosquito-plagued European colonies in Africa and Asia.

To blunt its intense bitterness, quinine was mixed with wine and other flavorings. In 1846, while vying for a government reward for creating a palatable quinine-delivery vehicle, Parisian chemist Joseph Dubonnet introduced the first successful quinquina, flavored with chamomile, green coffee beans, cinnamon and more.

### Medicinal roots

As with herbal drinks such as absinthe and Chartreuse, what began as medicinal soon became recreational. By the late 19th century, quinquinas including Dubonnet, St. Raphael, Bonal Gentiane-Quina and Kina Lillet were popular drinks in France, while in Italy the similarly popular chinati included Cocchi Aperitivo Americano and Cocchi Barolo Chinato, both introduced in 1891.

While still desirable as antimalarial prophylactics, the wines largely became aperitifs. Their light bitterness warmed the palate; their complex botanical blends aided digestive capabilities.

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In the United States, aperitif wines have typically been viewed less as a precursor to dinner than as a cocktail-shaker sidekick to gin or whiskey.

Dubonnet enjoyed an early 20th century heyday, accompanying gin in the Dubonnet Cocktail and rye whiskey in the Deshler, while Kina Lillet was found in the Corpse Reviver No. 2 and the gin and vodka-based Vesper, introduced as James Bond's favored bracer in "Casino Royale." (Lillet was reformulated in 1986; the quinine bitterness was eliminated and the cinchona-related "Kina" was dropped from the product's name.)

The recent cocktail revival gave quinquinas a bump in popularity. But that bump became a boom starting in April, when Minnesota-based Haus Alpenz began distributing two quinine-accented wines, Bonal Gentiane-Quina and Cocchi Aperitivo Americano.

Produced in France since 1865, Bonal has a double-headed bitterness from cinchona and gentian. When combined with other ingredients in a base of *mistelle* - partially fermented grape juice mixed with higher-proof alcohol - its character is simultaneously juicy and bone dry.

While Bonal is a new entry to the U.S. market, Cocchi Americano has been sporadically available in the Bay Area for years; prepared in a base of Moscato di Asti, this chinato is flavored with citrus and spices, and allegedly has a taste remarkably similar to pre-reformulation Kina Lillet.

### **A new toy**

Bartenders have taken a new-toy approach to these wines, which give cocktails a crisp bitterness without the intense bite or sweetness of a bitter liqueur.

At Dalva, Smith matches the richness of Bonal with rye whiskey and orange liqueur in the Bonal and Rye. At Nopa, bartender Yanni Kehagiaras mixes it with Venezuelan rum and dry vermouth in the Lock; at Heaven's Dog, bartender John Britton matches Cocchi Americano with brandy and an aged Old Tom gin from Oregon in the Vesper No. 2.

Elsewhere, bartenders such as Chantal Tseng at Tabard Inn in Washington, D.C., are using Bonal and Cocchi Americano in reformulations of late 19th- and early 20th-century drinks, such as the Philomel and the Quinquina Cocktail.

"It's part of my own geeky side of re-creating drinks the best I can," Tseng says. "Tasting them is like cocktail-history treasure hunting."

Haus Alpenz importer Eric Seed says the initial interest in these wines came from bartenders, but quinquinas and chinati are gaining extra appeal when served as originally intended - on their own or simply prepared with a twist of orange and a splash of soda.

"This summer, if you're barbecuing or at a party and you show up with a bottle of one of these, you have something really unique that most people haven't had - and you don't have to do anything to it," Smith says. "You can pour it on its own or on the rocks with some soda, and you're done."

### **Bonal & rye**

#### **Makes 1 serving**

Dalva bartender Todd Smith substitutes a quinquina for vermouth in a traditional Manhattan, and fleshes out the drink's citrus notes with a touch of orange liqueur.

- 2 ounces rye whiskey
- 1 ounce Bonal Gentiane-Quina
- 1/2 ounce Cointreau
- 2 dashes orange bitters
- 1 dash Angostura bitters
- -- Orange twist, for garnish

**Instructions:** Combine all ingredients, except the garnish, in a mixing glass. Fill with ice. Stir well to chill; strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Twist orange peel over the drink and use as garnish.

**Note:** Bonal is available at specialty liquor stores including Cask, K&L Wine Merchants, D&M Wines and Liquors, and Blackwell's.

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