

# The Spirit of Amaro

Italy's iconic, bittersweet after-dinner drink is an excuse to linger

**FRANCINE SEGAN**

Italians love to linger at the table, slowly savoring each course from antipasto to primi and secondi. Dessert, dolci, is also enjoyed leisurely and is often served in three parts. First the sweet itself, which is accompanied by a dessert wine; then espresso; and finally an after-dinner drink.

"Having an after-dinner drink to aid digestion, a digestivo, has always been a tradition here in Italy," noted Andrea Corsini, the director of Emilia-Romagna's tourism and commerce. "In recent years, there has been a resurgence of the custom with restaurants replacing highly alcoholic spirits, like vodka and whisky, with lower alcohol amaro."

Amaro, which means "bitter," is the term for a general category of bittersweet digestivo, which are generally made from various spices, herbs, fruits or nuts, and alcohol. Popular since the Middle Ages, these drinks were originally created by monks as medicinal remedies. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different types of amari (the plural of amaro) in Italy, with each region, city, and even village claiming its own local specialty.

"The importance of the amaro ... dates back to the age-old production of liquors in our country," said Paolo Badolato, head barman of Milan's lovely Terrazza Gallia bar. "In ancient times, they represented an offer of conviviality by a host towards guests. This ancient Italian tradition is linked to our current desire to show hospitality." (One of Badolato's favorite amaro cocktails is a version of the Manhattan, but with Italian amaro, called the Black Manhattan.)

**Regional Specialties**

One of the delights of traveling through Italy is discovering each region's specialty amaros. In Florence's stunning hotel Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni, they serve an absolutely unique and extraordinary amaro called Rosolio, made with a secret recipe including lemons and bitter oranges, by the historic Monastery of Benedictine monks of the Tuscan town of

**TERRAZZA GALLIA BLACK MANHATTAN**

- 2 ounces bourbon whiskey
  - 1 ounce Amaro Averna
  - 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Combine all ingredients with ice in a mixing glass. Stir for 30 seconds, then strain into a cocktail glass.
- Recipe by barman Paolo Badolato*

**PALACE HOTEL CHINA MARTINI**

- 1 1/3 ounce gin
  - 1/3 ounce vermouth rosso, such as Martini & Rossi Sweet Vermouth
  - 1/3 ounce bitters
  - 1/3 ounce China Martini
- Orange slice**
- Combine all the ingredients in a mixer and serve in a martini glass, garnished with an orange slice.
- Recipe by barman Erik Fontana*



Pistoia. Antica Torre's barman Ranjula Wickrama uses this exceptional amaro to enhance Italy's most popular cocktail, the Spritz, creating the hotel's signature "Benedictine Spritz" with two parts Rosolio to three parts Prosecco and one part sparkling soda.

Nocino, made from unripe walnuts, is a specialty of Emilia-Romagna, where it has been enjoyed since ancient Roman times. The walnuts were historically gathered on June 24, the eve of the Feast of San Giovanni, when they were considered to be at their most fragrant and healthful. It was thought that women were best at the task. They would climb trees barefoot to pick the unripe nuts using only their hands, so as not to bruise the nuts' fragile skins. The evening of collection was called "La Notte delle Vergini Scalze," or "evening of the barefoot virgins."

At Ristorante Ferramenta, in the south of the region, nocino is often served mixed with Galvanina chinotto, a lightly sparkling bittersweet soft drink made from the citrus pulp and extract of the myrtle-leaved orange tree.

At the elegant Palace Hotel in Emilia-Romagna's coastal Milano Maritima, "One of the most frequently ordered is Amaro Montenegro, a blend of 40 botanicals, created in 1885," according to barman Erik Fontana. This aromatic amaro, which is made with bitter and sweet oranges, hints of oregano, marjoram, coriander seeds, and spices including cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg, was later renamed in honor of Princess Elena of Montenegro on the occasion of her marriage to Italy's Prince Vittorio Emanuele III.

"At the Palace Hotel, we serve it straight or on the rocks, but don't recommend mixing it in cocktails," Fontana said. He does, however, make an amaro cocktail with another of Italy's favorites, China Martini (its name and flavors come from the bark of China Calissaia, or Cinchona root), which won him fourth place in an international cocktail competition.

Two other popular amari in Italy are Vecchio Amaro del Capo, a spirit from Calabria made with 29 ingredients, including orange blossom, peppermint, and licorice; and Amaro Averna, created by Benedictine monks in Sicily who passed on their special recipe to the Averna family in 1868. It is made with herbs, roots, and natural spices including myrtle, juniper berries, rosemary, and sage, combined with fruit including pomegranates, and the essential oils of bitter oranges and lemons.

Barbara Minichiello, head bartender of the historic five-star Grand Hotel di Rimini, waxes poetic on Italy's after-dinner tradition: "In Ital-



(Above) The leisurely after-dinner drink is an age-old Italian tradition.

(Left) Three of Italy's most popular Amari.

ian restaurants, there is almost no lunch or dinner where an amaro is not suggested as the way to end a marvelous meal. It is both medicinal, as an extraordinary aid to digestion, and a delightful way to extend the pleasure of the meal, to be relished while chatting with friends."

Francine Segan, food historian and expert on Italian cuisine, is a James Beard-nominated author of six cookbooks, including "Pasta Modern: New & Inspired Recipes from Italy" and "Dolci: Italy's Sweets."

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