

GET TO KNOW *Amaro*

By Christina Staalstrom



The Classic Aperol Spritz

Ah, Spritz season. Glasses sparkling in the sun with bright hues of red and orange bitters topped with bubbly, anything from seltzer to champagne. The Spritz has come to signify summer as much as a glass of cold rosé thanks to the proliferation of the ever-popular Aperol Spritz.

The refreshingly elegant and fun Spritz has long been a part of the Italian aperitif culture and the key ingredient, Amaro, the cornerstone of the aperitivo and digestivo culture. With American drinking habits shifting to lower-ABV offerings and consumers seeking unique and authentic products, the Amari (plural for Amaro) category is coming into its own as new brands emerge on store shelves daily.

Rudy Ruiz, an industry icon who has held leadership roles at both Bacardi and Southern-Glazer's, is known for his brand-building expertise and unique trend-spotting acumen. Currently, Ruiz is an advisor to several companies in the alcoholic beverage industry and agrees. "It took time, but cocktail culture has finally arrived and with it the classic Amaro. With our thirst for innovation, it will be interesting to see what new products will be created in this space."

Classic Amaro is made by macerating herbs and aromatic botanicals in a spirit or wine, and the offerings range from floral to minty to medicinal. There can be upwards of 40 ingredients in a single Amaro, think Underberg and Jägermeister, and often made with herbs and spices native to where these Amari are produced. Thus, like with wine, Amari aficionados often refer to the terroir when looking at Amaro's pedigree. But while there are some general guidelines for what is considered an Amaro, there are no steadfast rules, and unlike tequila or champagne, the category is not restrictive. So, while we may look to Italy for a classic Amaro, like Nonino or Averna, many other countries also produce bittersweet liqueurs that are identified as Amari. For instance, the Danes toast with herbaceous Gammel Dansk digestif to help burn through a heavy holiday meal while Latvians have been drinking their dark bittersweet Riga Black Balsam since 1752.

Typically, a bitter Amaro like traditional Montenegro or Cyna is often enjoyed as an after-meal sip, poured neat over ice, often as a digestif. On the other hand, the more appetite-stimulating aromatized wine and bitter liqueurs like Campari and Aperol are enjoyed pre-dinner, mixed with soda, juice or neat over ice before digging into those bowls of pasta.

Today, Amari are experiencing a boom as American consumers embrace these wine or spirit-based products with a slightly bitter flavor profile. The United States is becoming the second-largest market for the Campari brand in value terms and the third largest for Aperol.

According to Statista's 2020 Spirits Research Report, the global market leading Amaro in terms of sales volume is the German-produced Jägermeister, followed by Italians Aperol and Fernet-Branca. Ramazzotti and Montenegro considered both genuine and amongst the oldest Amari on the market, are gaining prominence as they embrace the versatility offered by the U.S. cocktail culture and shift their focus from the digestivo category to the emerging aperitivo category. Consumer trends calling for product authenticity, production, and material transparency and a continued focus on health and wellness with low ABV options and RTDs, offer the perfect platform for thoughtfully sourced and developed Amari offerings.

No longer the hidden secret of the industry Amaro cocktails can now be found on almost every cocktail menu whatever flavor preference, budget, and drinking occasion. Jonathan Stanyard, aka @thebittergringo, is a Seattle-based bartender and winner of numerous cocktail competitions, known for his cocktail bitters. Like many in his field, he has a bit of an Amaro obsession. His recipe, the Nero Wolfe, is an Amari-focused cocktail with classic Montenegro at the forefront. The gin gives a bit of robust support to the bittersweet botanicals. The cordial has a floral, tart, and spicy start complemented by the sherry and sparkling wine to dry out the cocktail. The final product is bitterly bright, herbaceous, and bubbly and is all about pleasing the palate.



The Nero Wolfe, by Jonathan Stanyard, aka @thebittergringo

The Nero Wolfe

INGREDIENTS

1 oz. Amaro Montenegro
½ oz. barrel-rested gin
½ oz. dry sherry
½ oz. basil-lime ginger cordial*
1 oz. dry sparkling wine

PREPARATION

Combine ingredients in a coupe, garnish with basil. *Basil-lime-ginger cordial: zest 10 limes, then cut limes in half and juice (producing at least ½ cup of juice). Add 1 ½ cups granulated sugar to lime zest and muddle. In a saucepan, combine lime juice, ½ cup fresh basil leaves, and ¼ cup fresh chopped ginger and lime-sugar mixture. Heat over medium heat, stirring frequently until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat, cover, and rest in the refrigerator for about 8 hours. Strain and store in a bottle or airtight container. Keep refrigerated, lasts for up to one month.