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**The
Guardian
Labs**

How To Drink Italian

Salute! Three of the best bars to enjoy Italian cocktails in the UK

From Edinburgh to London, embrace the sophistication of an aperitivo at these stylish watering holes

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About this content

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To those in the know, the British cocktail scene is growing up. Just like a child moving into adulthood, it's evolving from the overly sweet, simple cocktails of the early 2000s into an older, wiser drinks scene with a tinge of bitterness. Negronis are in vogue and drink aficionados have trained their taste buds to enjoy neon-bright spritzes instead of slushie-like daiquiris on a summer evening. Bitter, herbal amaros such as Fernet-Branca and Carpano bitter, and rich vermouths such as Antica Formula are slowly replacing sugary syrups as cocktail palates develop and mature. Italy has long led the way in grownup cocktails, and there are a handful of UK bars where you can embrace the sophistication of the Italian cocktail.

Bar Termini

"You know that romantic image of 1950s Italy?" says Robin Kolek, mixologist at Bar Termini in London's Soho. "A man waits at the train station for his girlfriend who has been visiting her grandma in rural Italy. He's probably sipping a bitter cocktail in a bar in Roma Termini. That's the feeling we want to capture." Bar Termini celebrated its 10-year anniversary in November last year, weathering the storm as bars and cafes opened and closed around it on one of Soho's busiest streets, Old Compton Street. "You step inside the bar and close the door to London. Here, you're in 1950s Italy, when *la dolce vita* was in full swing. This is the world in which these herbal and bitter cocktails were born."



📷 Bar Termini makes its espresso martinis with Caffè Borghetti coffee liqueur

Bar Termini recreates the feel of an Italian train station bar. Tiled floors and booth seating accompany the selection of Italian cocktails, jazzed up with flavours to suit the London scene. Spritzes all have different accents for whatever mood you're in. Termini creates traditional Italian cocktails, heavy on the amaros, yet adjusted to modern tastes. "It's like the stylish Italian lady who buys a new coat," says Kolek. "She is still the same lady underneath, but the coat adds a layer of something new and exciting." Its Termini spritz comes with a hint of sour thanks to rhubarb cordial, and its negroni superiore - which is made with Carpano Classico vermouth - is infused with pink peppercorns for a hint of heat.

"Espresso martini is still one of the most popular choices," Kolek says. Concocted with rich Caffè Borghetti coffee liqueur and an eye-opening shot of espresso, it's an ideal pre-dinner drink that oozes sophistication. Another popular coffee-based Bar Termini cocktail is the caffè corretto - which consists of a shot of espresso and a shot of a liqueur such as Fernet-Branca.

Hey Palu

"You will not like your first negroni," says Alex Palumbo, co-owner and director at Hey Palu in Edinburgh. "Amaros are an acquired taste. Italians have grown up with bitter flavours - in their herbs and salads - so it makes sense that we have bitter flavours in our cocktails." Alex hails from the Amalfi Coast, where aperitivo and evening spritz are a way of life. An ode to his homeland, Hey Palu has a large collection of amaros. Negroni flights with varying levels of bitterness ease first-time negroni drinkers into this new, suave world of herbal-first cocktails.

Hey Palu replicates a modern Italian bar experience in the Scottish capital - not too formal and offering an array of aperitivo drinks. It's a sleek space with bottles of amaro shimmering behind the bar. "In Italy, the bartenders make the food in aperitivo bars, there's no need for a chef," Palumbo says. It's the same at Hey Palu, where charcuterie boards of regionally imported cured meat and cheese accompany the curated cocktails.

A bottle of Fernet-Branca is kept behind the bar at all times. "Fernet is like the bartender's handshake," Palumbo says. "If someone comes in and asks for a straight Fernet to sip, you can assume they are either in hospitality or a real aficionado." It's like an industry secret and at Hey Palu bartenders add a shot of Fernet to an old fashioned instead of Angostura bitters. One of the lesser-known drinks, a Fernet-Branca Collins is a refreshing long drink with a herbal kick, combining Fernet-Branca, lemon juice, sugar and soda water. Perfect for summer.

Bar Swift



📷 Soho's Bar Swift takes its inspiration from Italian aperitivo bars, with a standing bar on its upper level. Photograph: Addie Chinn

Since opening its first branch in Soho in 2016, Bar Swift has acquired an empire of three bars across central London. The original bar is split over two levels and embraces New York-Italian culture with a casual standing bar on the top level and a lounge-style room below. As the name suggests, Bar Swift eschews the pernickety elements of cocktail construction, crafting perfect serves in a few seconds, rather than making customers wait 15 minutes for a thimble of alcohol.

"We're inspired by the aperitivo bars of Italy," says Coral Anderson, operations manager at Swift. "What I love about the Italian way of eating and drinking is the all day aspect of it. There's a time for everything - you don't dare have a cappuccino after 11am and amaro-first cocktails are for pre-dinner aperitif or a post-dinner digestif." Its vast spritz menu is available all day and happy hour is from 3pm to 7pm - in keeping with the Italian tradition of aperitivo time. "Our ethos is 'there's always time.'" One of the simpler and fastest serves is a Milano-Torino - a mix of Antica Formula vermouth and Campari bitter. Rich red in colour and lip-pursingly bitter, it has the air of a stripped-back negroni.

So when seeking out a slice of *la dolce vita* of 1950s Italy this summer, elevate your palate by ordering a grownup cocktail with a hint of herbal bitterness. Embrace the simplicity of the Milano-Torino at the standup bar with good chat, a refreshing Fernet-Branca Collins sipped alfresco on a sunny day, an espresso martini to kickstart the evening on an indulgent note, or enjoy a classic negroni singing with bitter notes in a dim, intimate corner of a lounge bar. It's time to leave the sickly sweet taste we're used to behind and enter the enlightened Italian cocktail renaissance.

Try *Antica Formula*, available at [Waitrose](#)

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