

THE POUR

The Ideal Aperitif: Good Vermouth, Cool and Fragrant

By Eric Asimov

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One summer evening a few years ago, I was standing in the Napa Valley kitchen of Steve Matthiasson, a farmer and winemaker, when he handed me a tumbler filled with amber liquid and a fat cube of ice.

It was not what I was expecting from Mr. Matthiasson, who, with his wife, Jill Klein Matthiasson, makes a range of wonderfully pure and refreshing wines from both the expected grapes like cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay, and from Napa rarities like refosco and ribolla gialla.

Instead, this drink was sweet yet brisk, fresh and floral, fruity and herbal, and, surprisingly, it was thoroughly refreshing. While the sweetness was undeniable, it was not at all off-putting, as I would have imagined in a pre-dinner beverage.

It was a sweet vermouth, made by the Matthiassons, balanced not by acidity, as it would be in wines like sweet German rieslings or Vouvrays, but by a slight, gentle bitterness, which had none of the force of a powerfully head-clearing digestif like Fernet Branca. It was barely noticeable yet insistent, just a genial note reminding me I was hungry.

The drink (\$30, 375 milliliters) served as my introduction to real vermouth and sent me on a path of rethinking the French term aperitif.

The meaning would seem to be fairly obvious: An aperitif is something to drink before a meal to stimulate the appetite.

I often sip something before dinner without thinking much about it. Almost by default, it is a glass of sparkling wine. Sometimes, it is a little Manzanilla sherry, perfect when served with Marcona almonds or olives. I don't often drink cocktails.

But sparkling wine, wonderful as it may be, is more about emotional preparation for eating, for getting in the proper mood. And with sherry and its accompaniments, you are already eating. In the strictest sense of the term, I have found little else that serves as pure an appetite-whetting function as a good vermouth on ice.

What is vermouth? It's a fortified wine infused with herbs, spices, botanicals, fruits or vegetables. It is made with anything, really, that the chef, I mean, winemaker, believes will benefit the outcome. At 16 percent to 19 percent alcohol, vermouth is stronger than table wine. But when well made, vermouth wears it easily.

It can be sweet, like the Matthiasson blend, and, more familiarly, like the often innocuous products used in cocktails like the manhattan. It can be dry, like the kind you wave over the extra-dry martini (though for me, it's not a martini without the vermouth).

In Europe, vermouths generally start with wormwood, an aromatic plant from which the word vermouth is said to have evolved. Like so many infused beverages, vermouth most likely started out as a palliative, meant to alleviate various ailments and physical imbalances.

Despite its unfounded notoriety as the mind-altering ingredient in absinthe, wormwood is not a hallucinogen, but it does stimulate the appetite and ease digestion. Mr. Matthiasson uses wormwood in his vermouths.

But Bianca Miraglia, whose New York company, Uncouth Vermouth, makes wonderfully idiosyncratic, militantly natural and local vermouths from ingredients she grows or forages, does not. She uses mugwort, a related plant also thought to help with digestion.

"Mugwort grows everywhere in New York," she said, "and wormwood does not."

While wormwood's presence or lack thereof is much debated in vermouth circles, I'm not so concerned about it because Ms. Miraglia's vermouths are so enticing.

She makes small batches (\$35, 500 milliliters), using base wines primarily from the Red Hook Winery in Brooklyn. The character of each batch is determined by what she finds or grows. I've had Uncouth Vermouths made with beets and rhubarb, butternut squash and apple mint, which contains no apple at all but is a particularly fruity sort of mint.

Often they are dry vermouths. The butternut squash is bone dry, floral, clean and refreshing and absolutely delicious. The apple mint is so lively it is like a wake-up call for the body and mind.

"The whole idea is to celebrate what's around," she said. "I don't intentionally change the compositions, but there's a limited number of plants I can harvest enough of, and little things I throw in."

"It should be a creative exploration of whoever is making it," she added.

For now, it's not always clear what goes into each batch of Uncouth Vermouth. Ms. Miraglia said the government would not approve labels with the ingredients of each batch for her bottles, so you will have to look them up on her website, which is under construction.

Most big brands make sweet vermouth by adding sugar. Carpano makes its Antica Formula (\$16, 375 milliliters) with vanilla and sugar. It's lightly sweet with flavors of almonds and citrus and is highly refreshing over ice. But Ms. Miraglia prefers not to add sweeteners to her sweet vermouth, and so she starts with a sweet wine instead.

Mr. Matthiasson, too, uses a sweet wine, made out of rare flora grapes, which he says are the key to his vermouth.

Flora is a cross between *sémillon* and *gewürztraminer* developed by Harold P. Olmo, a professor at the University of California, Davis, in 1938. Mr. Matthiasson said he suspected that the variety was developed specifically for fortified wines, which made up a significant part of the California wine industry until the late 20th century.

The grape had fallen into obscurity when Mr. Matthiasson found a patch of it. He said he first tried to make a sweet wine but fermented it too long, leaving not enough residual sugar in the wine. A light bulb went off: Why not use it as a base for a sweet vermouth?

The Matthiassons had long been vermouth fans, particularly of the excellent artisanal vermouths made in Italy by Mauro Vergano. They infused the flora wine with homegrown blood oranges, sour cherries and cardoons, along with spices and herbs, and fortified it with neutral grape spirits. The latest batch is a blend of three different vintages.

For Mr. Matthiasson, the bitterness is crucial to vermouth.

“It tastes moderately sweet, refreshingly sweet,” he said, “but if you take the bitterness out it would be shockingly sweet, like maple syrup.”

Because each vermouth — like gin, digestifs and other flavored beverages — has its own idiosyncratic set of ingredients, tasting them can be surprising. As with the Matthiasson, Mauro Vergano’s Bianco vermouth (\$49, 750 milliliters) is quite sweet, yet it is unexpectedly herbal as well, with flavors of thyme, oregano and basil that call to mind sizzling skillet and the meal to come. It is high-toned and refreshing, with flavors that linger on and on in the mouth.

Spain, too, has a vermouth tradition, particularly in Catalonia. Miró’s Vermut de Reus (\$17, liter) is bone dry and savory, almost saline. González Byass, the Spanish wine conglomerate, last year introduced La Copa (\$27, 750 milliliters), a sherry vermouth made from a 19th-century recipe. With both dry oloroso sherry and sweet Pedro Ximénez sherry at its base, La Copa is resoundingly herbal and spicy, lightly sweet and well balanced.

All of these vermouths offer forceful flavors, perhaps too forceful for standard cocktails like martinis, though no doubt bartenders have other recipes that make use of their qualities.

“I love some particularly rich, dark, rooty-barky vermouths on their own or with soda,” said Rosie Schaap, a writer and bartender who until recently wrote a cocktail column for *The New York Times Magazine*. “But they’re too assertive to get involved in, say, a Manhattan.” For one of her favorite assertive vermouths, the Primitivo Quiles Rojo (\$20, liter) from Spain, she created a light, fresh cocktail with grapefruit juice, tonic and bitters.

A vermouth you would use in a martini, like the dry Dolin Vermouth de Chambéry (\$10, 375 milliliters), also makes a pretty good aperitif: light, floral and herbal with a citrus edge.

No matter what sort of vermouth you want to drink, do not allow it to gather dust on the bar once you’ve opened it. Put it in the refrigerator, where a good vermouth will last and evolve for months.

“Anything that is made of less than 25 percent alcohol should go in your refrigerator once it’s opened,” Ms. Miraglia of Uncouth Vermouth said. “But even if you don’t refrigerate, they won’t go bad. They’ll just turn into the most gorgeous cooking vinegars ever.”