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The Truth About Vermouth: The secret ingredient in today's top cocktails remains misunderstood

Paul Clarke, Special to The Chronicle
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When the trumpets sound and Judgment Day comes, we mortals will have plenty for which to account. While it falls many points below unforgivable crimes such as destruction of the rain forest, global warming and the green-lighting of "The Love Guru," the decline in vermouth's fortunes from 19th century dandy to outcast of the speed rail certainly ranks on the list of modern offenses.

For many bartenders, the culprit is clear. "The cocktail to blame is the super-dry vodka martini," says Jonny Raglin, bar manager at Absinthe Brasserie & Bar in San Francisco.

Fear, apparently, is a factor. "Almost 75 percent of my vodka martini drinkers are very, very afraid of vermouth," says Brooke Arthur, bar manager at Range. While many vodka martini fans are seeking a cocktail as flavorless as possible, Arthur says, drinkers enter the world of the contemporary bar with almost no exposure to vermouth.

"They don't even know what it tastes like, but a friend who gave them their first dirty martini didn't use it, so they don't want it in there," Arthur says.

Native to northwest Italy and southern France, vermouth - a wine that has been aromatized with herbs and other botanicals and lightly fortified with unaged brandy - is widely popular in parts of Europe, where it is usually served as an aperitif. But from the approach taken by most American bartenders - who typically dispense vermouth with atomizers, eyedroppers or simply a delicate hand when mixing martinis - vermouth could be considered some sort of bibulous antimatter.

"Bartenders are taught to treat (vermouth) like toxic waste," says cocktail historian David Wondrich.

Wondrich notes that vermouth revolutionized mixology when it entered heavy usage in the late 1880s, and vermouth-heavy drinks of the era - such as prototypes of the martini and the Manhattan, which were made with twice as much vermouth as gin or whiskey - earned the cocktail a new level of sophistication. "By the 1890s it's like every drink has vermouth in it," Wondrich says. "They were completely crazy about this stuff."

Early days of vermouth

Vermouth's commercial origins date to 1786, when Antonio Benedetto Carpano began marketing the aromatized wine he produced in Turin, but the consumption of vermouth and its precursors stretches back centuries. Typically made from neutral-character dry white wines that have been flavored with herbs, roots and barks - typically including cardamom, cinnamon, marjoram and chamomile - and then fortified with a neutral grape spirit, vermouth is classically made - and named - for another botanical: wormwood (the plant's name in Old High German is Wermud).

Used as a treatment against intestinal worms, wormwood has been added to wine and ale since at least the time of Greek mathematician Pythagoras, and wine infused with herbs including wormwood was utilized as a tonic and medical treatment by Hippocrates.

By the late 17th century, homemade vermouths were commonly made in the Piedmont region of Italy. In the decades following Carpano's commercial debut, other vermouth makers began production in Turin: The Cinzano family opened their facility in 1816. Martini & Rossi, now the largest manufacturer of vermouth, started production in 1863.

In 1813, Joseph Noilly created the style that came to be known as dry vermouth or French vermouth. By 1855, Noilly's son, Louis, and his brother-in-law, Claudius Prat, were producing Noilly Prat dry vermouth in the southern French village of Marseillan. Like the Italian firms, Noilly uses white grapes, specifically Clairette and Picpoul grapes grown in the Languedoc region of France, but doesn't color the wine. (See "French vs. Italian" on Page F5.)

Starting with the aptly named Vermouth Cocktail, which debuted in print in 1869 and is composed of chilled vermouth with a twist of lemon peel, occasionally accented with dashes of bitters and maraschino liqueur - ample quantities of vermouth were consumed in cocktails in the decades that followed its mixological debut. But by the mid-20th century, bartenders were following the lead of martini drinkers such as Winston Churchill, who is said to have merely glanced at a bottle of vermouth (or, in some versions of the story, in the direction of France) while preparing a drink. This trend toward drier martinis, combined with changing tastes toward lighter-flavored drinks and the advent of the vodka martini, meant vermouth became largely ignored and, as a result, misunderstood.

Today it's not uncommon for a bottle of vermouth - deployed solely for the purpose of making martinis or Manhattans - to last weeks or even months in a standard bar, and many home bartenders may have bottles in their liquor cabinets that were purchased during the era of $2 gasoline.

A california bottling

Andrew Quady, whose winery in Madera (Madera County) makes both sweet and dry vermouth under the Vya label, says he decided to produce one precisely because it seemed so unpopular. "There's got to be

something wrong (with vermouth)," Quady recalls a restaurateur friend telling him before he launched Vya in 1999. "People don't like it, nobody drinks it straight, and it's used in a few cocktails - the most important of which is the martini. And when making martinis, people don't use it."

For Vya's dry vermouth, Quady uses botanicals including lavender, alfalfa and members of the mint family. Quady says the blend was chosen with the idea to create a flavor and aroma evocative of an alpine environment. "Maybe it could be like aromatherapy," he says. "You'd smell it and imagine yourself being transported to a mountain meadow."

Most Italian-style vermouths are made with a neutral white wine as a base. (Not all: Carpano distributes limited quantities of a robust-flavored vermouth called Carpano Antica Formula, made from red wine, which the company claims is based on the original 1786 recipe.) But Vya's sweet vermouth is produced using Orange Muscat, commonly used to produce dessert wines, with some Port-style wine added for color and flavor. Quady's choice of botanicals creates a richer, spicier vermouth, with less of the bitterness found in vermouths such as Antica Formula.

While Vya earned some devoted fans, Quady's hope that it would be embraced as an aperitif hasn't quite panned out. "My objective from the very beginning was to make something that people would enjoy drinking straight," Quady says. "We continue to try to get people to think of it on its own, but so far that doesn't seem to be happening."

Cocktails showcase flavors

At Bourbon & Branch, Vya is the default vermouth for many of the bar's cocktails. Bar manager Yanni Kehagiaras says Vya's intense flavor is the reason bartenders at the Tenderloin bar choose to feature it so prominently.

"This is going to sound totally dorky, but I did a vermouth intensity chart where I rate them from the most to least intense," Kehagiaras says. For dry vermouths, Vya dominated the intensity scale, and for sweet vermouths, it closely followed the assertively flavored Carpano Antica Formula. "That boldness, when you're using half an ounce in a cocktail, it showcases your vermouth rather than losing it," Kehagiaras says.

While full-flavored vermouths such as Vya and Antica Formula have earned a certain cachet in prominent cocktail bars, bartenders warn against relying too heavily on them. "When I try to use the (Carpano) Antica or the Vya, I really have to think, 'What's going on here?' " says Seattle cocktail consultant Jamie Boudreau.

Boudreau says that substituting an intensely flavored vermouth for a milder product has the potential to knock a drink's flavor off balance. "The Carpano Antica is a linebacker and the Cinzano is a soccer player. They're both muscular, but one lets you know when it hits you," he says. "There's so much flavor going on

in the Antica, and even the texture - it makes its presence known. If you're using it, you need to have something big, strong and bold enough to go up against it, or you're going to have to really cut back in its proportions."

Boudreau cites as an example the Waldorf Cocktail, composed of equal parts bourbon, absinthe and sweet vermouth. "In that case, you want a strong bourbon and a strong vermouth that can help tame down the absinthe," he says.

Vermouth's ability to temper full-flavored spirits makes it a preferred ingredient at Absinthe. "I think vermouth's most important attribute is its alcohol content," Raglin says. "It's not much more than wine, and it helps tone down big, gnarly spirits like whiskey and gin, even Tequila."

Unlike other bar staples such as citrus juice or liqueurs, Raglin says, vermouth can alter the character of a drink without knocking the flavors in an undesired direction.

While bartenders such as Boudreau and Neyah White, bar manager at Nopa, assert that Antica Formula may be the ultimate vermouth for a Manhattan, White is equally emphatic that more mainstream brands are preferable for many cocktails. "Martini & Rossi is the only vermouth for a Negroni, period," White says. "It's the only one that can handle the Campari on a 1-to-1 ratio. The sugar levels just aren't there in the more esoteric vermouths, so (Martini & Rossi is) what I use for that one - and I serve a hell of a lot of Negronis."

In parts of the world where vermouth is more popular, other varieties are available beyond the two mainstream styles. In the 1960s, Cinzano launched a rosé vermouth in Italy; Martini & Rossi also produces a rosé vermouth, which is sold primarily in France. French producer Dolin makes a strawberry-flavored vermouth called Chamberyzette for the European market, and Noilly Prat makes limited quantities of Noilly Ambre, a rich-tasting vermouth flavored with botanicals including cinnamon and orange peel, which is sold almost exclusively from its production facility in Marseillan.

After sighting a bottle of rosé vermouth through the window of a closed liquor store in London, Neyah White grew frustrated that the product wasn't available close to home, and decided to make his own. He infused botanicals including rose petals, dried jasmine and quassia bark in grain alcohol, which he used as a fortifying agent, and in his base wine: a 2005 Grenache-Syrah blend from the Rhone Valley that was just starting to oxidize. "Since the wine was getting a little old, I wasn't going to crush anything by adding botanicals to it," White says. "There was no delicate balance I was going to screw up."

Homemade vermouths

Made for the spring season, White's homebrew vermouth was mixed in a special house cocktail and was also served chilled as an aperitif. "I have three guests who drink this exclusively before dinner; I've actually set bottles aside for them because I know I'll run out by the end of the summer," White says.

Such experiments underscore a renewed interest in vermouth. By the end of the year, vermouths from Dolin - prized by bartenders but only sporadically available in the Bay Area, and almost not at all elsewhere in the country - are expected to be distributed more widely and regularly by Haus Alpenz, a Minnesota importer and distributor of artisan spirits. Beginning in October, Noilly Prat will distribute its popular European blend of dry vermouth - richer in color and more fragrant than the current American blend - in the United States.

At Range, bartenders are doing their part to lift vermouth's fortunes. For the restaurant's cocktail of the day, Arthur says she often uses the wine to "kick-start" the staff's creativity. "You'll make (a drink) that seems like it's missing something, and it's a running joke that you just add sweet vermouth to it," she says.

Most bars still ration out their dry vermouth when mixing martinis, but with the growing interest among bartenders, it's getting easier for fans of vermouth to find a drink to their liking. "I always order a wet martini when I go out these days," Wondrich says. "People used to look at me like I was insane, but now they've clearly heard of it."

French vs. italian

Labels such as "French" or "Italian" vermouth refer to the style of the wine, not its provenance. Both styles are produced by makers such as Martini & Rossi, Cinzano and Noilly Prat, along with less widely distributed producers such as Boissiere and Dolin, and by California-produced Vya. Originally, the Italian firms that commercialized vermouth made a style known as rosso. Often simply known as sweet vermouth or **Italian vermouth**, rosso vermouth is mildly bitter and slightly sweet, with a dusky garnet color from caramelized sugar.

That contrasts with dry vermouth, also known as **French vermouth** due to its commercialization by French firms. Like most rosso vermouths, dry vermouths are also made from neutral-character white wines - but are flavored with a different set of botanicals that may include nutmeg and bitter orange peel.

Several makers also produce a sweet, white style of vermouth known as **bianco** that is widely available. And Carpano makes **Punt e Mes**, an extra-bitter aromatized wine that blurs the boundaries between rosso vermouth and the class of Italian bitters known as amari.

How to store

Like any other wine, vermouth begins to oxidize once a bottle has been opened. While refrigeration will slow the process, the flavor gradually changes over time. Vermouth fans recommend finishing a bottle **within a month**, or sooner, from when the seal is first broken. Always store it in the fridge to slow the process as much as possible.

"People have an aversion to vermouth, and quite frankly, it's well founded," says Seattle cocktail consultant

Jamie Boudreau. "Even if you keep your vermouth in the fridge, after a week you'll notice it has a different flavor. If you keep that vermouth on a shelf, it's going to taste terrible. That's why people don't like vermouth."

Tasting notes

While most vermouths fall into the categories of sweet and red or dry and white, there are several styles available in most liquor stores and wine shops, and within each category, there's room for exploration.

Boissiere Dry ($8/1 liter) Very light and floral, with a brisk aroma of roses, it has a surprisingly bright, sweet flavor for a style of vermouth that is typically crisper and drier. **Use for:** A refreshing aperitif served chilled with a lemon twist, or a lively Vermouth Cassis.

Carpano Antica Formula ($26/1 liter) A classic rosso vermouth, the Carpano Antica Formula has a dry, earthy aroma redolent of citrus peel and dried flowers. Its flavor is deep and rich, with notes of caramel and vanilla and a complex herbaceous character that is initially sweet, but finishes with a lingering bitterness tinged with cinnamon and warm spices. **Use for:** Excellent as an aperitif; makes a memorable Manhattan.

Carpano Punt e Mes ($22/750ml) Very dark in color and with mild, earthy aroma, Punt e Mes has a rich mouthfeel and a flavor that gets right down to business: a light sweetness is followed by an assertive, cascading bitterness that pushes this distinctive vermouth close to the category of Italian amari. **Use for:** Assertively flavored cocktails such as the rye whiskey-rich Red Hook or for a Negroni with an extra-bitter edge.

Martini & Rossi Rosso ($7/750ml) The world's biggest-selling rosso is a good mixing vermouth, but for aperitifs there are better options out there. With a rich aroma of molasses and cinchona, it has a full-bodied but simple sweetness quickly followed by a single-note bitterness with a satisfyingly long finish. **Use for:** A classic Negroni, or for cocktails that need a gentle touch of sweetness and spice, such as the Floridita.

Noilly Prat Extra Dry ($7/750ml) Noilly Prat's Extra Dry vermouth defined the category and remains one of the better vermouths on the market. The vermouth has a very light, crisp aroma and body, with a mildly floral, oak-tinged flavor touched with hints of chamomile and lemon peel. **Use for:** A martini; served chilled, it's also a satisfying aperitif.

Vya Extra Dry ($10/375ml) This California vermouth has a richly floral aroma with a touch of menthol, and a grassy, earthy flavor that is dry and crisp. Rich and expressive where other dry vermouths are brisk and lean. **Use for:** A memorable aperitif or a potently flavored martini.

Vya Sweet ($10/375ml) Distinctively aromatic with notes of molasses and licorice, the Vya Sweet is very

rich and herbaceous, with a medium body and a long-lasting bitterness that is lighter and gentler than most other sweet vermouths. **Use for:** An unbeatable Duplex, when mixed with Vya Extra Dry and a dash of orange bitters (see recipe at left).

Duplex

Makes 1 drink

Older bar manuals have many similar mixtures of vermouth and bitters; this cocktail features both sweet and dry styles of vermouth.

- 1 1/2 ounce dry vermouth
- 1 1/2 ounce sweet vermouth
- 2 dashes orange bitters
- -- Lemon twist (optional)

Instructions: Combine sweet and dry vermouths and bitters in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well and strain into a chilled cocktail glass; a twist of lemon peel over the drink is a nice touch.

Note: To minimize dilution, the vermouths may instead be chilled in the bottle and combined without ice prior to serving.

Waldorf

Makes 1 drink

To best counterbalance the powerful flavor of absinthe, Jamie Boudreau recommends using a full-strength bourbon such as George T. Stagg, and a robust vermouth such as Carpano Antica Formula or Vya.

- 1 ounce bourbon
- 1 ounce sweet vermouth
- 1 ounce absinthe

Instructions: Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Rose

Makes 1 drink

A vintage Parisian cocktail unearthed by David Wondrich and recommended by Jamie Boudreau as a low-alcohol drink well suited for a summer evening.

- 2 ounces dry vermouth
- 1 ounce kirsch
- 1 teaspoon raspberry syrup or Chambord
- -- 1 maraschino or brandied cherry (optional)

Instructions: Combine vermouth, kirsch, and syrup or Chambord in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with cherry.

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