

Coming Up Dry

THOSE WHO PASS ON VERMOUTH ARE MISSING OUT ON SOMETHING SPECIAL.

BY JORDAN MACKAY



The Classic Martini

One of the earlier martini recipes actually called for bitters and no olives. Garnish this version with a twist of lemon.

3 ounces gin, such as Plymouth
1 ounce dry vermouth
2 drops orange bitters

In a shaker, stir all the ingredients with ice for about 15 seconds. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Poor vermouth. Through no fault of its own, it's been the victim of a major smear campaign over the last couple of decades. In many circles, it's considered macho or cool to flaunt the fact that you like a martini so dry that it is has no vermouth in it whatsoever. "Just wave the bottle of vermouth over the glass," some say. Or, "You think 'vermouth' while I pour the vodka." They even sell vermouth atomizers to ensure that just a spray is all the martini gets.

Not only is that behavior patently obnoxious, it's demeaning: A so-called dry vodka martini (i.e., no vermouth) is neither a martini nor a cocktail. It's simply a chilled shot of vodka. What's so sophisticated about that? Secondly, the vitriol toward vermouth makes no sense, as it happens to be the one common ingredient in three of the greatest cocktails ever invented—the Negroni, the Manhattan and the martini. Which suggests that at least a few people with good taste thought pretty highly of this fortified wine infused with herbs and spices.

The first example of a drink that resembles modern vermouth dates back to the 18th century. Like many aperitifs—think Chartreuse and Campari—vermouth was probably originally drunk for its medicinal value, so it's no coincidence that the German word for wormwood, *wermut*, is where we get the name. (Wormwood, the key ingredient in absinthe, was an early medicinal component in vermouth that's no longer used.)

Today, vermouth comes mainly in two versions: sweet and dry. Sweet vermouth, sometimes known as Italian, is often red; dry vermouths are white and often referred to as French. The national distinctions break down, though, since most vermouth brands—Noilly Prat, Cinzano, Martini & Rossi—make both styles.

Dry and sweet vermouths have different applications. In a martini, one should use only dry vermouth (though in cocktail speak, the less vermouth, the "drier" the martini). The Negroni calls for sweet vermouth, shaken in equal parts with gin and Campari. In this case, the sweetness balances the bitterness of the Campari. And in a Manhattan, you have choices. A basic Manhattan mixes sweet vermouth with bourbon or rye whiskey, plus a dash of Angostura bitters; a dry Manhattan uses dry vermouth instead of sweet; and the aptly titled "perfect Manhattan" calls for half dry and half sweet. A

WHAT TO DRINK

While most vermouths are made in France or Italy from centuries-old recipes, we are lucky to have one of the few contemporary vermouths in the world made right here. Andrew Quady, of Quady Winery in Madera, CA, produces **Vya**, a vermouth that's received rave reviews for years. It comes in both sweet and dry versions, both of which use Colombard and Orange Muscat wines as a base. The cool "extra dry" recalls wild herbs such as lavender and rose, while the sweet vermouth glows with hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. Vya is so good that it begs us to remember vermouth's original role—as an aperitif. Try it straight, over ice. Available for \$20 at PlumpJack Wines, 4011 24th St., 415-282-3841.

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It's bottoms up at **7x7SF.COM** (click on "Featured Drinks" under Eat+Drink).