

Zingerman's Roadhouse, Ari Weinzweig, 2006

Vya Vermouths at the Roadhouse

One of the key components of our classic cocktail work over the last year has been the improvement in the quality of the raw ingredients we're using. Fresh lime juice, fresh lemon juice . . . and this here, very, very good vermouth. This is no small investment in quality-Vya costs us about three or four times more than what one pays for more everyday Noilly-Prat or Martini and Rossi let's say. But it's no different than buying Anson Mills grits or Niman Ranch pork or better butter for the croissants or using Valrhona chocolate in the Pain au Chocolat, or Datterra coffee for our espresso. You have to start with great stuff to get great stuff. And if we're going to have great cocktails they have to start with great ingredients.

This one came to my mind because a RH regular stopped me to ask if you could buy the Vya vermouths around town so that he could start mixing at home what he was getting when he was at the bar at the RH. He told me that he'd been a straight bourbon drinker for years but that tasting a Manhattan made with Vya vermouth at the RH he was ready to start switching what he did at home as well.

The truth, although I haven't done a detailed search I don't think you can find these vermouths much at retail in Ann Arbor. I do know that Ric had to work hard to get the local distributor not to drop this amazing Vermouth by telling him the truth-we're going to be using a lot of it at the Roadhouse-Vya is the only vermouth we use -it's what we automatically use in all our mixed drinks. You can order Vermouth to drink on its own, which, with these, you should definitely try doing. Or, we can happily sell it to the guest who was asking me, to you, or to anyone else (of legal drinking age) to take home.

Although everyone's heard of it, a lot of folks probably don't even know what vermouth is. So to get that out of the way first, vermouth is a wine that's "seasoned" with various botanical herbs. Maybe it was the herbal tea of the 18th century? It was meant to be drunk on its own where its complex and interesting flavors could be appreciated.

Historically, vermouth dates back about 200 years. It was originally done in a sweet red style, made by Carpano in Italy in 1776 in Turin from this grandmother's recipe. In 1813 Joseph Noilly made the first dry white Vermouth in the village of Marseillan on the Mediterranean coast of France and that vermouth is available today as the very good Noilly-Prat. Vermouth, like absinthe, was originally made with wormwood. (Since absinthe and its history are currently so in vogue, I'd guess that this fact would help you to sell more vermouth). In fact the name is derived from the German "wermut" or the old Anglo-Saxon "wermod," for wormwood. Wormwood is naturally very bitter and so sweeteners and herbs were added and vermouth was born.

I think the most straightforward comment I can share about this vermouth is a quote from the RH's day bartender Bob Brunelli. I asked him what he thought of the Vya vermouths and he said, "I like 'em because they actually taste like wine." Which is odd, but actually, oddly true. They do taste like wine. (This is much the same as people say about the artisan cream cheese from the Creamery.) They do taste good. And they're something you'd want to drink, as it was intended to be, on its own. Of course, he's right, and of course, IT IS A WINE so that's the point.

Vya vermouth is made by Quady Winery in Madera, California. You can certainly check out their website-quadywinery.com-to get more info on what they do. The Vya approach is, as I think it should be, to taste both the wine and the botanicals, in what has to be a balanced blend. I think they pull that off pretty darned well. And because vermouth is used so frequently in martinis and other mixed drinks that balance carries all the way through.

In terms of Vermouth they make two, dry white and sweet red. Both are delicious.

The white first. They use two base wines in it-Columbard and Orange Muscat. Those are blended with fifteen different herbs and botanicals, including lavender, sage, alfalfa, and linden. It's super smooth, almost creamy on the tongue. Nice round aroma. Lively but in a really soft, subtle way. Like nice soft but interesting jazz, you can be fooled into thinking it's almost too soft. But let the finish come on, exhale a bit and you suddenly start to notice the different herbs and botanicals. (For those of you, like me, who are cheese eaters first, wine drinkers second it's like a great summer cheese made from Alpine milk). The herbs are subtle. They don't dominate. But they're there. And they're delicious. Very refreshing. Taste of summer in a cold dark winter's night.

The dry white vermouth is, of course, great in a martini. Check out the entire Roadhouse Classic Cocktail menu on line or at the Roadhouse-it's in the Dirty Martini and the Scofflaw just to name a couple of drinks. And it'll be in the Classic Martini when we roll that out next month (part three of the rollout). If you want to try one before the formal introduction date, head to the RH and talk to Ric Jewell.

The Vya dry white vermouth is also a really great cooking ingredient. It's got to be great with shellfish, in fish stews or delicate sauces of all sorts. I'm going to try cooking with it in the coming weeks so more info to come on that subject.

So, that's the white. As good as it is the other option is probably even better. "In fact," Ric Jewell wrote me, "the red is the real find." The man knows his wines. It's made with a base wine of the Orange Muscat (that's in the white vermouth) and then Valdepenas (for its red fruit tones). The herbs and botanicals in it are listed as "roots, and seeds," (I have some homework to do to find out which roots and seeds though I have a feeling they're going to tell me it's a secret) along with citrus rind, cinnamon, cloves (see below for more on cloves), nutmeg, and

galangal (the wild Asian ginger root) among other things. This stuff is really pretty darned superb. Sherry like, smooth, not at all cloying. Really, really deliciously good. Subtle hints of red fruit. I'd drink it on its own. And of course it's great in Manhattans. You can also try it in some of the other Classic Cocktails-Blood and Sand, the Oriental, and the Martinez, which was the likely historical forerunner of the Martini.

Anyways, if you're out and about and in the mood for a cocktail that really tastes good, is historically accurate and far more flavorful than most of what's out there, stop by the RH and check out any of these. Or order a glass of the Vya vermouth on its own. Happy Holidays!