

WINE & SPIRITS

Vya:

Vying for the perfect aperitif

By Jason Tesauro and Phineas Mollod

For our 100th wine and spirits column, we wanted to cover something impactful. World hunger, maybe—world thirst, certainly. When we saw bargain brands hiding amongst our premium spirits, we knew this week's mission.

Vermouth, long the red-colored stepchild of spirit cabinets everywhere, has had a face-lift. Most common French and Italian brands ending with a vowel sit neglected, barely passable but for a few viscous drops in a martini, lacking the craftsmanship of a true aperitif. Indeed, the martini gin-to-vermouth ratio has soared since Prohibition, from the classic three-to-one to the current seven (plus)-to-one, with serious drinkers protecting their high-end booze from the industrial flatness of today's vermouths. Enter California's own Quady Winery, maker of luscious dessert wines (including the venerable Essensia and Elysium and the new Deviation) and producer of Vya, the aficionado's vermouth, in both extra-dry and sweet varieties.

Vermouth was invented around 1760 by Antonio Benedetto Carpano in Turin, Italy. Fascinated by Germany's medicinals, he named his concoction vermouth, an Italian version of *wormut*, or, wormwood, an absinthe additive and old-time tapeworm curative. Carpano softened up his bitter creation with enough sweetness to be enjoyed as a cocktail, and 100 years later Frenchman Joseph Noilly created a dry vermouth. Nowadays, Italian and French factions manufacture both.

Picture twilight: the first drink of the night. As guests congregate over olives, nuts and chips, how about a drink with ample acid to awaken the palate and enough botanicals to cleanse the mouth? Like a lavish complexion toner at Key Lime Pie Salon, Vya is a tastebud refresher, playfully resetting the tongue and prepping the tum-tum for food. Says Vya's creator, Andrew Quady, "Bitter plants wake up the aperitif and make the meal that follows taste better." It took a couple of years for him to master extractives, but he nailed the final recipe with incredible balance and finesse: "The plants shouldn't be overpowering, and you must take into account that vermouth is served on ice."

The base wine for Vya Extra Dry is colombar (the primary grape of Cognac) and luxuriantly aromatic orange muscat grapes infused with a selection of herbs (lavender, elecampane, galangal, angelica, orris and linden). Vya Sweet is orange muscat plus Tinta Roriz, an important variety in Portugal. It's what Quady, with a master of science in food science specializing in enology, uses in Starboard, his version of port. "Vermouth-making is secretive," he explains. "Some offerings resemble neutral spirits, stripped of flavor, fitted with aromatic components and tinted with caramel color."

We queried him about the Vya name: "It's made-up. We wanted a short word so it would appear large on the bottle." Fantastic—since there are only 2,000 cases of each produced, you'll know instantly whether or not your favorite ATL watering hole is wise enough to dress up martinis and Manhattans with vermouth that's fit to go solo. Indeed, with Vya, you can pour twice as much vermouth to increase a cocktail's complexity. "My favorite way," says Quady, "is the dry and sweet together on the rocks with a strip of lemon or orange peel. Some call it the perfect Vya or V and V."

In any case, it's lightly arresting and heavily pleasurable, whether it's the acidic, sherry-nuttiness of the Dry or the wash of mulled wine goodness in the Sweet. Looking for the perfect wine pairing for Mediterranean mussels with chorizo, tomatoes, chick peas, cilantro and Moroccan spices? Sweet Vya makes this dish sing. As for storage, we'll follow Quady's advice: "Keep the white in the fridge to prevent oxidization. The red can be left out."

Vya is a must for mature palates that wouldn't deign to drown top-shelf bourbon with cheap vermouth, so use the cheap stuff for cooking or irksome out-of-town guests. All in all, we'd rather go thirsty than go without Vya.

Thanks for two intoxicating years.



CREDIT: Courtesy of Quady Winery

Where to find Vya in the 404:

Pearson's Wine of Atlanta
3072 Early St. NW
Atlanta, 30305
404-231-8752

Floataway Café

1123 Zonalite Road, #15
Atlanta, 30306
404-892-1414

National Distributing Co., Inc.

One National Drive, SW
Atlanta, 30336
404-696-9440
