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9 Popular Italian Amari to Try Right Now

Head to Italy, the homeland of amaro, to learn why bitter is better.

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While amaro, or Italian herbal liqueur, has been mass-produced for more than 200 years, it's only relatively recently that Americans have begun to appreciate its deep, dark charms, with many old producers finally available on our shores. And you can thank the groundswell that has brought all things bitter to the mainstream: hopped-up IPAs; bars of dark chocolate containing sky-high cacao percentages; green tea; bitter veggies such as kale, broccoli rabe, arugula and dandelion leaves; even the cracker-dry, skin-fermented pet nats and brut natures that have turned a whole new generation of wine lovers on to low- to no-sugar sipping with a tannic bite.

Amaro is made by macerating any number of tasty things—herbs, flowers, fruit and its bits (like citrus zest or seeds), spices, tree sap, bark, roots—in alcohol (typically grape-derived, although other neutral base spirits are used as well), sweetened with sugar or syrup (which is why it belongs in the category of liqueurs) and often aged in a barrel. Amari are made throughout Italy, representing each region's typical botanicals and style and most often consumed after a meal (with the exception of aperitif-skewed amari, such as Campari or Aperol). Although in true pioneering American spirit, our love of the liqueur is more of a drink-when-you-wish approach, often in cocktails from clever bartenders who recognize the world of flavor dimensions amaro brings to a drink. While hundreds of different Italian amari exist (and a growing number of American-made versions, too), these are some of Italy's most classic and best-loved post-meal darlings to prime you for the bitter side of sipping.

1. Averna



Perhaps Sicily's best-known amaro export, Averna was born in Caltanissetta in 1868 when a Benedictine monk from Abbazia di Santo Spirito gave the recipe as a gift to Salvatore Averna. The magical formula included such botanicals as pomegranate seeds, sage, bitter orange, licorice, juniper and sap resin. The silky-textured combo creates the distinct flavor of pure cola that's oh-so-nice on the rocks.

2. Braulio



Just over the border from Switzerland sits the mountainous area of Bormio in the province of Lombardy, where this Alpine amaro is made. Its 13-botanical combo was perfected back in 1875, but to this day only four of those elements are publicly known: gentian, yarrow, juniper and wormwood. It's aged for two years in Slovenian oak before the pungent, minty and woody low-fi liquid (just 21% ABV) is released into the world.

3. Cynar



Let the label art be your guide. Artichoke leaves are indeed the main event in this savory amaro, but it's no one-trick choke; it also claims an ingredient list that's a baker's dozen of botanicals. But unlike its many amari brethren, Cynar is a relative newcomer, launched in post-war Italy in 1952 with an easygoing 16.5% ABV (although a 35% ABV formulation is available).

4. Dell'Etna



While this amaro has been a staple from Sicily's Mount Etna region since 1901, it took 116 years for it to make it to the United States. It has proven more than worth waiting for, however. The amaro's notable complexity comes from its beautiful blend of 29 herbs and other botanicals, such as mint, rhubarb, vanilla, almond, star anise and cinnamon from Etna's volcanic soils, that macerate for two months. It makes a great party gift for that friend who enjoys extra-nerdy booze conversations over cocktails.

5. Fernet-Branca



The amaro that launched a million tattoos, Fernet-Branca, invented in 1845 by Bernardino Branca, is the brand of fernet-style amaro that separates the cautious whistle wincers from the wide-open flavor wanderers. Arguably, it's generally not the first amaro to which you'll want to introduce the uninitiated, with its in-your-face medicinal smack of licorice. But it's beloved by those who like to dig deep and simmer in the savory qualities from the dozens of botanicals in this badge-of-honor amaro—cinchona bark, linden, saffron, rhubarb and Thai ginger, among them.

6. Montenegro



If there's an amaro welcome wagon, Montenegro earns the title with its cheerful sweet and bitter orangey aromatics that bartenders find to be so much fun to play with in cocktails and make it easy to love on its own. Those orange notes are well-complemented by ones of nutmeg, cinnamon, marjoram, coriander and clove, among others. Created in 1895 with the slightly unwieldy moniker Elisir Lungavita, it got a name change in 1906, when Italy's Prince Emanuele III married Princess Elena of Montenegro.

7. Nonino Quintessentia



This elegant easy-to-love amaro is made in Friuli by the Nonino family, who've been distilling grappa since 1897. Gently bitter with notes of orange, saffron and tamarind among its mix of botanicals, its more-herbaceous edges are softened by spending five years in barrique and used sherry casks, which contributes to a faint nuttiness.

8. Ramazzotti



Thought to be the oldest commercially made amaro, Ramazzotti is a mix of 33 herbs, flowers, roots and other botanicals first created in 1815 by a young, ambitious Milanese herbalist named Ausano Ramazzotti. Its herbal notes of Sicilian oranges, turmeric, star anise, rosemary and gentian taste as fresh and lively today as they did 205 years ago.

9. Vecchio Amaro Del Capo



Calabria, the toe of Italy's boot, doesn't get a ton of attention for its culinary treasures, which is unfortunate because there are plenty to be had. But Del Capo, its famed (if ubiquitous in Italy) amaro has finally arrived on U.S. shores. This amaro's base distillate is from sugar beets, in which 29 botanicals from the Calabrese province, including chamomile, peppermint, anise, orange and licorice, are macerated. Drinkers are encouraged to consume it ice cold, as with '90s-era Jäger shots, but just a little ice in a glass for a gentle chill does the trick to enhance all the lovely flavors.