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"I don't like flouncy, and I don't like boring. I'd prefer to go for something a little sleeker and more defined."
—Emily Blunt, actress

Sweet Bitter Love

Our drinks correspondent falls for amaro, which turns herbs and roots into magic potions

By Howard Chua-Eoan

ON A BLOCK OF OLD TENEMENTS IN downtown Manhattan, you will discover a tiny bar wallpapered with embossed red felt. It feels like the inside of a fuzzy ruby—which might have been a nice name for this tight little establishment or a drink it might have served (say, a Shirley Temple spiked with rambutan?). But words far more poetic and cautionary hang on the door: Amor y Amargo, which is Spanish for “love and bitters.” A recent addition to Ravi DeRossi’s East Village cocktail fief, Amor y Amargo is the city’s only tasting room devoted exclusively to bitters—part of a global wave of bars vowing monogamy to a single spirit, from mescal to shochu to single-malt scotch.

At Amor y Amargo, the shelves are stocked with German Jägermeister, Czech Becherovka, an Argentine fernet, even an American interloper called Root, which has all the puckish fun of root beer at 80 proof. Dominating the room are the amari of Italy, each with its secret proportion of arcane roots and herbs, like the closely guarded recipes for a magic potion.

Well, perhaps not everyone’s magic potion. “Amaro?” a friend sniffed when I told him of my latest love. “You mean that thing that tastes like licorice?”

That is *so* unfair to the amaro (which means *bitter* in Italian) and



its cousins from around the world. My scoffing friend changed his tone after the bartender at Annisa in Greenwich Village gave him a taste of Nardini Bassano on the rocks with a twist of orange—intimate but not insistent, with a friendliness that gave even the ice a surreal warmth. The nose is herbaceous: a whiff of grass, a newly torn leaf. With a sip, the syrup coats your tongue, elixir-like; in a half-blink your taste buds swoon to the sweetness.

The recipes for amari are proprietary combinations of root, bark, herbs and vegetables that are macerated in alcohol and then aged. The end products can be as little as 20% alcohol or more than 40%. More and more Italian restaurants feature a range of amari. New York City’s Dell’Anima offers a three-amaro tasting. But my city’s amaro masterpiece can be found at Amor y Amargo. Its eight-amaro sazerac, polished with bitters, can put a twinkle in any eye.

As digestifs, amari and bitters are hailed for their therapeutic qualities. I am almost convinced. At a Robert Burns supper of gourmet haggis and a buffet of single-malt scotches, a dining companion brought out tiny bottles of a German herbal bitter (44% alcohol). He instructed me to chug it at the end of the night to prevent a hangover. It did—as far as I can remember. ■

Starting Six: An Amaro Tasting Menu



Cynar

Pronounced *chee-nar*, this artichoke-based amaro has a vegetal nose and a lusty flavor—and creates a lovely red glow against the light



Nonino

Made from grappa and aged five years in oak, Nonino suggests harshness. Nope. It is magically citrusy and golden, almost like soda pop



Fernet

A style popular in Italy and Argentina, it is perhaps the most aggressive amaro, a pointed caramel that is almost prickly on the palate. It can fight you



Nardini Bassano

The color and texture may intimidate, but its balance of bitter, sweet and garden comes into perfect play with an ice cube and a twist of orange



Del Capo

Juicy and golden, it is one of the more approachable amari. But it is not simple: it boasts 29 different herbs from Calabria, in southern Italy



Zucca Rabarbaro

Predominantly concocted of rhubarb, it broods a dark purple and smells like a dusty street but tastes deliciously of fig