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Amaro amore: The Bay Area's passion for bittersweet liqueur



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Standing next to a gleaming white marble bar in Palo Alto's new Vina Enoteca restaurant, Massimo Stronati loads up a vintage cocktail cart with his amari arsenal, a dozen fancy-labeled bottles of the bittersweet Italian liqueurs that are making waves across the Bay Area bar scene.

It's no secret that California foodies have a thing for all things bitter, from coffee to hoppy beer. That's the appeal of amaro, as well. These spirits run the flavor gamut from sweet with a bitter kiss, to herbal or medicinal, to aggressively bitter. From Oakland's Shakewell to San Francisco's Quince, amari are popping up on bar menus in cocktails or served neat as aperitifs or digestifs.

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Amaro was born centuries ago in Italy, where monks and apothecaries concocted tonics by distilling bitter roots, flowers, herbs and other botanicals in neutral or wine spirits. Sweeteners were added to balance the bitter results.

When these elixirs first began appearing here, amaro was something of a clandestine sip. Hip mixologists kept bottles under the bar and served shots to fellow devotees after hours. Today, amaro is front and center on the bar — at San Jose's Paper Plane, Los Gatos' Lexington House and other Bay Area hot spots, where it's often served in mixed drinks.

At Lexington House, co-founder Stephen Shelton uses amaro's bittersweet notes to balance his cocktails, instead of adding sweet syrups, infusions or tinctures. He calls it "using what's on your bar's back shelf to enhance the spirits." And he prefers to use amaro instead of the bitters typically called for in classic cocktails. Lexington House's On the Flip Side, for example, takes a traditional flip — which is made with spirits, simple syrup and a whole egg — and adds Cynar 70, an aggressively bitter, artichoke-based amaro.

Shakewell bartender Nick Stratton channels a little "how do I love thee" when asked about amaro's appeal: "Let me count the ways. It's very versatile in cocktails, replacing sweet vermouth or simple syrup." His amaro cache includes Montenegro, which hits the sweet spot between sweet and bitter; the famous Fernet Branca; Santa Maria al Monte, which appeals to fernet fans, as well; Cynar; rhubarb-based Amaro Sfumato Rabarbaro; and the relatively sweet Amaro Nonino.

Customers are eager to learn more about all of these, says Vina Enoteca's Stronati, and the Italian-born master mixologist is happy to oblige. "The amaro cart," he says, "is a way to bring the bar to the diners and make amaro more approachable."

You'll find an amaro cart roaming the dining room at Quince, as well, with two dozen amari on offer. It's irresistible, says general manager Matt Cirne, "The cart often becomes a conversation piece."

And when San Francisco's Bar 821 reopened in 2015, it was with a second, amaro-centric bar with amaro flights and 15 types of fernet alone.



Now several Bay Area spirits makers are catching the amaro wave, too, distilling the bittersweet liqueur with a California twist. And we're not just talking about the bittersweet, woody Bruto Americano created by Lance Winters, the award-winning master distiller at Alameda's St. George Spirits.

Take Patrick Bickford and Susan LaRossa, two amaro-obsessed, self-styled "recovering sommeliers," who amassed a 47-bottle

collection of Italian amari before moving from New York to Sonoma's wine country. They're not making wine, though. They're making amaro. Their Amaro di Bilaro — a label that combines their two last names — uses a grape spirit base and 13 botanicals, including rosemary and spearmint from the couple's backyard, as well as gentian, rhubarb root and myrrh.

San Francisco amaro-maker Joe Cannella's fascination with spices is hardly surprising. His Sicilian family was in the spice trade, and Cannella actually means cinnamon in Italian. A visit to Sicily inspired his dry Amaro Canella, which blends four cinnamon varieties with coriander, clove and orange and lemon peels.

"Amaro is the quintessential Italian spirit, as far as I'm concerned," Cannella says. "You've got this opportunity to create layers and layers and layers of flavor. I feel like a booze chef."

And Bay Area natives Ben Flajnik — from "The Bachelor" franchise — and Max Rudstein's amaro is the result of a chance meeting at a music festival in 2013. Flajnik considered himself an unofficial ambassador for Fernet Branca. And Rudstein had been on a fernet quest ever since his first taste of the spirit when he was 18. He'd spent years sourcing bitter herbs and botanicals, and experimenting with distilling recipes.

The pair collaborated on a decidedly more approachable, less polarizing and, well, more San Franciscan fernet, using ingredients sourced from within 100 miles of the city. The one exception was cinnamon. Now you can add their Fernet Francisco to your amaro cart.

Bay Area amaro makers:

- **Amaro di Bilaro:** www.amarospirits.com
- **Amaro Canella:** www.canellaspirits.com
- **Fernet Francisco:** www.fernetfrancisco.com
- **Oakland Spirits Co:** This distillery will release its first J.C. Mars Amaro soon; www.oakland.ventures
- **St. George Spirits:** www.stgeorgespirits.com

Restaurants and bars with amaro:

- **A16 Oakland:** 5356 College Ave., Oakland; www.a16pizza.com
- **Bar 821:** 821 Divisadero St., San Francisco; www.dajanigroup.com
- **Lexington House:** 40 N. Santa Cruz Ave., Los Gatos; www.thelexlg.com
- **Paper Plane:** 72 S. First St., San Jose; www.paperplanesj.com
- **Quince Restaurant:** 470 Pacific Ave., San Francisco; www.quincerestaurant.com
- **Shakewell:** 3407 Lakeshore Ave., Oakland; www.shakewelloakland.com
- **Vina Enoteca:** 5007 Welch Road, Palo Alto; www.vinaenoteca.com

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