



The New Italian Aperitivo

Today's producers are imagining what the future of the tradition could look like.

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On the coattails of the cocktail renaissance, when strong-and-stirred reigned, arrived a new kind of craving, one for lighter, lower-alcohol drinks. Enter the Italian way of drinking: aperitivo.

In the last few years, the category has expanded at a dizzying clip. Where once this range of spirits and cocktails didn't even have a name in the United States, today, whole sections of drink menus and shelves of bars are dedicated to the simple yet culturally complex concept. Led by a flood of new bittersweet liqueurs and all the cocktails born of them, aperitivo has emerged within the cocktail world as an entire tradition unto itself.

“With current trends in the United States and the rest of the world, low-ABV and sessionable drinks are more and more common,” says Max Green, of Blue Quarter, a cocktail bar in Manhattan. Less boozy, more refreshing cocktails, he says, allow “one to be social and not too worse for the wear the next morning.”

Valentino Longo of La Sireneuse in Miami agrees: “I believe more people today are understanding the value of drinking a good cocktail without [over-doing] it.”

Not so long ago, the only real reference point Americans had for aperitivo liqueurs were the most recognizable of red bitters. Those lucky enough to live near a good cocktail bar might've had the opportunity to taste lesser-known wine-based or gentian-tinged alternatives. Now, the selection has expanded to include a host of red bitters from Italy and even a number made stateside.

With the aperitivo concept imported and firmly established, producers are now starting to imagine what the future of aperitivo, and its attending cocktails, could look like.

Take Nonino, the storied Friulian grappa distillery, who recently introduced its own variation: L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink. It's an exception within the category in the fact that it isn't red, but rather 100% natural and saffron-hued. Gentian root and rhubarb provide complexity and body, while Nonino's Fragolino (meaning "little strawberry") Grape Distillate lends a backbone of the distillery's unmistakable terroir. Fresh, with high tones of citrus, hints of grape richness and a light bitterness, this take on the aperitivo liqueur is notable for its subtlety.

That light touch also makes for a versatile player in cocktails outside the expected canon. When aperitivo liqueurs were limited to the stalwarts of the red bitter category, they could be found mixed into just a handful of classics, with little variation: the Americano, the Negroni, the Sbagliato and the Spritz. But the boom of new liqueurs, red and otherwise, has led to a rise of drinks that are expanding the notion of golden-hour drinking.

At Kumiko in Chicago, Julia Momose's shochu- and Nonino-based L'Aperitivo Caffè conjures up the feeling of drinking spritzes and espresso at an Italian café, by way of Tokyo. Blue Quarter's Green plays with the Americano tradition in his Higher Value, blending blanc vermouth, L'Aperitivo Nonino and sparkling green tea.

OG classics, from Margaritas to Manhattans to highballs, are getting the aperitivo treatment, too. Over at Polite Provisions in San Diego, Alicia Perry remakes the Pisco Sour with L'Aperitivo Nonino to "play on flavor affinities that are reminiscent of liqueurs of the past to present," she says. "It allow[s] me to implement a traditional cocktail variation while utilizing not-so-traditional ingredient pairings." At Ben Paris in Seattle,

Abigail Gullo Italian-izes a basic sour by incorporating Armagnac, Amaro Nonino, L'Aperitivo Nonino and sparkling wine.

Other bartenders are working in a more contemporary tradition. Dan Sabo, of the Paligroup in Los Angeles, looks to the modern classic, the Paper Plane, for inspiration, integrating L'Aperitivo Nonino with Japanese whisky to create the Nakatomi Plaza. "I enjoy working with a new expression of the aperitivo format, which has a lot of classic elements with some new fun flavors," he says. At La Sireneuse, Longo lightens up a modern sparkling cooler with cold brew, banana, and L'Aperitivo Nonino, for a drink that still looks the part but offers a wholly new taste profile.

Then, there's sixth-generation distiller Francesca Nonino, who prefers to drink her aperitivo with ice, a spray of fresh lemon, a lemon peel and a splash of tonic. At its heart, this pared-back approach is a timeless way to let an aperitivo shine—and there's nothing more Italian than a measure of something bittersweet, a slice of something fresh and a splash of something bubbly.