

# A New Approach to Vermouth

BY JACK BETTRIDGE

Not so long ago, the otherwise savvy cocktail connoisseur put less than a thimbleful of thought into vermouth brands. After all, the choices were few and the standard proportions—such as in a desert-dry Martini—were sparing. Even the choice of garnish may have posed a greater concern.

But an explosion in the vermouth category has made it necessary for mixologists to take a closer look at the spirit. Not only are new examples from old stalwarts and previously unfamiliar brands emigrating from the traditional European production regions, but American makers are showcasing versions with striking variety in flavor.

At heart, all vermouths are aromatized and fortified wines. But the simplistic notion that they fall into one of two categories—Italian (red and sweet) and French (white and dry)—is no longer valid.

A defining feature of the spirit per European—though not U.S.—law, is the presence of wormwood, the word for which in German, *vermut*, gives vermouth its name. Botanicals such as cardamom, cloves, citrus peel, juniper and ginger can also contribute to the flavor profiles of certain bottlings.

Predictably, new interest in the category arises from the contemporary bar's ceaseless thirst for innovative products. In fact, relates brand ambassador Guiseppe Gallo, when Martini & Rossi was tossing around ideas for a release to celebrate its 150th anniversary this year, "We said, 'Let's give a gift to the mixologist world.'"

The result is a vermouth that turns the company's standard red style on its head. Most red vermouth is made with white wine, getting its color from caramel added for sweetness. Gran Lusso, a bargain at \$30, gets its ruby hue courtesy of Barbera grapes from Piedmont. Far tarter than Martini's rosso, it offers a complex mixture of cinnamon, honey, quinine and grapefruit notes.

Noilly Prat, likewise, is marking its 200th birthday this year by introducing its Ambré edition to the U.S. market for the first time. French-made, but far from dry, with a color you can gather from the name, it delivers flavors of apple and banana. While quite mixable, it would be absurd as part of a dry martini.

But the household names aren't the only Old World brands available. Italy's Carpano, which first marketed vermouth in 1786, has long sold its extra-bitter Punt e Mes in the United States, and is making headway with the vanilla-flavored Antica Formula. Its newly imported Carpano Bianco lacks color but is in no sense dry, providing plenty of lush sugar and fruit.

And if you're blessed with a good barman or liquor store, there are a host of other esoteric producers to explore. Boissiere bills itself as "bone-white dry," but also shows a nuttiness rounded out by orange bitters. Cocchi revived its mint- and citrus-accented Vermouth di Torino in 2011 for its 120th anniversary. Dolin, the last of the Chambéry produc-

ers of France, makes dry vermouth that is citrusy and grapey, as well as a sweet and floral style. Its Rouge is notably less sugary-sweet than many of its Italian counterparts, with notes of dried fruit and honey.

But the surge in European exports is only half the story. The New World is providing a spectrum of vermouths that challenge traditional beliefs about what the category can be. Adam Ford was inspired to found Atsby New York Vermouth while on the Tour du Mont Blanc, sampling local examples of the spirit at every stop along the long-distance alpine walking route. Once back in the United States, Ford, an attorney in New York City, created vermouths on his own terms: Instead of using light neutral wines and spirits, he experimented with vintage wines from

the North Fork of Long Island and apple brandy from the Finger Lakes. "The assumption was always that wine and brandy shouldn't get in the way," he says. As a result, his Amberthorn and Armadillo Cake vermouths are flavor-forward animals compared with the nuanced Old World styles. Amberthorn is sweetened with honey, not caramel, and includes Chinese anise and French lavender as botanicals. For the Armadillo Cake, the sweetener is an earthy caramel made from muscovado sugar, complementing ingredients that include shiitake mushroom.

Jackson Cannon, who creates house-made vermouths for the Eastern Standard bar in Boston, made a pilgrimage similar to Ford's, this one to the home of Martini & Rossi, in Turin. Finding it impossible to reproduce his favorites from the trip back in the United States, he decided on a different direction: "Vibrant, rustic," he says. "Let's just make this delicious." Since then, he's tried maverick concepts such as strawberry-infused brandy, rhubarb botanicals and even a grappa fortifier.

On the West Coast, Derek Einberger, the winemaker at Patton Valley Vineyard in Oregon's Willamette Valley, produces Imbue Vermouth. "We feel like cowboys," he says of the choice. "You have to be a little crazy to try it." His products—Petal & Thorn and Bittersweet—let the wine's flavor shine through, focusing on a small number of botanicals rather than the typical complexity of European examples, which can call for up to 50 ingredients. Cinnamon and ginger notes define Petal & Thorn, whereas elderflower and chamomile characterize Bittersweet.

As you may have noticed, vermouth's namesake, wormwood, remains surprisingly absent in many American versions—unlike European producers, U.S. makers can legally exclude it from their recipes. Since the ingredient is notoriously difficult to obtain here, these groundbreaking manufacturers have been forced to seek out bittering agents elsewhere.

But Ivano Tonutti, the master herbalist for Noilly Prat, whom we reached by cell phone in a field of angelica in Germany, doesn't seem too bothered by the new direction taken by these American upstarts. Although he notes that wormwood's bitter taste is important to vermouth, he adds, "We don't want to be too limited. I love the creativity."

Jack Bettridge is senior features editor of Cigar Aficionado.



Sweet red vermouth is a key ingredient of the Manhattan cocktail.