

Supporting Characters

Bitters and vermouths are the essential components of any bar program

BY SALLY KRAL

It may be hard to imagine today, but there was a time not too long ago when vermouth gathered dust on many back bars. “Vermouth is now getting its credit, but for years it was so often scoffed at as an unnecessary part of a Martini,” says Tim Johnson, lead bartender at Urban Farmer steakhouse in Philadelphia. “These days, there are bars that offer extensive vermouth selections to be consumed not only as a part of a cocktail, but also on the rocks or neat.”

Bitters have seen a similar transformation over the past decade—where there used to be one main type (aromatic) there are now bitters of all flavors and styles. “Bitters and vermouths have grown so much over the past few years for two reasons,” says Max Green, managing partner of Blue Quarter and head bartender at Amor y Amargo, both in New York City. “First, the continued growth in availability has allowed for growing interest to be constantly fed. And second, the cocktail industry’s exponential growth over the past decade or so has pushed bartenders to always look for new ingredients that deliver complexity without increasing prep time on their end—vermouth and bitters are perfect for doing exactly that.”

Indeed, vermouth and bitters have much to offer in the cocktail-making world. “A lot of different bitters and vermouths can bend to almost any spirit,” says Collin Minnis, beverage director at The Market Italian Village in Columbus, Ohio. “Grapefruit bitters and mole bitters go well with agave spirits; orange bitters are for darker spirits; tiki-style bitters go with rum; honey bitters with gin; and so on. It’s the same thing with vermouths: Between dry, sweet, and bianco, and the plethora of different brands and different recipes that make up each bottle, the pairing possibilities are endless.”



Over the past decade, bitters have become a featured ingredient behind the bar. At Urban Farmer in Philadelphia, the Farmer #4 cocktail (pictured) features Peychaud's bitters.

Classic Components

Take a look at any of the classic cocktails that are wildly popular today—from the Old Fashioned to the Manhattan to the Martini to the Negroni—and you’ll see that they all feature either bitters or vermouth, if not both. “Bitters and vermouth have been a vital part of cocktails dating back to pre-Prohibition,” Urban Farmer’s Johnson says. “Break out Jerry Thomas’ classic cocktail guide and almost all of the recipes call for some amount of the two ingredients.” Johnson’s Wagyu Sazerac (\$14) is a take on the classic pre-Prohibition tippie, comprising wagyu beef-washed Wild Turkey 101 rye, turbinado simple syrup, Angostura and Peychaud’s bitters, and a spritz of Vieux Carré absinthe.

“Vermouth was underappreciated, misused, and mistreated before the cocktail boom—now it’s come back en vogue, with speakeasy and classic cocktail bars using it in vintage recipes,” says Lucas Swallows, bar director at Momofuku in Las Vegas. “The boom has also opened the door to a massive number of bitters producers creating countless expressions.” The Momofuku cocktail menu features many Japanese takes on traditional recipes, including Swallows’ Bonji Old Fashioned (\$17), featuring Old Forester Signature 100 Proof Bourbon, a house-made syrup comprising Okinawa black sugar and Momofuku rye bonji liquid seasoning, and Angostura Aromatic and The Bitter Truth Orange bitters. A more modern classic that’s similar to the Negroni, the Rosita (\$17)—developed by front of house manager Joshua McIntosh—comprises El Silencio mezcal, Campari aperitif, Cocchi Storico di Torino and Dolin Dry vermouths, and Fee Bros. Orange bitters.

PHOTO BY (OPPOSITE) EMILY DORIO

A Desert Rose (pictured), offered by Nashville-based Henley, combines two different vermouths—Del Professore Classico and Carpano Dry—mixing them with Tequila, beet tincture, and rose water.





“One of the cooler things about the cocktail renaissance is that the guest has become savvier,” says Benjamin Rouse, head bartender at Henley in Nashville. “Their cocktail knowledge and palates are evolving, allowing bartenders to use ingredients like bitters and vermouths in completely new ways and proportions. A 50/50 Manhattan or Martini, anyone?” His Stirred, Not Shaken (\$13) is the latter: It blends equal parts Absolut vodka and Del Professore Classico vermouth, plus Angostura Orange bitters.

Angostura Aromatic bitters is one of the oldest and most storied brands, dating back to 1824, and is many bartenders’ go-to, especially for use in similarly historic cocktails. “When it comes to bitters, you can’t unseat the king, Angostura, and for good reason,” Market Italian Village’s Minnis says. “It has a classic flavor profile and is ubiquitous in many cocktails.” The venue’s Manhattan Blackout (\$12) blends Woodford Reserve Double Oaked Bourbon, Don Ciccio & Figli Ferro-Kina amaro, and a blend of equal parts Angostura Orange and Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters. “There’s a lot going on in the production of these cocktail modifiers, with secret recipes and numerous ingredients, and many have a long lineage with an interesting story attached to them,” Minnis adds. “Any reputable bar or restaurant has at least the go-to brands of bitters and

vermouth behind the bar so they can make the drinks found in the classic cocktail canon.”

Wade McElroy, co-owner of Young American in Chicago, favors Angostura bitters, as well as Carpano vermouth, which is even older—it was first created in 1786. “They’re the building blocks of classics, which I use to inform my cocktail-making style,” he says. “They’ve been part of the drinking lexicon for so long, they’ve become an irreplaceable part of our world.” His Deep Purple (\$10) features Carpano Bianco vermouth, Hayman’s Old Tom gin, Giffard Wild Elderflower liqueur, Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters, and ube powder that’s been emulsified with water.

Cocktail Seasoning

Many bartenders compare working with bitters and vermouth—traditionally modifying ingredients—to using spices or herbs in food dishes. “It’s become common practice for bartenders to treat bitters and vermouths as seasoning for cocktails,” notes Momofuku’s Swallows.

Henley’s Rouse refers to bitters in particular as like salt and pepper for your cocktail. “If your drink is looking for that pinch of complexity or roundness, bitters can be the key,” he says, adding that vermouth is similarly useful in highlighting or amplifying certain characteristics. “There

are many cocktails that change by simply swapping out vermouths—they go from being bold and round to lightly floral and acidic.” Henley bartender Amanda Drazkowski’s A Desert Rose (\$14) mixes Espolòn Reposado Tequila, Del Professore Classico and Carpano Dry vermouths, house-made beet tincture, and rose water.

“When you make a dish using herbs or spices, they either build on the flavors of whatever you’re cooking or provides a sharp contrast—no matter what, they add depth and complexity to your dish,” says Devin Chapnick, lead bartender at Poka Lola in Denver. “Bitters work the same way, so practically any flavor or type of cocktail could benefit in some way from them. And today there are as many varieties of bitters as there are flavor profiles—there’s no replacement for Angostura, but some of my other go-to brands are Bittermens, Scrappy’s, Fee Bros., and Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters.” Chapnick’s Dairy

Block Punch No. 4 (\$11) blends Maison Rouge VSOP Cognac, Beefeater gin, Wray & Nephew White Overproof rum, Quinta do Noval Black Port, St-Germain liqueur, lemon juice, Demerara simple syrup, Earl Grey tea, scalded milk, and Bittermens’ Elemakule Tiki bitters. Former bartender Bridgette Turner’s Post Script (\$12), meanwhile, comprises Old Forester Rye, Maker’s Mark Private Select Barrel Bourbon, Licor 43 and Bénédictine liqueurs, and Fee Bros. Whiskey Barrel-Aged bitters.



Henley’s Stirred, Not Shaken (top) mixes vermouth and Angostura Orange bitters with vodka, while Amor y Amargo’s Diamond District (above) blends vermouth and Scrappy’s lime bitters with rye.



At *Young American* in Chicago, co-owner Wade McElroy calls bitters and vermouth the building blocks of classic cocktails. His *Deep Purple* (pictured) mixes Carpano Bianco vermouth and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters with gin, elderflower liqueur, and ube powder.

Because of their ability to act as “seasoning” to cocktails, bitters and vermouths are extremely versatile. “The beauty of these ingredients is that they can add that missing something to literally any cocktail,” Urban Farmer’s Johnson says. “Obviously bitters and vermouth work incredibly well in stirred cocktails like Manhattans and Martinis, where they are integral ingredients, but they can work just as well in shaken drinks. For example, we add Peychaud’s bitters as a garnish to the top of our Farmer #4 cocktail, which helps balance out the sweetness of the St-Germain.” The drink (\$15) mixes Tito’s vodka, St-Germain liqueur, lime and grapefruit juices, and Peychaud’s

bitters. It was created by Brandon Wise, vice president of beverage operations for Urban Farmer’s parent company Sage Restaurant Group.

Johnson appreciates how bitters and vermouth can bridge flavors together. “They add a flavor that will balance out the other ingredients in a cocktail,” he explains. “Bitters can work against a sweet ingredient while vermouth adds a robust and subtle sweetness to go against a spirit.” His *Bramble On* (\$14) blends Beefeater gin, Meletti amaro, a blend of Dolin Blanc vermouth, Dolin Dry vermouth, and Cocchi Americano aperitif, lemon juice, house-made blackberry syrup, and Angostura bitters.

Cocktail Recipes Featuring Vermouth And Bitters

STIRRED, NOT SHAKEN By Benjamin Rouse

Ingredients:
1½ ounces Del Professore Classico vermouth;
1½ ounces Absolut vodka;
1 dash Angostura Orange bitters;
Dehydrated lemon wheel.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine vermouth, vodka, and bitters. Stir and strain into a Martini glass. Garnish with a dehydrated lemon wheel.

DIAMOND DISTRICT By Max Green

Ingredients:
2 ounces Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth;
1 ounce sansho pepper-infused Wild Turkey 101 rye¹;
2 dashes Scrappy’s Lime bitters.
Lemon peel.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine vermouth, rye, and bitters. Stir and strain into a chilled coupe glass. Garnish with a lemon peel.

DEEP PURPLE By Wade McElroy

Ingredients:
1½ ounces Carpano Bianco vermouth;
1 ounce Hayman’s Old Tom gin;
¼ ounce Giffard Wild Elderflower liqueur;
2 drops Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters;
1 drop emulsified ube².

Recipe:
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine vermouth, gin, liqueur, bitters, and ube. Stir and strain into a coupe glass.

¹Infuse a 750-ml. bottle of rye with 1 gram of sansho peppers for one hour. Strain out peppers and pour the liquid back into the bottle.
²Mix together equal parts powdered ube and water.

Alternate Uses

It’s generally considered best practice to use ingredients with bold and complex flavors sparingly. “My mantra for any cocktail development—and this goes for bitters and vermouths as well—is ‘less is more,’” Market Italian Village’s Minnis. But he adds that there are always exceptions. “If you’ve never tried an Angostura Sour, which incorporates 1½ ounces of Angostura bitters, I encourage you to do so because there are few drinks that send your taste buds into overdrive—in the best possible way—quite like that one.”

While Marina Holter, head bartender at *The Whistler* in Chicago, generally adheres to the “dash will do ya” mentality in her drinks, she’s recently been experimenting outside those guide-

lines—after all, there are no true “rules” in cocktail-making, she argues. “I was recently gifted a copy of ‘Beta Cocktails’ by Billy Helmkamp, one of the owners of the Whistler,” she says. “This book suggests ways to flip the structure of a cocktail, and often relies on a heavy hand of something that is usually viewed as an additive. Playing off recipes from this book, I designed a couple of drinks that utilize a generous amount of classic-style bitters.” Both her *Stained Vision* and *Test Drive* cocktails fall into this category: They each feature a quarter-ounce of bitters—significantly more than the usual dash or two in most recipes. The *Stained Vision* (\$10) features Corazón Blanco Tequila, L.N. Mattei Cap Corse Quinquina Blanc aperitif, house-made ancho chile and hibiscus syrup, lime juice, Angostura bitters, and a pinch of salt, while the *Test Drive* (\$12) comprises Ransom Old Tom gin, Don Ciccio & Figli Ambrosia and Meletti 1870 Bitter aperitifs, and Peychaud’s bitters.

drink helps to bring down the abv. “This enhances the mindfulness of drinking while also adding nuance and letting the other ingredients flow together,” she says. “I’m seeing more vermouth on menus lately, and I think that’s because bartenders and beverage directors are generally gravitating toward lower-abv cocktails, which can be easily executed with vermouth.”

Indeed, as a fortified wine that’s naturally lower in alcohol content, vermouth is an excellent ingredient for lightening an otherwise spirit-heavy drink. At *Blue Quarter*, Green’s *Not My Presidenté* (\$15) mixes an ounce each of Carpano Bianco vermouth and Plantation 3 Stars White rum, plus Aperol aperitif, Ricard Pastis de Marseille anise liqueur, and mint tea.

And at *Amor y Amargo*, his *Diamond District* (\$15) is vermouth-based,



The Whistler’s Test Drive (left) utilizes Peychaud’s bitters, while *the Autumn Americano* (center) from *The Market Italian Village* features Cocchi Storico di Torino vermouth, and *the Not My Presidente* (right) from *Blue Quarter* uses Carpano Bianco vermouth.

featuring Carpano Antica Formula vermouth, sansho pepper-infused Wild Turkey 101 rye, and Scrappy’s Lime bitters. “As foundations to the classics, bitters and vermouth have always played a large role in the cocktail world, and now the low-abv

movement is sparking additional interest in these products, as they serve to anchor low-proof drinks,” *Young American’s* McElroy says. His *Swizzle #5* (\$12) comprises a base of Atxa Vino Dry vermouth, as well as Ferrand 1840 Cognac, Apologue Paw Paw liqueur, house-made ginger syrup, lemon juice, and fresh mint leaves.

At *The Market Italian Village*, Minnis’ *Autumn Americano* is a vermouth-forward, low-abv concoction, blending equal parts chai-infused Cocchi Storico di Torino vermouth and espresso-infused Campari, plus soda water. “With the low-abv trend, as well as the ‘I don’t like sweet drinks’ movement in full force, I hope to see more bitter- and vermouth-based cocktails in the future,” Minnis says. “It starts a whole new conversation for bartenders and the cocktails we produce.”

Holter also notes that adding more than the usual half- or quarter-ounce of vermouth and lessening the other spirits in a

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