

# Viva L'Italia

Now more than ever, Italian spirits play a starring role in cocktails

BY SALLY KRAL



Italian spirits have long been a mainstay in the cocktail scene, says Pat Ray, bar supervisor at The Violet Hour in Chicago, and recently their popularity has surged. “There’s a dazzling array of Italian spirits and I’d challenge anyone to find a cocktail style that couldn’t incorporate some,” he says.

Encompassing vermouths, liqueurs, aperitivos, and amari—and ranging in flavors from sweet to bitter to herbal to dry—Italian spirits have grown significantly in the U.S. market over the past several years. “A number of these Italian products have long, rich histories, but the recent availability of many of them in the U.S. speaks to the cocktail drinker’s evolving palate—we’re seeing larger proportions being introduced in cocktail builds to create bolder flavor profiles,” says Nick Kokonas, former bar manager and current cocktail consultant for restaurant The Heritage in Forest Park, Illinois. “People are starting to move past simplicity to expand their tastes, and they’re excited to learn about and try more



Italian spirits are favored by mixologists because of their layered flavors, as seen in the *Start Spreading The News* (left) from St. Cecilia in Atlanta, the *Spritz* (center) from Bar Clacson in Los Angeles, and the *Shiso Negroni* (right) from Miami’s *Kaido*.



exotic things. Amaro is a new frontier for a lot of people.”

Natasha David, co-owner and bartender at cocktail den Nitecap in New York City, has noticed guests moving out of their comfort zones to try progressively more complex flavors. “The Aperol Spritz and

Negroni, both featuring aperitivos, have been popular for a while,” she says. “As customers become accustomed to that bitter, herbaceous flavor profile, more and more are drinking products like Fernet-Branca amaro.”

Today’s savvy cocktail enthusiasts are growing more adventurous in their drinking habits because they’re following the lead of trusted bartenders. “More American bartenders are reaching for Fernet, Montenegro, and Averna amari instead of the usual Campari and Aperol to create truly unique and complex cocktails, just as our European counterparts have been doing for years,” notes Jamie Clark, lead bartender of Pikoh in Los Angeles. And as more bartenders incorporate

PHOTOS BY (LEFT) ANDREW THOMAS LEE; (RIGHT) JUAN FERNANDO AYORA; (OPPOSITE) CARRIE ROLLINGS



The El Jimador’s Day Off cocktail from Pikoh in Los Angeles highlights the versatility of Italian spirits, mixing Montenegro amaro with Yuul Baal Espadín mezcal, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, Drambuie Scotch whisky liqueur, and lemon juice.





these bolder styles of Italian spirits into their cocktails, the spirits become more approachable and exciting to their guests, notes Lauren Mathews, lead bartender at Italian restaurant Urbana in Washington, D.C. “It opens up a conversation with people who want to try something a little more obscure and allows bartenders to experiment with cocktails in new ways,” she says.

### Versatile Variety

Italian spirits are exciting to many bartenders because even within a single product, such as vermouth, the brands and styles vary greatly, offering mixologists a wide breadth of options. “The density of flavor is profound in Italian products—these flavors are often uncompromising, unmistakable, and indispensable,” says Clarke Anderson, beverage manager for Atlanta restaurants St. Cecilia, King + Duke, No. 246, and BeetleCat, all of which are owned by chef and restaurateur Ford Fry. At St. Cecilia, Anderson’s Start Spreading the News (\$13) features J.W. Dant Bottled in Bond Bourbon, Dolin Dry vermouth, CioCiaro amaro, and Luxardo Maraschino liqueur.

“I love the layers involved with Italian spirits, as they lend something to a cocktail that’s hard to replicate with a single ingredient,” says Stephanie Andrews, bar manager at Billy Sunday in Chicago. “My favorite is Braulio, an alpine style of amaro coming out of Bormio. It has a balanced, herbaceous nature, and it plays well with so many spirits and ingredients.” Her Amaro Daiquiri (\$12) comprises Braulio, Sfumato Rabarbaro amaro, lime juice, and house-made gomme syrup.

Brandyn Tepper, bar director at Angler restaurant in San Francisco, notes that in Italy, amaro is traditionally consumed neat at the end of a meal, while aperitivos are served over ice with a



At Billy Sunday in Chicago, Italian spirits, particularly amari, are used to add depth to classic cocktails such as the Old Fashioned (top), which mixes Zucco Rabarbaro instead of bitters, and the Amaro Daiquiri (above), which showcases Braulio.

splash of soda and squeeze of orange. Modern mixologists, however, are expanding the uses of these spirits. “Now they’re often used to balance out the acidity in cocktails containing citrus, or to act as a bitter-sweet component in aromatic cocktails like the Old Fashioned,” he explains. “At Angler we use a lot of spirits from Bordiga, a producer based out of Piedmont that makes vermouth, amari, and bitter aperitivo.” The venue’s Pacific Coast Highway (\$17) blends Bordiga Bianco vermouth, Bordiga Bitter and St. George Bruto Americano aperitivos, grapefruit and lemon juices, and simple syrup. Tepper says the drink is a riff on one of the same name created by bartender Parker Marvin of New York City cocktail lounge Attaboy.

The Heritage’s Kokonas has noticed that amaro in particular is taking off behind the bar. “Amaro is showing up in everything from tiki drinks to stirred cocktails to sours, and there are even amaro-based cocktails,” he says. His Sonder (\$11) is one such amaro-based concoction, blending Montenegro amaro, Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon, John D. Taylor’s Velvet Falernum liqueur, and lime juice. “It’s incredibly rare to see a menu at a world-class bar that doesn’t include at least one amaro,” The Violet Hour’s Ray says. The And In Flew Enza cocktail (\$14), created by Violet Hour bartender Zac Sorensen, features Ransom Old Tom gin, Laird’s Straight apple brandy, Nardini amaro, and Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth. “When I’m searching for an ingredient to integrate disparate flavors in a cocktail, I tend to

reach for Italian spirits,” Ray adds. “The variety and versatility of these products make them immensely useful tools to have at your cocktail bar.”

Indeed, the Italian spirits category offers bartenders many options for experimentation and fun. Urbana’s Mathews notes that the Negroni—equal parts gin, Campari, and sweet vermouth—is her favorite cocktail to play around with. “The Negroni has become extremely popular and it’s so fun because you can change the taste just by switching up the gin and vermouth,” she explains. At Kaido lounge in Miami, partner and mixologist Nico de Soto does just that with his Shiso Negroni (\$17), which blends Citadelle gin, Campari, and Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, before being infused with a shiso leaf for 24 hours. “Always taste the amaro or vermouth you want to use—they’re all distinct, so if you want to substitute one for another, the proportions may have to be reconsidered so that the drink stays balanced,” de Soto says.



### Mixable Modifier

With any cocktail, balancing flavors is important. Italian spirits are particularly useful because, depending on the style of drink, they can be added in large or small amounts to achieve that balance. Additionally, they mix well with other spirits. “As I’ve stepped out of my comfort zone when creating cocktails, I’ve thoroughly enjoyed blending amaro with agave spirits and citrus,” Piko’s Clark says. Her El Jimador’s Day Off (\$14) features Yuu Baal Espadín mezcal, Montenegro amaro, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, Drambuie Scotch whisky liqueur, and fresh lemon juice. “My favorite brand right now is Montenegro,” she adds. “It’s not as heavy as some other Italian spirits, and the nose is floral, with some lingering baking spices.”

Urbana’s Mathews, meanwhile, has a preference for mixing Italian spirits in cocktails that feature Bourbon, gin, or sparkling wine. Her Hive Mind (\$13) comprises Basil Hayden’s



Amaro-based drinks, like the Sonder (left) from Heritage in Forest Park, Illinois are now on many drinks lists, as are low-abv cocktails like the Breakfast In Bed (center) from New York City’s Nitecap and Bitter Giuseppe (right) from The Violet Hour in Chicago.



Kentucky Straight Bourbon, Don Ciccio & Figli Limoncello liqueur, lemon juice, aquafaba, honey syrup, cayenne pepper, and Angostura bitters, while her Face With a View (\$13) mixes Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Straight rye, Plymouth Sloe gin, Dopo

Teatro Cocchi vermouth amaro, Pasubio Vino amaro, and Scrapy’s Black Lemon bitters. “Italian spirits work well in more spirit-forward cocktails where the nuanced flavors of each ingredient can be appreciated,” she adds.

Though most Italian amari, vermouths, and liqueurs are lower in abv than traditional distilled spirits, their bold and complex flavors enable them to stand up to higher-proof ingredients. At The Keep Liquor Bar in Columbus, Ohio, the Vieux Carré (\$15) comprises Osocalis Rare Alambic brandy, Michter’s US\*1 Kentucky Straight rye, Carpano Antica Formula, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, and Angostura and Peychaud’s

### Italian Spirit-Based Cocktail Recipes

#### SONDER By Nick Kokonas

**Ingredients:**  
2 ounces Montenegro amaro;  
¾ ounce Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon;  
½ ounce John D. Taylor’s Velvet Falernum liqueur;  
¾ ounce lime juice;  
Grapefruit peel.

**Recipe:**  
In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine amaro, Bourbon, liqueur, and lime juice. Shake and strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a grapefruit peel, expressed and inserted.

#### BREAKFAST IN BED By Natasha David

**Ingredients:**  
2 ounces Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth;  
1 teaspoon Branca Menta amaro;  
¾ ounce lemon juice;  
½ ounce simple syrup;  
1 bar spoon orange marmalade;  
Mint bouquet.

**Recipe:**  
In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine vermouth, amaro, lemon juice, syrup, and marmalade. Strain into a double rocks glass filled with crushed ice. Garnish with a mint bouquet.

#### BITTER GIUSEPPE By Stephen Cole

**Ingredients:**  
2 ounces Cynar amaro;  
1 ounce Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth;  
¼ ounce lemon juice;  
6 dashes Regan’s No. 6 Orange bitters;  
Lemon peel.

**Recipe:**  
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine amaro, vermouth, lemon juice, and bitters. Stir and strain onto fresh ice in an Old Fashioned glass. Garnish with a lemon peel, expressed and inserted.

PHOTOS BY (LEFT) NEIL JOHN BURGER; (CENTER) WILL FOSTER; (RIGHT) MARZENA ABRAMIAK



bitters. At King + Duke, Anderson's On Stranger Tides (\$20) is a Negroni riff featuring Plantation 2002 Barbados rum, Campari, and Berto Rosso vermouth, while A Rose for Emily (\$12), created by the venue's former beverage manager Ronald LeClair, mixes Four Roses Bourbon, Cynar amaro, lemon juice, house-made grenadine, and St. Elizabeth allspice dram, garnished with atomized saline. "Salt will balance out bitter flavors," Anderson notes. "If a cocktail is delicious but a whisper too bitter, often a pinch or a spray of salt will bring it around."

At Angler, the Mezcaletti (\$17)—a take on the drink originally created by renowned mixologist Richie Bocco—blends equal parts Del Amigo Joven mezcal and Meletti amaro, as well as Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters and Fee Brothers Orange bitters. "Bitter, sweet, salty, aromatic, acidic—anything that's balanced will work well with Italian spirits," Tepper says. "I try to keep it simple because many of these products work well with very little done to them."

Billy Sunday's Andrews agrees that simple is best, especially with bolder styles of amari, saying it's important to "start small and build up." The Billy Sunday Old Fashioned (\$12), created by former bar director Alex Bachman, features Johnny Drum Private Stock Kentucky Bourbon, sugar, water, and Zucca Rabarbaro amaro in place of the traditional Angostura bitters. At The Heritage, Kokonas' Black Park (\$11) is a similar take on the Old Fashioned build, comprising David Nicholson 1843 Bourbon, Cynar, Scrappy's Cardamom bitters, and Urban Moonshine Maple Digestive bitters. "Italian spirits tend to modify the cocktail's overall taste in ways that are a little more profound," Kokonas says. "Substituting a different base spirit such as gin or Tequila in a cocktail isn't going to affect the outcome as drastically as incorporating a different amaro may."

Pikoh's Clark agrees that Italian spirits are unlike any other cocktail ingredient, adding a complexity that "you just can't put your finger on sometimes. The botanical makeup of many of these spirits is closely guarded, which makes using them more exciting to me. They're bittersweet and herbal, but figuring out whether it's cardamom, citrus peel, rose, mint, rhubarb, cinchona, or something else can be a fun game." Clark's El Paso (\$14) blends Old Forester Bourbon, Tromba Reposado Tequila, Luxardo Abano amaro, pink grapefruit and lemon juices, and house-made chipotle maple syrup.

"There are so many Italian spirits, and they can be used in anything from a Whiskey Sour variation to a decadent

dessert cocktail, but I'd say one of my favorite styles of drinking is the aperitif, and many Italian spirits lend themselves to that category," Nitecap's David says. Created for Carpano, her Breakfast in Bed (available at Nitecap for \$16) mixes Carpano Antica Formula, Branca Menta amaro, lemon juice, simple syrup, and orange marmalade. "It's all about low-abv drinking right now, and nothing lends itself better to that than a delicious and simple vermouth and soda on a hot summer night," David adds.

Indeed, low-alcohol, session cocktails are in high demand as consumers continue to embrace moderation. At The Violet Hour, the Bitter Giuseppe (\$14), created by bartender



Washington, D.C.'s Urbana relies on the herbaceous qualities of Italian spirits to balance cocktails with Bourbon, gin, or sparkling wine. The Hive Mind (above) blends Don Ciccio & Figli Limoncello liqueur with Basil Hayden's Bourbon, lemon, honey, cayenne, and bitters.

Stephen Cole, is a low-abv blend of Cynar, Carpano Antica Formula, lemon juice, and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters. The similarly light Vicenza Spritz (\$12), created by lead bar farm specialist Sonia Stelea at Esther's Kitchen in Las Vegas, comprises Nardini amaro, Nardini Mandorla grappa, lime juice, and Q Tonic water.

Led by the Aperol Spritz, the low-abv trend shows no signs of waning and Italian spirits are the stars of the show. The Spritz (\$13) at Bar Clacson in Los Angeles features Aperol, fresh lemon juice, house-made white wine syrup, Cantina Pavan Prosecco, and soda water. "The Aperol Spritz is such a classic, no matter the time of year—it's refreshing and has just enough bitter that anyone can enjoy it," Urbana's Mathews says. "With Italian spirits, just adding sparkling wine or soda makes a nice, refreshing cocktail." **mw**