

Old World Meets New

Italy's amaro brands are having a moment on U.S. craft cocktail menus

BY SALLY KRAL



LEFT TO RIGHT: *The Amaro Highball* from Billy Sunday in Chicago, the *Honey Do Right* from Gracias Madre in Newport Beach, California, and the *Old Fashioned* from New York City's Dante are a few cocktails that rely on Italian aperitivi for a flavor boost.

In recent years, two classic Italian cocktails—the Negroni and the Aperol Spritz—have exploded in popularity in the U.S. bar scene. Both of these drinks feature bitter Italian aperitivi—Campari in the Negroni and Aperol in the Aperol Spritz—and have helped introduce U.S. consumers to the pleasures of a more bitter and complex style of cocktail. “Over the past five years in particular, people’s awareness of Campari and Aperol has grown, and it’s opened them up to heavier, more bitter Italian amari like Cynar and Braulio,” says Linden Pride, co-owner of New York City restaurant and bar Dante. “I think that iconic Italian taste profile is very sophisticated, mature, and acquired—if you’re really enjoying amaro, the Italian word for bitter, it’s usually because you’ve taken an interest in developing your palate and expanding it, and that’s what more and more consumers are doing today.”

Indeed, with Aperol and Campari serving as their stepping stones, U.S. consumers are gravitating toward even bolder

flavors, which is a boon to the herbal, earthy, and bittersweet products within the Italian amaro category. “Our clientele have become adventurous and thirsty for more—their palates are educated and they’re conscious of what they consume,” says Tamara Jovanovic, assistant general manager and beverage director at The Wilder in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “At the same time, we have passionate and knowledgeable bartenders who are pushing past the norm by experimenting with ingredients that used to collect dust on backbars or in our grandparents’ cabinets. The combination of both occurrences has opened the door for amaro.”

Star Hodgson, award-winning mixologist and beverage consultant for Seed in New Orleans, has long been a lover of Italian amaro and is glad to see it becoming more widely known in the U.S. “I’ve been a judge in multiple double-blind spirits tasting competitions over the last decade and a few years ago, something incredibly telling occurred: An amaro

PHOTOS BY (ABOVE RIGHT) STEVE FREIHON; (OPPOSITE) MARINA POUPART



U.S. consumers are rediscovering Italian amaro. The Paper Plane at Fort Lauderdale, Florida’s The Wilder is a modern classic that mixes equal parts Nonino amaro, Aperol, Breaker Bourbon, and lemon juice.



Indeed, the most common way to use amaro in cocktails is as a modifying ingredient that supports other base spirits. Smith favors pairing it with various styles of whisk(e)y, as well as a host of other ingredients depending on the cocktail style. “Brands like Montenegro and CioCiaro are approachable in flavor and play very well with other ingredients,” he says. “Nonino, a more elegant and higher-proof amaro, works incredibly well with whisk(e)y in a stirred cocktail.” His *Between the Bridges* (\$17)—featuring Angel’s Envy Bourbon, Nonino amaro, Nardini Tagliatella liqueur, Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, and Regans’ No. 6 Orange and Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters—is bold and stirred. A lighter, shaken option is his *Honeycrisp Highball* (\$17), which blends Suntory Toki whisky, Montenegro amaro, honeycrisp apple juice, house-smoked maple syrup, malic acid solution, and club soda. His *Zucca Julep* (\$17) comprises Maker’s Mark Private Select Bourbon, St. Agrestis amaro, house-made toasted pumpkin seed orgeat syrup, honey syrup, and lemon juice.

“Darker amari like Averna, Cynar, and fernet lend themselves to stirred cocktails that are more spirit-forward,” notes Alaric Moore, bar manager and bartender at Odd Job in San Francisco. The bar’s Arlington cocktail (\$13) mixes Lost Republic rye, Averna amaro, Calvados (brand varies), and Angostura Orange bitters. “Amaro cocktails are exceedingly popular; though the majority of our guests don’t know much about amaro, they’ll recognize Nonino or Averna,” Moore

adds. “Cynar seems to be becoming more popular as well, and fernet is a classic—people who like it will always call for a Toronto if it’s on the menu.” The bar’s Toronto (\$12) features Rittenhouse rye, Jelinek fernet, simple syrup, and Angostura bitters.

Chicago bar Billy Sunday boasts one of North America’s largest collections of amari. “We have a really great set of regulars and guests who seek us out for our amari,” says beverage director Stephanie Andrews. “We make it a point to incorporate amari and other bitters into all of our cocktails so we get a chance to educate guests who are unfamiliar.” Her Anything Besides Water? (\$13) comprises Knob Creek rye, Cardamaro Vino amaro, Angelico fernet, Bénédictine liqueur, Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters, and a spritz of house-made fenugreek tincture.

“There are so many unique styles of amaro, from bitter and intense to sweet and syrupy, heavy and potent to crisp and citrusy,” The Wilder’s Jovanovic says. “Because they can be very potent in flavor, it’s important to pay attention to ratios. Just a few drops more or less can make a completely different cocktail—which is also what makes amaro so fun to work with.” Her Exumas (\$13) blends bacon fat-washed Coconut Cartel

won best in show,” she says. “That’s when I knew it wasn’t just me—amari were going to finally start getting the attention they deserve.”

Traditionally enjoyed neat in Europe, amaro has been embraced by the U.S. mixology community as a key cocktail ingredient, notes Alex Smith, bar manager at Cecconi’s Dumbo in Brooklyn, New York. “Amaro has a lot of bang for your buck when it comes to flavor—in a single bottle you can find both bitter and sweet profiles accentuated by an array of herbaceous notes,” he says. “When properly utilized in a cocktail, it adds greater depth and complexity than most other ingredients.”

Bittersweet Balance

Smith adds that with flavors ranging from bitter to sweet, dry to viscous, and floral to zesty, amaro brings a lot to the cocktail glass—as long as it’s appropriately balanced. “It’s important to remember that not every palate is accustomed to the assertive flavors of an amaro, and that cocktails made with amaro should still be approachable to the average bar guest,” he explains. “Pairing an amaro with a more familiar spirit or profile will invite the guest to try something new and different.”



Amaro is having a moment in the U.S. bar scene. The *Zucca Julep* (top) from Cecconi’s Dumbo in Brooklyn, New York utilizes St. Agrestis amaro, while the *Smoking Jacket* (above) from New Orleans’ Seed incorporates Nonino amaro.

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rum, Amaro di Angostura, pecan and chicory-infused Osborne Pedro Ximénez Sherry, Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, and Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur, while her Golden State of Mind (\$13) mixes Riazul Reposado Tequila, Nonino amaro, carrot and limes juices, and house-made spiced pear syrup. “My favorite thing about working with amaro is using it as a bridge to bring the other ingredients together,” Jovanovic adds. “It often gives body to my cocktails and creates an explosion of flavor.”



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Between the Bridges* from Cecconi’s Dumbo and the *Golden State of Mind* from the Wilder use Nonino amaro, while the *Amaro Daiquiri* from Billy Sunday highlights Braulio and Sfumato Rabarbaro amari.



Dante’s Pride says that although the taste at the forefront of amaro is bitter, there’s also a good deal of sweetness that needs to be considered when making a cocktail. “If you took the bitter out of it and you just used that product with the amount of sugar in it, you would really need to be offsetting that sugar somehow,” he explains. The Old Fashioned Whiskey Cocktail (\$17) at Dante features Wild Turkey 101 rye, Nonino amaro, honey syrup, Dale DeGroff’s Pimento Aromatic bitters, and a dash of saline.

Cocktail Recipes Featuring Amaro

BETWEEN THE BRIDGES By Alex Smith

Ingredients:

1¼ ounces Angel’s Envy Bourbon;
½ ounce Nonino amaro;
½ ounce Nardini Tagliatella liqueur;
¾ ounce Cocchi Vermouth di Torino;
2 dashes Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters;
2 dashes Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters;
Orange peel;
Cherry.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine Bourbon, amaro, liqueur, vermouth, and bitters. Stir and strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube. Express an orange peel over the drink, then discard. Garnish with a cherry.

GOLDEN STATE OF MIND By Tamara Jovanovic

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Riazul Reposado Tequila;
½ ounce Nonino amaro;
1 ounce carrot juice;
½ ounce lime juice;
¼ ounce spiced pear syrup¹;
Carrot greens;
Dried carrot flakes.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine Tequila, amaro, juices, and agave. Shake and strain into a dried carrot flakes-rimmed Collins glass over crushed ice. Garnish with carrot greens.

AMARO DAIQUIRI By Stephanie Andrews

Ingredients:

1 ounce Braulio amaro;
1 ounce Sfumato Rabarbaro amaro;
¾ ounce lime juice;
½ ounce gomme syrup²;
Dehydrated lime wheel.

Recipe:

In a cocktail shaker, combine amari, juice, and syrup. Add ice and hard shake. Double-strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a dehydrated lime wheel.

¹In a saucepan combine 2 parts Demerara sugar and 1 part water. For every cup of sugar you use, add 1 freshly diced pear, 2 slices of fresh ginger, and 3-4 cloves. Bring to boil, then let it simmer for 30 minutes. Put it in the fridge overnight, then strain. Keep refrigerated.

²Combine 32 ounces water and 2 tablespoons gum arabic in a pot, whisking constantly. Bring mixture to a boil, then add 6 cups sugar, whisking vigorously. Turn off heat and let sit for 20 minutes to cool. Store in a non-reactive container for up to 1 month.

PHOTO BY (TOP) LILY WOKIN

PHOTOS BY (LEFT) KIRA TURNBALL; (CENTER) MARINA POURPART

“I think of amaro and liqueurs as my sugar content in a cocktail, which is why I like to say a little goes a long way,” says Luis Del Pozo Arroyo, bar manager at Gracias Madre in Newport Beach, California. His Honey Do Right (\$17) comprises Monkey 47 gin, house-made honey basil syrup, fresh lemon juice, and a Meletti fernet float. “I prefer to make cocktails that are three to four ingredients max—that way I’m able to pull an abundance of flavor without overusing ingredients and overlapping them,” Arroyo adds. “What I like about amari is you don’t need to go crazy with them to pull out the flavors you need.”



The Exumas cocktail (pictured) from The Wilder blends bacon fat-washed Coconut Cartel rum with Amaro di Angostura, pecan- and chicory-infused Osborne Pedro Ximénez Sherry, Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, and Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur.

Front And Center

While amaro is most typically featured as a supporting ingredient in a cocktail, it’s becoming more common to see it used as a base spirit or in equal parts with other spirits in a drink. “I feel like amaro has taken a front seat over the last decade,” Seed’s Hodgson says. “The most popular drink at our bar right now is, surprisingly, an amaro and Scotch cocktail.” The drink she refers to is her Smoking Jacket (\$11), which is smoked with alder wood and features equal parts Nonino amaro and Monkey Shoulder blended malt Scotch, as well as Punt e Mes vermouth and Cocktail Punk Smoked Orange Cocktail bitters. “Many spirits are singular or dual in flavor, but amaro brings a super complex profile that can bend a typical drink in multiple realities,” Hodgson adds. “It’s incredibly fun to find ways to highlight each brand’s uniqueness and hone your own palate into an experience for your guests.”

At Odd Job, Moore’s Nostalgia (\$14) blends equal parts Francisco Chamomile fernet and By the Dutch Advocaat egg

liqueur, as well as simple syrup, lemon juice, and egg white. “As bartenders look to fulfill demand for more and more exotic flavors for guests who are looking for more varied culinary experiences in general, we’ll continue to see an upswing in amaro use,” Moore says. Indeed, as consumers continue to expand their palates, amaro is primed to take on a larger role in the U.S. mixology scene. At The Wilder, Jovanovic notes that the modern classic Paper Plane (\$13)—which she makes with equal parts Nonino amaro, Aperol, Breaker Bourbon, and lemon juice—is very popular with guests.

“Especially for people that aren’t so used to having an amaro cocktail, bartenders like to use them as modifiers and just accents, but nowadays there’s been a push to feature amaro as a base spirit as guests have gotten more comfortable with it,” says Arroyo of Gracias Madre. “It’s a pretty cool trend because amari are full of flavor and a little goes a long way, so when you’re using them in full-on ratios it’s just an explosion of flavor depending on how you want to use it.” His 2 Speziato Bites (\$13) features a base of Fernet-Branca, as well as Yellow Chartreuse liqueur, fresh lemon and orange juices, and fresh jalapeño.

Billy Sunday’s Andrews favors Braulio amaro, particularly for using as a base spirit. “It’s a great alpine style of amaro with so much going on—the perfect amount of bitter, herbaceous, and sweet qualities,” she says. Her Amaro Daiquiri (\$13) comprises Braulio and Sfumato Rabarbaro amari, lime juice, and house-made gomme syrup, while her Amaro Highball (\$11) is a blend of blackberry-infused Braulio and house-made blackberry soda, garnished with fresh mint. “Amaro is known as a digestif, but digestif is really just a style of service—if I took that same amaro and served it over ice with soda and an orange twist, it’s now an aperitivo,” Andrews adds. “It can be enjoyed in every which way.”

Aperitivo-style drinks have become very popular in recent years as consumers gravitate toward drinks that are lower in alcohol content. “I can see amaro being used more in low-abv cocktails in the future and I definitely see the comeback of amaro and tonic,” Jovanovic says. “I love using Nonino because at 35% abv, it can easily be used as a base spirit in cocktails like my Ciao Bella Spritz.” The drink (\$11) comprises Nonino, Chinola Passion Fruit liqueur, and Mionetto Prosecco, garnished with fresh mint.

Dante’s Pride notes that the low-abv cocktail trend is here to stay. “People don’t always want to be punched in the guts or knocked over when they have a single drink—they might prefer to have two different types of drinks, and have those be low or minimal abv so they can take the edge off, as opposed to sitting on something stiff,” he says. “That responsible, sophisticated style of drinking is only growing.” The Bitter Italian (\$10) at Dante is one such light cocktail, featuring Cynar and San Pellegrino Chinotto soda.

“I believe we’ll see amaro become a key ingredient in cocktails as the popularity of low-abv drinking continues to grow—a light and refreshing Highball or Spritz is an excellent medium for amaro,” says Smith of Cecconi’s. “And we’re going to see amaro’s popularity rise in a greater variety of venues, not just the fancy cocktail bars.”

