

James The Sommelier - Aperitif Wines -Vermouth

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.'

Vermouth The Misunderstood

Without making it sound like the parody of a sinister, 12th century, Eastern European Count, the story of Vermouth does deserve some attention. One of the original aperitif wines, Vermouth nowadays is a largely misunderstood liqueur- looked upon with a mild disregard in the beverage scene much like a has-been, out of fashion item of clothing. When used- primarily in cocktails- its presence is less than regarded and more like ignorantly overlooked to the point where people exclaim 'oh, it's vermouth!'

So, a bottle more readily available as a dust collector or an ornament. But does vermouth deserve such a fall from grace and to live in such tragic existence in this day and age. Antonio Carpano invented it in 1786 Turin, Italy it and was somewhat of a cultural extravaganza with ladies from around Italy cueing to buy the precious new liquid. Its popularity continued up until its zenith in 1890s where, in New York, the Manhattan was prepared with twice as much vermouth as gin or whisky. Every drink had vermouth in it, and a hell of a lot of it at that.

Then the trend towards drier and subtler drinks materialized. By the mid-20th century bar tenders were negating the use of vermouth in a trend apparently set by Winston Churchill, that great drinker. As well as his political fame, Churchill was renowned for his heavy drinking and it is said, when making a drink he would merely look at a bottle of vermouth or bow in the direction of France (another historic vermouth producer). If this *were* true, then it would mean that he would have to *buy* a bottle of vermouth in order to look at. Either way, it spelled a new trend in cocktails where drier martinis, combined with changing tastes toward lighter-flavored drinks and the advent of the vodka martini, meant vermouth became largely ignored and, as a result, misunderstood.

I suppose both vermouth eras can be *understood*. Its popularity is easily fathomable due to its unique taste. With a mixture of herbs- wormwood, nutmeg, coriander, juniper, orange peel, cloves, marjoram, and cinnamon- it is safe to say that this bitter-sweet, kaleidoscopic whirlwind of flavor would separate it into a class of its own. As an aperitif it provides a perfect option because its savor could only induce a craving for more palate stimulation. As well as this, the vermouth has numerous health benefits due to the presence of wormwood- the liqueurs namesake. Used as a treatment against intestinal worms, wormwood has been added to wine and ale since at least the time of Greek mathematician Pythagoras and wine- infused with herbs including wormwood- was utilized as a tonic and medical treatment by Hippocrates.

On the flip side, wormwood was used by Carpano as a way to hide the flavor of cheap wine used, in order to make large quantities of the stuff. Oops.

Of course, some places have never forgotten vermouth, something that martini fans should remember when traveling, especially in Europe. Outside of the U.S. or England, saying just "martini" will probably get you a glass of Martini & Rossi's sweet vermouth, a very popular aperitif. It seems then that the misunderstanding of vermouth tends to be outside its originating countries. People should get out more, I suppose.

Tips: Before eating Italian food use Martini Rossi's sweet vermouth. If eating French food start with a glass of Noilly Prat's white vermouth.