

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

Italy is world-famous for its varied regional landscapes, history, food and accompanying wines. However, if you go straight out to dinner, you'll be missing out on a quintessential tradition of *la bella vita*: self-respecting Italians, especially in the north and in big cities, customarily start their evening with an *aperitivo* or pre-dinner drink.

Italians blame many ailments on their livers, and the *aperitivo's* "bitter bite" stimulates their digestive metabolism and gets their juices flowing to work up their appetite before dinner. This so-called "bitter bite" is beloved to Italians who prefer it and everything sour to overly sweet.

The oldest *aperitivo* is vermouth, created in Turin, where the *aperitivo* tradition is still strongest today. *www.selectitaly.com* tells us: "One of the oldest vermouths dates back to 1757 when two herbalist brothers, Giovanni Giacomo and Carlo Stefano Cinzano, created *vermouth rosso*, initially marketed as a medicinal tonic." This explains the bitter quality of many Italian drinks, even non-alcoholic ones like *chinotto* or *crodo*. The Cinzano brothers flavored their *vermouth* (its name derived from the German for wormwood) with *Wermut*, its main ingredient, and with over 30 aromatic plants from the nearby Alps: herbs, barks, and roots such as juniper, gentian and coriander. Their other ingredients," continues the website, "were a white wine base, cane sugar and a small amount of distilled spirits, often brandy, to pump up the alcoholic strength, although exact recipes are closely guarded secrets."

The second most popular Italian *aperitivo* is *Campari*, also red but much brighter in color, first sold by Gaspare Campari, born in Cassolnovo in the province of Novara, the tenth child of a farmer. By 1860 he'd formulated *Campari's* recipe combining 60 ingredients: herbs, fruit, spices, and alcohol. Its distinctive ruby red color came from crushed "lady bugs" (cochineal insects), a practice stopped in 2006.

Campari's popularity grew fast and Gaspare moved his bar to Milan in front of the Gothic cathedral. When his sons took over the business, they opened additional bars in Nice and on the French Riviera. Today *Campari* is sold in over 190 countries. In 2010, for the product's 150th anniversary, Campari opened a museum at Via A. Gramsci 61 in Sesto San Giovanni, on the outskirts of Milan, the company's headquarters since 1904, when Davide, one of Gaspare's sons, opened it. On display on the first floor are posters, advertisements, art, and company documents; on the second floor the product itself in its various-shaped bottles.

Vermouth rosso (one third) and *Campari* (one third) together with

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, NEGRONI



Stefano Neve's illustration

another third of gin are the ingredients of the first Italian cocktail, *Negroni*, stirred with a bar spoon and served in an old-fashioned glass over shaken ice and garnished with a slice of orange peel.

The drink's origins are controversial.

The most widely-reported account is that it was first mixed in Florence at the Caffè Cassoni (formerly Caffè Giacomini), located on Florence's fashionable shopping street Via de'

Tornabuoni, now called Caffè Roberto Cavalli after its present-day owner, the fashion designer.

Supposedly Count Camillo Negroni (1868-1934), the son of Count Enrico Negroni and Ada Savage Landor, the niece of the British poet Walter Savage Landor, concocted it. In 1919 or 1920 (hence this year is its 100th birthday), globe-trotter Negroni asked the

bartender Fosco Scarselli to strengthen his favorite cocktail, *The Americano*, by adding gin rather than soda water. Scarselli added a slice of orange as garnish rather than the *Americano's* typical lemon slice to distinguish the two different drinks.

For numerous anecdotes and recipes consult *The Negroni: Drinking to La Dolce Vita: With Recipes and Lore*, by Gary Regan, 2015. It includes the story of the *Negroni Sbagliato* or "Bungled or Erroneous Negroni." Supposedly, a bartender at the busy Bar Basso in Milan picked up the wrong bottle accidentally pouring sparkling white wine for the gin. No matter, the *sbagliato* is a very popular alternative, especially in summer. Another expert is Florentine Luca Picchi, former barman at the historical bar *Le Rivoire* on Florence's main square, *Piazza della Signoria*, across from the *Palazzo Vecchio*, and author of *Negroni Cocktail: An Italian Legend* (2015). Both volumes are available from Amazon. Another expert is David Wondrich, a cocktail historian who on June 10 published in the *Daily Beast*, *How the Negroni Conquered America*. Other recent celebrations of the Negroni were second place in 2018 in the magazine *Drinks International's* poll of more than 100 bars as the most frequently-ordered cocktail worldwide, surpassed only by the old-fashioned "Florence Cocktail Week" from May 6-12, 2019 and Negroni Week, also this year from June 24-30. As *www.negroni-week.com* explains, the Campari Company and *Imbibe Magazine* launched Negroni Week in 2013 as a celebration of one of the world's great cocktails and as an effort to raise money for charities around the world. Since 2013, Negroni Week has grown from about 120 participating venues to almost 10,000 venues around the world, and to date, they have collectively raised about \$2 million for charitable causes. Underway at this time is the casting of the documentary film *Looking for Negroni*, directed by the Florentine Federico Micali, to be released later this year. ☺

From left: Cinzano vermouths 1757, vintage Campari, Camillo Negroni, Negroni cocktail, Luca Picchi and Federico Micali

