

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

Vermouth is an aromatized fortified wine, flavored with various roots, barks, flowers, seeds, herbs and spices. The most usual herbs are yarrow, chamomile, hyssop, marjoram, sage, and thyme; the spices: cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, coriander, nutmeg, juniper, ginger, and labdanum. A similar drink dates to the Chinese Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (1250-1000 BC), so vermouth is probably the oldest alcoholic beverage in the world except for ancient Egyptian beer.

In Europe, vermouth's earliest recipes date from about 400 BC in ancient Greece. Its most popular original ingredient was and remained until the 18th century wormwood, believed to be an effective treatment for stomach disorders and intestinal parasites.

Commonly imbibed in Hungary and Germany during the 15th and 16th centuries, the name "vermouth" is the French pronunciation of the German word *Wermut* or wormwood. Also during the 16th century, an Italian merchant named D'Alessio began producing a similar "wormwood wine" with additional botanical ingredients from *Piemonte* competing with brands developed shortly thereafter in nearby south-eastern France and still rivals today.

Modern versions of vermouth were first produced in the mid-to-late-18th-century in Turin, first as pharmaceutical digestive remedies, but soon served in the city's fashionable cafés as an *aperitivo* or appetite stimulator. Although still imbibed unaccompanied in Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal, in the late 19th century it became popular with bartenders as a key ingredient for cocktails — especially the martini, a favorite of Ernest Hemingway, Humphrey Bogart and the fictional James Bond.

Vermouths are almost always made with a white wine base (originally *Moscato* and *Cortese*), with an added high-alcohol liquid, like brandy. So they are usually about 75% white wine and herbs, but average a hefty 17% to 22% ABV (Alcohol By Volume).

They can be extra dry white, dry white, sweet white, red, amber, and rosé or bitter, depending on the amounts of sugar, alcohol, and other ingredients.

The production process has five steps: 1) infusion of the ingredients (alcohol, herbs, wine, and sugar for 15 to 20 days; 2) mixing these ingredients; 3) the mixture must age in steel barrels for several months and then be 4) filtered and 5) bottled.

TURIN: THE VERMOUTH CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

known for its *Rosso*.

Cinzano and *Martini & Rossi* both also produce rosé vermouths, which are mainly distributed in Italy and France.

Another early *Piemontese* manufacturer was Antonio Benedetto Carpano who in 1786 decided to aromatize *Moscato* with an infusion of spices and wormwood. (This ingredient was

prohibited in the early 20th century, but is still sometimes included in artisan products.) Today Carpano's descendants still produce brands including *Punt e Mes*, a deep red vermouth with sweet and bitter flavors, and the *Antica Formula Brand*, a bitter, fuller-flavored version. In 1982, *Distillerie Fratelli Branca* of Milan bought 50% of the Giuseppe B. Carpano Company and the whole company in 2001.

In 2019, the *Consorzio del Vermouth di Torino* was established to protect, promote and valorize local vermouths. Today its members count 34 producers, who produce annually some 6 million bottles sold in some 82 countries worldwide, with Italy as its largest client, followed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and South America, in particular, Argentina, because of the number of *Piemontesi* immigrants.

Each brand uses c. 30 herbs, 60% of which come from all over the world, so vermouth is *torinese*, but also international.

Beginning in January 2023 until December 31, 2025, the *Consorzio* is sponsoring *L'Ora del Vermouth di Torino*. More information can be found on www.turismotorino.org.

The *Consorzio*'s 2023 plans include creating a glass perfectly designed for a vermouth *aperitivo*; promotional events in Toronto, Brooklyn, New Orleans, London, Berlin, and Athens; and in June *La Settimana del Vermouth di Torino*, a kind of seminar in Turin for barmen from around the world. In 2025 it will open a Vermouth Museum in Asti.

At home, the *Consorzio* advises, vermouth should be kept in the refrigerator and served cold. Once the bottle is opened, it should be consumed within three months.

For a detailed history of vermouth, purchase *The Grand Book of Vermouth di Torino* by Giusi Mainardi and Pierstefano Berta. 50 euros. ○



The Grand Book of Vermouth di Torino by Giusi Mainardi

From left: *Artemisia absinthium*; a display of vermouths; Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour; and a Vermouth production procedure chart

