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## Food & Wine

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# Italy's Aperitivi: A Guide to Their Origins and Popularity

An aperitivo is not “Happy Hour” or an excuse to drink to oblivion, it has many other attractions for Italians.

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



*Italian aperitivo (Photo by annca da Pixabay).*

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*Though conflicting stories obscure their origins, and many may claim to have invented them, aperitifs like Negroni, Aperol, Chinotto and Crodino are all extremely popular. They may be highly alcoholic, or barely so, they may be seasonal or not, but they are ubiquitous in Italy.*

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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*, because, when they have time, self-respecting Italians, especially in the north and in big cities, start their evening with an *aperitivo* or pre-dinner drink.

An *aperitivo* is not “Happy Hour” or an excuse to drink to oblivion. Italians blame many ailments on their livers so the *aperitivo* has digestive purposes. It allows Italians to relax, unwind and socialize after work. It also starts their digestive metabolism and gets the juices flowing with a light, dry or bitter tonic with a ‘bite’ to work up their appetite before dinner. This so-called ‘bitter bite’ is beloved to Italians who prefer it and the overly sweet to sour. It took me several years to get used to bitter, much less like it.

The oldest *aperitivo* is vermouth, an aromatic fortified wine created in Turin, where the *aperitivo* tradition is still strongest today. As [www.selectitaly.com](http://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 *crofino*.



The Cinzano brothers flavored their *vermouth*, (its name derived from the German 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 spirit, often brandy, to pump up the alcoholic strength, although exact recipes are closely guarded secrets.” Aside from Cinzano, its most popular brands are Carpano and

Martini & Rossi, drunk by themselves or mixed to create



*Campari.*

cocktails.

The second most popular Italian *aperitivo* is *Campari*, also red but much brighter in color, first sold by Gaspare Campari, born in Cassolono 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 facing the Gothic cathedral. When his sons took over the business, they opened bars in Nice and on the French Riviera. Today Campari is sold in over 190 countries. In 2010 for the product's 150<sup>th</sup> 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 it was opened by Davide, one of Gaspare's sons. On display on the first floor are posters, advertisements, art, company documents showing the product; on the second floor the product itself in its various shaped bottles.

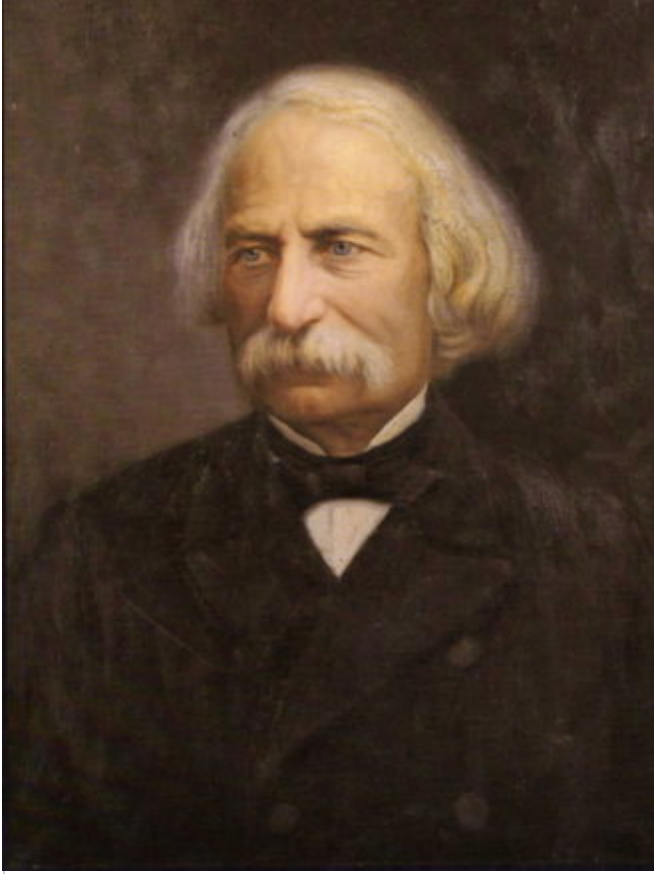
*Vermouth rosso* (one third) and *Campari* (one third) together with another third of gin are the ingredients of the first Italian cocktail, *Negroni*, stirred with a bar spoon and served in an Old Fashioned glass over already-stirred ice and with a slice of orange peel.



*Arnold Henry Savage Landor.*

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 Giacosa), 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 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. The story is told that Negroni asked the bartender Fosco Scarselli, to strengthen his favorite

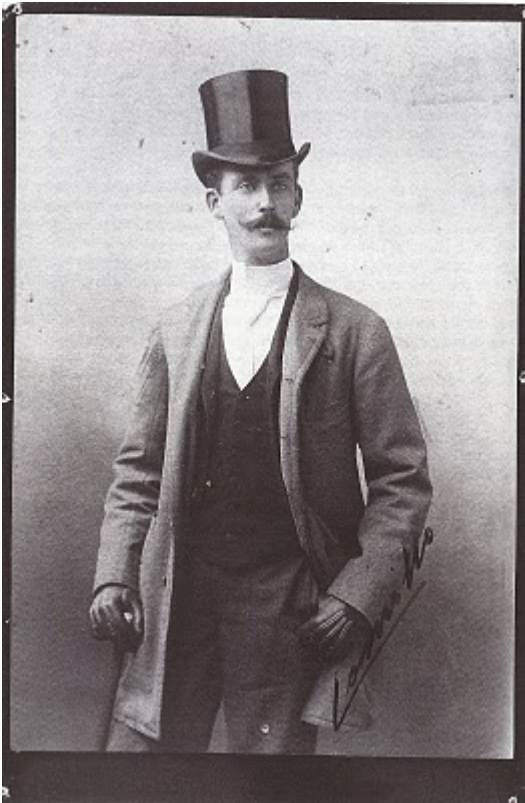
cocktail, the *Americano*, by adding gin rather than soda water. Scarselli added a slice of orange as garnish rather than the *Americano*'s typical lemon slice to distinguish the two different drinks.



Carlo Negroni

Another claimant of the self-titled cocktail, although unlikely, is a cousin of Camillo, Arnold Henry Savage Landor (1865-1924), the famous painter, explorer, witty writer, anthropologist and cat lover, who like Camillo was born, died, and buried in the English cemetery in Florence.

Some descendants of General Pascal Olivier de Negroni, count de Negroni, claim rather unconvincingly that their ancestor invented the drink in 1857 while stationed in Senegal, while still another dates it to



*Camillo Negroni*

1914. Antonio Poggio Steffania, Presidente dell'Opera Pia Negroni di Novara, reported Rome's newspaper *Il Messaggero* on June 14, announced that Carlo Negroni, Mayor of Novara and later Senator, thought up the drink.

Whoever the inventor, after the cocktail's success, the Italian Negroni family founded the *Negroni Distillerie* in Treviso and produced a ready-made version of the drink, sold as *Antico Negroni* 1919. Nonetheless, its popularity outside Italy had to wait another generation until Orson Welles, while working in Rome in 1947 either on the film "Cagliostro" or "Black Magic", commented that a new drink called *Negroni* was his favorite. "The bitters are excellent for your liver; the gin is bad for you. They balance each other." The drink was immortalized in the film of "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone" (1960), where the protagonist orders a "magnificent Negroni" to forget her late husband and open herself to young love. That same year Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond in his story "Risico" becomes a Negroni fan.





Luca Picchi

*The Negroni: Drinking to La Dolce Vita: with Recipes and Lore*, a book by Gary Regan, (2015) offers more anecdotes and over thirty recipes. It includes the story of the ‘Negroni Sbagliato’ or ‘Bungled or Erroneous Negroni’. According to legend, 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, barman at the historical bar on Florence’s main square, Piazza della Signoria, across from the Palazzo Vecchio, and author of *Sulle tracce del Conte. La vera storia del cocktail ‘Negroni’* (2008) and *Negroni Cocktail: an Italian Legend* (2015). All three volumes are available from Amazon.



*Negroni Cocktail.*



Wondrich.

Another expert is David Wondrich, a cocktail historian who has traced the Negroni's story in his recent article published on June 10 in the *Daily Beast*, "How the Negroni Conquered America". Other recent celebrations of the Negroni were coming in second place in 2018, in the magazine *Drinks International* poll of more than 100 bars as the most frequently ordered cocktail worldwide. This was surpassed only by the old-fashioned; "Florence Cocktail Week" from May 6-12, 2019 and Negroni Week this year from June 24-30.

As its website [www.negroniweek.com](http://www.negroniweek.com) explains, the company "Campari and Imbibe Magazine" launched Negroni Week in 2013 as a celebration of one of the world's great cocktails in 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 around the world, and to date, they have collectively raised about \$2 million for charitable causes." Here's how it works: "For one

week every June,” continues the website, “bars and restaurants mix classic Negronis and Negroni variations for a great cause. To participate, each venue signs up at the website, chooses from our list of official charity partners, and makes a donation to that charity. Then it can return during and after Negroni Week to make additional donations to their chosen charity.” Underway at this time is the casting of the documentary film, “Looking for Negroni” directed by the Florentine Federico Micali and to-be-released later this year.



*Federico Micali*



Fynes Moryson (*Great Thoughts Treasur*)

The year 2019 was also a memorable year for another favorite Italian *aperitivo*: the sparkling wine called *prosecco*. Its beautiful vineyard-covered hills between the Veneto towns of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene, north of the city of Treviso, and into parts of the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia, were named a *UNESCO World Heritage Site* on July 8<sup>th</sup>. The UNESCO designation reads: “The landscape is characterized by ‘hogback’ hills, *ciglion*i—small plots of vines on narrow grassy terraces-forests, small villages and farmland. For centuries, this rugged terrain has been shaped and adapted by man. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, use of *ciglion*i has created a particular chequerboard landscape consisting of rows of vines parallel and vertical to the slopes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *bellussera* technique of training the vines contributed to the aesthetic characteristics of the landscape.”

The first recorded mention of the name *prosecco* dates several centuries back to the memoirs of Fynes Moryson, an English gentleman traveler who visited this area of Italy as part of his Grand tour in 1593. However, this sparkling white wine was apparently a favorite of the ancient Roman historian Pliny the Elder for the medicinal quality of its fizz.

The Hills of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene are the 8<sup>th</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Veneto region, the 55<sup>th</sup> Site in Italy, and the 10<sup>th</sup> site in the world in the category of ‘cultural landscape’ in recognition of their unique interaction between humans and the environment.





Conegliano Valdobbiadene hills

As can be imagined from its name, we owe the *spritz* or the *spritz veneziano* to the Austrians who ruled the Veneto from 1815 to 1866. It seems that the Austrians found Venetian wine too strong so they diluted it with a *spritzen* or sprinkling of water to make it more drinkable. After the Veneto was returned to the newly formed Kingdom of Italy, bitter herbal liqueurs were gradually added to give the drink a bit of a kick, the way gin was added to the *Americano*.

Another turning point took place in 1920 when, according to the [www.selectitaly.com](http://www.selectitaly.com), “the Barbieri brothers of Padua invented their Aperol bitter using orange, rhubarb and gentian and the neon-orange Aperol spritz was born, made from 3 parts prosecco, 2 parts Aperol and 1 part soda water with a large green olive on a stick as a garnish. “Today Aperol spritz is one of the most commonly drunk *aperitivi* in Venice. It’s the archetypical Venetian pre-dinner drink and an estimated quarter of a million are drunk every day in the watery city alone. What’s more, in the last ten years the Aperol spritz has enjoyed a stratospheric rise in international popularity as an Italian alternative to Pimms, rosé wine and other summer cocktails. In my opinion that is exactly the point, the Aperol spritz is the perfect summer

cocktail, while the Negroni is perfect in winter. Therefore, I have to disagree with Jennifer Finney Boylan, who in her article, “The Negroni is 100 Years Old—and the Perfect Cocktail for 2019” (*New York Times*, June 12, 2019) that the Aperol spritz “is not a good drink”. She’s wrong; it’s a seasonal drink.

Carlo Ottaviano tells us in his article, “Negroni, 100 anni di gusto: negli USA Batte l’Aperol Spritz”, that although seasonal as well because of its higher alcoholic content, the drink “is the synthesis of Italy; born in Florence, to make one you need red vermouth from Piedmont; it was the symbol of Rome’s *Dolce Vita* and thanks to the ‘Erroneous Negroni’ it has a pinch of Milan” (*Il Messaggero*, June 14). His thesis would have been more accurate if he had said that the ‘Negroni’ and ‘*aperitivi*’ are the synthesis of Northern Italy.

On the other hand, *digestivi*— or for the most part sweet after-dinner digestion aids (and with the exception of Grappa from the once Austrian Veneto and the unbeatable Milanese Fernet Branca) are the synthesis of southern Italy with its long summer romantic suppers consumed on rooftop terraces. Sambuca in Rome; Limoncello everywhere but especially around Naples; Liquirizia in Calabria; Mirto in Sardinia; and Averna in Sicily, to name just a few. But *digestivi* are another story. In the meantime, Cin! Cin!

[Lucy Gordan](#)

Lucy Gordan

*Italian Hours*

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