

Mixing It Up

The New Role of Aperitifs in Cocktails

By Jessica Pogash-DiMarco

Before he was asking for his martini to be “shaken, not stirred” James Bond was actually ahead of the aperitif trend when he ordered an Americano (made with Campari) in the first Bond novel, *Casino Royale*. Though the Vesper Martinis he’s now known for have taken center stage for a while, the cocktail culture is returning to early Bond days and experiencing a huge resurgence in the popularity of aperitifs.

Recently the term aperitif has taken on a new definition in restaurants, bars, and cocktail lounges across the country. Derived from the Latin verb *aperire*, which means to open, the aperitif is an alcoholic drink traditionally served before a meal to stimulate the appetite. Most aperitifs are only between 16 percent and 24 percent alcohol, because too much alcohol has a dulling effect on taste buds or causes too much fullness before indulging in a meal. Although aperitifs are most often served before the meal, as the name suggests, more and more decadent cocktails are making it possible to include them before, during and after a meal.

Rhiannon Enlil, a New Orleans bartender, has seen a shift in drinking behavior. She says, “What I find most interesting is that digestifs are being drunk before dinner. Most people

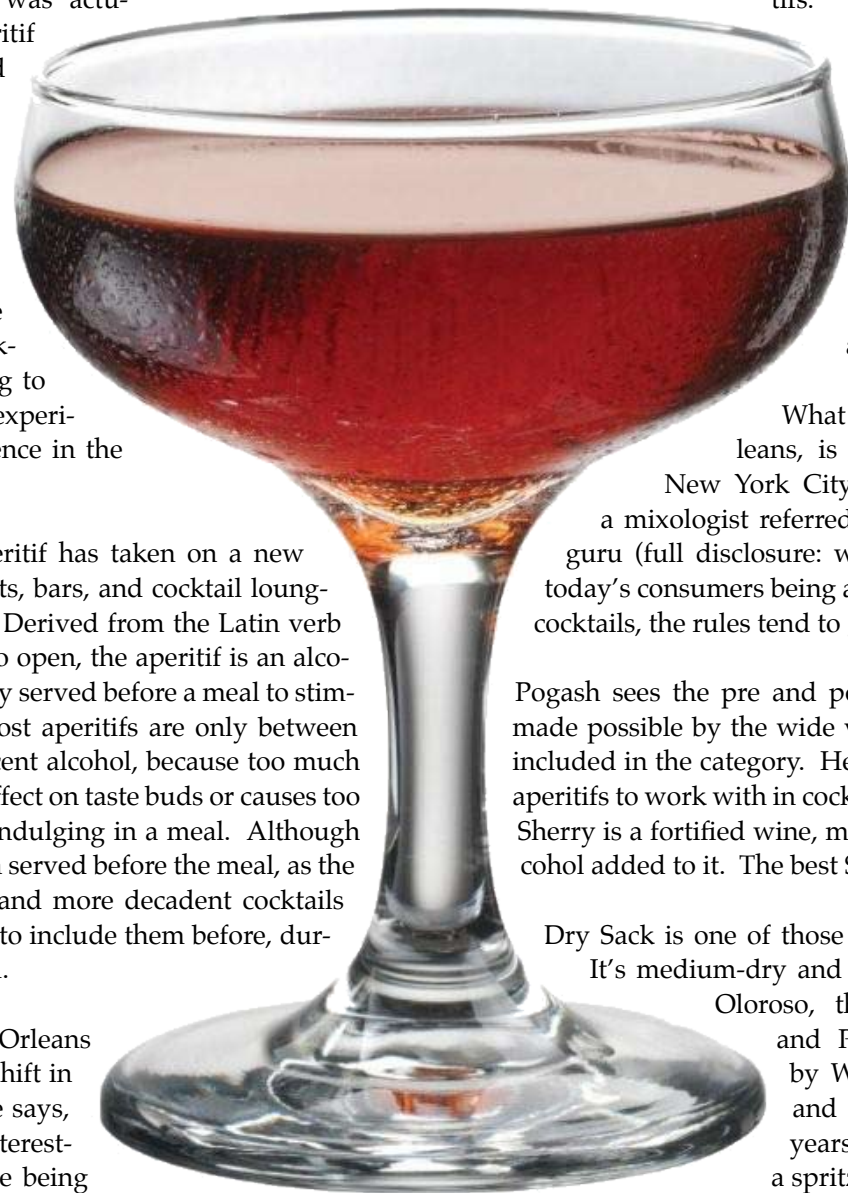


Photo courtesy of Dobonnet

don’t even know the difference between digestifs and aperitifs.

“I’m sure you’ve seen it [in your city] as well, but here in New Orleans, we’ve been seeing a cocktail renaissance and these drinks are being served before, during, and after dinners. People are starting to break the tradition and it’s pretty cool.”

What works down in New Orleans, is also a phenomenon up in New York City. There, Jonathan Pogash, a mixologist referred to as Manhattan’s cocktail guru (full disclosure: we are related) notes, “With today’s consumers being a bit more experimental with cocktails, the rules tend to go out the window.”

Pogash sees the pre and post meal aperitif enjoyment made possible by the wide variety of spirits that can be included in the category. He says, “Some of my favorite aperitifs to work with in cocktails are sherries and bitters. Sherry is a fortified wine, meaning it is wine that has alcohol added to it. The best Sherries come from Spain,”

Dry Sack is one of those venerable Spanish sherries. It’s medium-dry and blended from three grapes: Oloroso, the very dry Amontillado, and Pedro Ximenez. Produced by Williams & Humbert winery and aged for a minimum of six years, Dry Sack can be served as a spritzer, on the rocks, chilled in a wine glass or in a cocktail.



Photo courtesy of Hospitality Holdings

Its nutty bouquet isn’t overpowering, which makes it an ideal choice for a pre-dinner palate primer.

Opening up the palate is easy to achieve with the use of bitters. Pogash explains, “These liqueurs are made from various types of herbs and fruits, all macerated together in alcohol to create a balance that works well before a meal. The bitter liqueurs Pogash prefers are Campari and Averna.

Campari originated in Italy and, while the exact formula has been kept secret for years, among its ingredients are quinine, rhubarb, spices, ginseng, bergamot oil and orange peel. Enlil says Campari, which is classically used in the Negroni and Americano cocktails, is a popular choice where she works. She comments, “Campari is making a comeback. It’s hugely popular here.”

Averna is another Italian bitter liqueur that works wonders as both a digestif and aperitif. Made of herbs, roots and citrus rinds with added caramel, Averna is sweet and thick with a gentle bitterness. It can be enjoyed on the rocks or neat and even mixed with tonic water or cola. Allison Domeneghetti, the owner of Domaine Select Wine Estates which imports Averna into the US, agrees with Pogash and Enlil. “Historically [Averna] has been enjoyed as a digestivo. That’s how it’s been for generations. But with the new ‘Have Averna’ campaign, we’ve focused on its long-term viability in the cocktail culture.”

American cocktail culture is feeling a significant Italian influence these days. In addition to Campari and Averna’s presence on the scene, Aperol is another Italian brand taking America by storm. Aperol has been around for a century, but Italians have been consuming it massively only over the past five or so years. “Aperol has caught on like wildfire, at least in New York,” says Noah Rothbaum, author of “The Business of Spirits: How Savvy Marketers, Innovative Distillers, and Entrepreneurs Changed How We Drink.” Comparable to Campari, but less bitter, Aperol has characteristics of an ideal lead-in to

dinner: It has a low alcohol level with herbal and floral hints. That’s what makes this 100-year-old beverage a choice as an aperitif also perfect as a digestivo, or after-meal stomach settler.

Classic meets modern with Cherry Heering liqueur. Although the cherry beverage has existed since 1818 and been marketed as a classic cordial, it has undeniably been at the forefront as of late. Why? Because with the growing popularity of cocktails, Cherry Heering has experienced its own renaissance as a stylish accessory to a cocktail. It’s highly mixable and for that reason alone is worth trying, no matter what time of the meal. For consumers interested in another traditional option, the time-honored Dubonnet does the trick. It’s long been a staple in the aperitif category of wines. The number one selling aperitif brand in the United States has been around for over two centuries. It was originally created by a Parisian chemist named Joseph Dubonnet to make quinine more palatable for soldiers suffering from malaria. Now Dubonnet continues its reputation as an “aromatized” wine with a ruby color and refreshing herbal and citrus flavors.



Photos courtesy of Cherry Heering, Averna & Cointreau



Photo courtesy of Jonathan Pogash

The result is a beverage often associated with Southeastern France and a Provençal lifestyle. Often consumed for refreshment on hot days, Pastis is commonly enjoyed diluted with ice and/or mixed with flavored syrup.

And there are a number of new products adding extra flavors to the market as they take advantage of the cocktail craze. Cointreau Noir is one that just hit the market in 2008 and already is creating a buzz. This first brand extension from Cointreau combines the revered orange spirit with Remy Martin cognac for a unique palate-pleasing orange, vanilla and nut flavor.

Though new flavors and blends are exciting and appealing there are some times when drinkers seek a more familiar option. That's when champagne, which hasn't lost its place in the niche, may just hit the spot. Pogash says, "Champagne is a traditional aperitif enjoyed by the masses."

Like Dubonnet, Pastis also plays a dominant role in the aperitif category. The French beverage is so popular it sells over 130 million liters a year in its native country. Since its creation in the 20th century as a substitute for banned absinthe, Pastis has managed to dominate much of the aperitif sector. Brands like Pernod and Ricard have become household names (having since merged).

Classical and modern innovations in aperitifs have combined to make an endless array of options. No matter if they're enjoyed before a meal (as an aperitivo) or following a meal (digestivo), these beverage delights are to be savored and above all enjoyed. Cheers!

Madroño

Winner, 2002 Sherry Cocktail Competition
Created by Giuseppe Gonzalez,
The Clover Club, Brooklyn, NY

3 oz Dry Sack
2 strawberries
2 cinnamon sticks
½ oz. Torani Amer
2 bar spoons of Demerara Syrup

Muddle one strawberry in Torani Amer Break cinnamon stick in half into shaker. Add Dry Sack. Shake.
Serve in wine goblet. Top with more ice. Garnish with fanned strawberry, whole cinnamon and a straw.

Singapore Sling

1 part Cherry Heering Liqueur
2 parts premium gin
6 parts pineapple juice
1 parts lime juice
½ part Cointreau
½ part Dom Benedictine
½ part Grenadine
A dash of Angostura bitters

Cranberry Spice Champagne

Created by Jonathan Pogash,
Bookmarks Lounge, NYC

6 fresh cranberries
1 tsp. pumpkin spice agave nectar
Splash of fresh lemon juice
3 oz. Moët White Star Champagne

Muddle the cranberries in the agave and lemon. Add ice and stir in champagne. Strain into champagne flute.
Garnish: 3 floating cranberries

Intercontinental

1 ounce Averna
1 ounce Cognac
½ ounce Maraschino Liqueur
Orange twist for garnish

Combine all ingredients in a shaker and stir 30 times over ice. Strain into cocktail glass and garnish with an orange twist. (You can add a ¼ ounce of lemon juice to make it more tart or decrease the liqueur).

Sherry Honey Cobbler

Created by Jonathan Pogash, served at Madison & Vine NYC

1 oz. Riesling
2 oz. Pedro Ximenez Sherry
1/2 oz. Honey Syrup**
1 orange slice and handful of champagne grapes

Muddle the grapes and orange in the honey syrup. Add remaining ingredients and shake briefly. Pour into highball glass. Garnish: 3 champagne grapes and 1 orange wedge .

* Honey Syrup is 2 parts honey dissolved in 1 part hot water.

Americanos

1 ounce Campari
1 ounce sweet vermouth
Club soda
Lemon twist or orange slice for garnish

Fill an old-fashioned glass with ice cubes. Build with the Campari and vermouth. Top off with club soda. Garnish with lemon twist or orange slice.