

That's Amaro

Drink this family of bitter Italian liqueurs neat or as an ingredient in hip cocktails.

BY ELIN McCOY

▶ **ON A COLD NIGHT** this spring, I sat in tiny Bar Veloce in New York's Chelsea neighborhood sipping a tangerine-colored Italian *aperitivo* garnished with an orange slice. The fizzy, citrus-and-rhubarb-flavored combo of Aperol and prosecco made me think of lounging in an Italian cafe in warm sunlight.

I was in the midst of a crash course in the family of complex Italian bitter liqueurs called *amari*, the latest buzz-generating ingredients in cocktails. Their colorful bottles now line the back bar of dozens of hip Italian restaurants. They're also featured—along with other bitter offerings—at new East Village nightclub Amor y Amargo.

Made from spirits infused with a mix of up to 100 botanicals—including ginger, anise, cardamom and gentian—*amari* have their origins in the herbal remedies of medieval times. The essence of them all is bitterness (*amaro* means bitter) more or less balanced with sweetness.

"All these liqueurs have two faces," my tutor, *amaro* aficionado Jordan MacKay, co-author of *Secrets of the Sommeliers* (Ten Speed Press, 2010), said as he ran a finger down Bar Veloce's list to pick what I should try next. "They're for before dinner or after, and sometimes both."

We sipped small glasses of reddish-brown Ramazzotti Amaro neat, the way it's drunk in Italy to aid digestion after a long meal. There was a perfect tension between sweetness and bitterness, and the intriguing flavor notes included anise and orange peel. Mixed with ginger ale, ice and a dash of citrus, it turned into a refreshing *aperitivo*. Later, I poured a tiny bit of fragrant, syrupy Nardini Amaro in the tail end of my espresso, another way to enjoy *amari*.

"Italy produces hundreds of local versions, each using the spices and fruits typical of the region," importer Paolo Domenghetti told me later. "Drinking them, you taste the culture."



AMARO NEGRONI

1 oz. gin
1 oz. *amaro*, such as Varnelli Amaro Sibilla
1 oz. sweet red vermouth

Stir ingredients with ice. Strain into a glass over cracked ice and garnish with an orange slice.



Few were available in the U.S. five years ago, other than popular Campari and superbitter *digestivo* Fernet-Branca, which developed a cult following among San Francisco bartenders.

Domenghetti, who hunts down top artisanal spirits, had a hard time importing my favorite, Varnelli Amaro Sibilla, because the company's owners were reluctant to reveal their secret list of ingredients, as required by law. It's rich and elegant, with aromas of chestnuts, coffee and flowers and a long bittersweet finish. At home, I mixed it with tonic, ice and lemon rind and then tried it in a version of the latest revived cocktail, the Negroni. I'm now an *amaro* aficionado, too.

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AN AMARO SAMPLER

RAMAZZOTTI (\$24) From Milan. Well-balanced, with 33 herbs and spices. A good all-around selection

AMARO NONINO (\$42) From Friuli. Mildly bitter, aged in oak, with spicy licorice and orange flavors. Best chilled, straight up

AVERNA (\$28) From Sicily. Powerful and molassesey, with blood orange and lemon notes. For complex cocktails

FERNET-BRANCA (\$22) From Milan. An acquired taste. Very bitter and herbal. Best as a *digestivo* after a blowout dinner or mixed with cola

VARNELLI AMARO SIBILLA (\$55) From Le Marche. The ultimate. Only 5,000 bottles produced annually. Good straight up or in cocktails

APEROL (\$24) (not pictured) From Padua. Lighter, sweeter and less bitter than most *amari*. Best in cocktails E.Mc.