

PUNCH

Bringing it Back Bar: What to Do with Punt e Mes

In "Bringing It Back Bar," we shine a light on overlooked bottles and devise recipes to take them from back bar to front shelf. Up now: the bittersweet Italian vermouth, Punt e Mes.

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photo: FRATELLI BRANCA



An aromatized wine with an extra bitter kick, Punt e Mes straddles the line between sweet Italian vermouth and amaro. Though traditionally consumed as an aperitif, it has a unique ability to hold its own against strong spirits in cocktails—and to fortify softer vermouths—making this 19th century Italian staple an enduring back bar necessity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Parent company Carpano suggests that Punt e Mes was first ordered in Turin on April 19, 1870, when a stockbroker recounted to his colleagues the increase in share prices that day; they'd gone up a point and a half, or "punt e mes" in Piedmontese dialect. It was then that he ordered, according to the barman, a glass of vermouth with a half-measure of bitter quina liqueur while employing for the first time a now iconic hand gesture: a raised thumb on one hand to indicate the sweet ("punt") followed by a swift, horizontal motion by the other hand to represent the half measure of bitter ("mes"). This eventually became the preferred way to order the drink, signaling

to the bartender the customer's intent without so much as a word. While it's unclear as to when Punt e Mes was first bottled, this sweet-bitter combination had, by the early part of the 20th century, established itself as an Italian bar favorite.

"I truly think it belongs on every back bar," says Sother Teague, beverage director of Amor y Amargo, which specializes in stirred, bitter drinks. Punt e Mes is Teague's preferred vermouth in a Negroni, but he also finds that it pairs well with bigger spirits like rye, which forms the base of his play on the classic Manhattan. With the addition of Ramazzotti, the resulting drink is dark and spicy with a noticeable rye backbone, hence its name, Pumpernickel.

"The 'big boy,' in-your-face nature of Punt e Mes always hits a soft spot for me," explains Carlton Dunlap of Americano in Portland, Oregon, who similarly uses the vermouth in his Manhattan, dubbed Raining on 110th St. In this wetter take, Punt e Mes is blended with the softer Cocchi di Torino, which stands alongside unconventional additions of coffee tincture and Licor 43, a Spanish liqueur with flavors of citrus and vanilla.

For a twist on yet another classic, Naren Young employs Punt e Mes in his signature Chocolate Negroni to add deep spice and chocolate flavors. ("It can add depth and complexity in spades," explains Young.) Leo Robitschek of the NoMad, meanwhile, uses it in an updated approach to the Montauk cocktail, traditionally a blend of equal parts of gin and sweet and dry vermouths. By removing the dry vermouth altogether and replacing it with a combination of blanc vermouth and Punt e Mes, it offers a more structured, bitter and balanced take on the original.

As for taking a measure of Punt e Mes on its own, as has been long popular in Italy, it's certainly an acquired taste. But, per many bartenders, it's one worth getting to know. "It's not for everyone," notes Teague, "but those who know [it will] appreciate it, and the adventurous will be delighted."

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