

PUNCH

Bringing it Back Bar: What to Do with Byrrh

Every bar sports marginal bottles that elude even the most seasoned drink-makers. 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 French quinquina wine, Byrrh.

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photo: ASTOR WINE & SPIRITS



As trends in bartending come and go, so, too, do waves of popular spirits; and, in keeping with the interests of today's bartenders, the past decade has seen more than a handful of pre-Prohibition liqueurs re-emerge on scene. Among them is Byrrh, a 150-year-old aromatized wine often drunk straight as an aperitif, the latest Old World bottle to undergo New World treatment.

First produced in France in 1866 by brothers Pallade and Simon Violet, Byrrh was originally marketed as a health tonic, a clever conceit that took the fortified wine out of competition with existing French aperitifs. In fact, the wine—a blend of carignan and grenache mistelle, dry red wine from Rousillon and spices (among them, orange and coffee)—had a distinctly

pharmaceutical bend in its inclusion of cinchona bark; with its bitter flavors of quinine, cinchona was, at the time, considered to be solely medicinal, earning Byrrh a restorative reputation on both sides of the Atlantic.

That message continued to resonate well into the 20th century, especially among the post-Victorian-era public, which was particularly concerned with matters of health and hygiene and had a bias towards low-proof cocktails. But with Prohibition came a wave of more spirituous drinks, pushing the likes of Byrrh out of the spotlight. Add to that a number of post-World War II tax breaks on French sweet wines (Banyuls, Muscat de Frontignan and Rivesaltes), and Byrrh was bound to fall out of favor. In fact, by 1977, unable to rescue the failing family business, the Violets sold their “hygienic tonic wine” to Pernod-Ricard.

And while production of the aperitif wine would continue in France for the next few decades, it would take until 2012 for Haus Alpenz to reintroduce it to the U.S. market—to acclaim from bartenders.

“It makes for a crisp and refreshing cocktail while not being overly sweet,” says Chad Larson of Denver’s Williams and Graham, who mixes it with gin, lemon, port and muddled berries for the Easy Street, a summer-ready riff on the cobbler. “Byrrh has some wonderful notes of fruit spice,” adds Melina Meza of Ink in Los Angeles, who makes a similarly refreshing mezcal drink, combining the smoky agave spirit with earthy beet juice and celery bitters and serving it on the rocks with a lemon twist.

In keeping with the aperitif spirit of Byrrh, Natasha David of New York’s Nitecap uses the fortified wine as a component in a spritz playfully called Byrrh It’s Cold Outside. “Unlike many other fortified wines, it has this incredible body, which adds great texture to cocktails,” David says. With two sherries—amontillado and ancho chile-infused muscatel—plus cranberry shrub, it makes for an easy transition to fall.

But it’s the Casualty, from New York’s Amor y Amargo, that showcases Byrrh’s versatility as a seasonless spirit. Stirred with Scotch, Amaro Montenegro and two dashes of chocolate bitters, it serves as a pinch-hitter for sweet vermouth and results in a spirituous drink that’s cold weather-ready.

Of course, both first-time and long-time drinkers can always look to the advice from Amor y Amargo’s Sother Teague, and enjoy Byrrh year-round as it was first intended: “Simply drink it on the rocks.”