PUNCH

Bringing It Back Bar: What to Do with Bianco and Blanc Vermouth

Every bar sports marginal bottles that elude even the most seasoned drink-makers. That is, until someone dusts them off and uses them in a new way. 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: pale, sweet bianco vermouth.

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For as long as we've been drinking it, Americans have understood vermouth as a simple dichotomy: white and red. Dry and sweet, French and Italian, yin and yang, martini and Manhattan; it's an equation that even very beginner home bartenders have memorized.

But the world of vermouth—the aromatized, fortified wine that is a staple of many of our most cherished classic cocktails—is much wider than that basic either/or equation.

Its home is the tiny kingdom of Savoy, carved out of the northern corner of the French-Italian border at the seat of the Alps, whose mountain meadows provide the unique botanicals that give vermouth its character. There, in the late 18th century, Antonio Benedetto Carpano first

introduced his Vermouth di Torino, the spicy red "Italian" vermouth we still know today. (Carpano's historically faithful Antica formulation, in fact, is the modish choice for many a Negroni.)

Next came Dolin's Vermouth Blanc, in the town of Chambéry, following the same sweet-n-bitter model but pale, lighter on the palate, with more pronounced herbal and citrus notes. But it was quickly overshadowed in the international marketplace by its bizarro twin, Marseille dry vermouth, which matched it in color but stripped away the sugar. Those who did carry the torch promoted blanc/bianco as a pure aperitivo, best consumed straight or with a splash of soda—a ritual that never made it across the Atlantic.

Until recently. As it turns out, the amaro craze, for all its intensity and bravado, has inspired an appreciation for aperitivi and a boom in lower-proof cocktails, both of which have encouraged bartenders to take a closer look at other neglected European liqueurs and aromatized wines, like bianco.

"I really enjoy blanc/bianco vermouth. Mixing it into a cocktail. Drinking it like water in the summer," says Jane Danger, of New York's Cienfuegos and Mother of Pearl. Danger likes to use it in her variation of the El Presidente, swapping it in for the traditional dry "to make it a bit fuller," as well as in her bitters-driven French Connection, where bianco's vanilla notes, combined with the warm spice of rum, round out the drink.

Cresting the wave of Negroni fervor, creative variations like the White Negroni and Toby Maloney's Polka Dot Negroni have made good use of bianco's colorlessness, while others, like the Rob Roy No. 3, have played up its distinctive botanical makeup.

In Austin, Half Step's Chris Bostick describes the bianco as "perfect for that moment when you want to dial down the bitter and enjoy something softer and a bit more floral"— just what he does in the aromatic, herbaceous Solitude Is Bliss, which combines gin and grapefruit with chamomile syrup and a dose of bianco. It also works with more savory herbs, as in Alba Huerta's (of Houston's Julep) Oregano Cobbler, where it mellows out a strong dose of botanicals.

Touting the vermouth's versatility and ability to play well with many spirits, Bostick says, "Want to mix it with whiskey? Sure! How bout rum? Why not? Gin? No brainer!" But don't write off letting it stand front and center: "Considering its deceptive complexity, it works well as the main component to many cocktails," he adds.

Even further to that, don't be afraid to go back to the start: Toss it in an ice-filled rocks glass and garnish with an orange or lemon twist, the way god, and France, intended it. *—Regan Hofmann*