

Spirits: Aperitivi go with food



Vesper (Deb Lindsey for The Washington Post)

By Jason Wilson

Special to The Washington Post Tuesday, November 2, 2010; 4:35 PM

TURIN, ITALY

Cocktails are a strange proposition in Italy, as I once again experienced last week during a visit there.

THIS STORY

- [Spirits: Aperitivi go with food](#)
- [Recipe: Vesper](#)

Non mi piace il cocktail - I don't like cocktails - I've been told many times by my Italian acquaintances, often during the aperitivo hour while they sip a Spritz, perhaps the most popular drink in the country. It's a mix of Aperol, club soda and prosecco.

Americans might call a Spritz a cocktail. But Italians can, of course, split the thinnest of hairs over food and drink categories. Okay, so in Italy, Aperol Spritz is not a cocktail. It's an aperitivo. *Va bene*.

Still, it's always surprising that stronger cocktails don't have a more prominent place in Turin. The Piedmont region, after all, is the home of vermouth, with Cinzano and Carpano first producing the fortified wine here in the 18th century. Big spirits companies such as Martini and Campari, whose recipes date from the 19th century, are still headquartered nearby. In fact, historically, many of the grand, ornate bars in the central piazzas made their own vermouths and amari. Turin gave us vermouth, and we gave the world the martini and the Manhattan.

Even with all that spirits history, you rarely see people sipping martinis. For instance, even though my favorite, the [Negroni](#) (gin, Campari, sweet vermouth), was invented in Italy and is available here, I rarely see the Torinese drinking it. If people drink cocktails at all, it's generally late at night, when they drink mostly bad mojitos or vodka drinks or beer.

Much of that has to do with food. The Italians must drink with food, which is why you can find an entire culture of lighter aperitivi, with multiple variations containing splashes of Campari, Aperol, prosecco, white wine or soda, served along with free food at most bars during happy hour. Some of these spreads, with meat, cheese, vegetables, bruschetta and sandwiches, could serve as meals in themselves.

Stronger cocktails just don't pair as well with food. At home, an inventive American bartender might once in a while try to make a case for cocktail-food pairings. But Italians probably would hear none of it. Aperitivo, white wine, red wine, dessert wine, coffee, grappa: That's how the drinks are staged.

In Turin, it was interesting to meet with Roberto Bava, a fourth-generation winemaker. His family owns Giulio Cocchi, which makes two fortified wines now available in the United States: Cocchi Barolo Chinato and Cocchi Aperitivo Americano. I've written before about his delicious [Barolo Chinato](#), a Barolo wine that's infused with quinine bark ("china" or key-NAH) and other herbs and spices, creating a smooth, spicy drink with a kiss of quinine.

In order to market Barolo Chinato in Italy, Bava had to convince people that his fortified wine pairs beautifully, after dinner, with chocolate (which it does). Meanwhile, in the United States, Barolo Chinato has been embraced by innovative bartenders in martini variations such as Adam Bernbach's [Darkside](#), again illustrating the difference in drinking cultures.

In the spring, Haus Alpenz began importing Bava's Cocchi Aperitivo Americano, thus restoring a missing link in the cocktail world. Cocchi Aperitivo Americano is a white wine aperitif (with a base of Moscato d'Asti) that's infused with herbs, fruit and spices including quinine bark, making it a true [quinquina](#).

In Italy, [Cocchi Aperitivo Americano](#) would be served chilled on ice, where its touch of bitter would be a match for the happy hour spread. But in the English-speaking world, it has been a revelation to bartenders, because now they can make the vaunted Vesper cocktail, otherwise known as James Bond's "shaken, not stirred" martini from Ian Fleming's 1953 novel "Casino Royale."

There was a surge of interest in the Vesper a few years ago when the "Casino Royale" film was out. But the Vesper, per Agent 007, called for Kina Lillet, which no longer exists. Lillet Blanc, the usual substitute, lacks the quinine element of the original version. Cocchi Aperitivo Americano now stands in nicely for the Kina Lillet and offers an authentic taste of Bond.

On the Saturday night of my trip, Bava threw a Vesper "martini" party at a bar in Turin called the Jazz Club. But this being Italy, it couldn't be only about drinking; there had to be food as well. So bartender Fulvio Piccinino demonstrated how surprisingly well the Vesper cocktail paired with raw oysters and cured salmon.

Now, I doubt James Bond would go in for food with his cocktail. (Nor would Bond probably have gone in for my group's bad gyrations on the Jazz Club dance floor, which included an unfortunate attempt at the Robot by yours truly.) But setting Bond aside, I believe oysters and salmon with a Vesper is an inspired match.

In a way, the night was a real cultural exchange. For once, the Italians were drinking an actual Anglo-Saxon cocktail. Meanwhile, they showed us a new twist on pairing food and spirits.

Like I always say: Cocktails. Building bridges.

Recipe

[Vesper](#)

Wilson can be reached at food@washpost.com. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/boozecolumnist. He will be signing copies of his new book, ["Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits."](#) on Tuesday from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the National Press Club's Book Fair and Authors' Night.