
Northern California's great vermouth awakening

By Esther Mobley | January 17, 2017 | Updated: January 13, 2017 12:13pm

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Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

Owner Carl Sutton pours a glass of vermouth at Sutton Cellars.

Carl Sutton had been making wine in San Francisco for 16 years when it occurred to him, in 2009, that he ought to make vermouth. He concedes the idea was initially

more of a perceived business opportunity than a lifelong passion. “A conversation at a party got me thinking, ‘what the hell *is* vermouth?’” Sutton recalls. “And with this cocktail renaissance, why isn’t anyone making well-sourced, artisanal vermouth?”

It was a gap that needed filling, but at the time even Sutton held vermouth prejudice. The only options available then — with the notable exception of Madera-based Vya, launched in 1999 — were mass-produced imports, rarely served properly. “We’re so obsessed here with everything being fresh,” Sutton says, “yet we were leaving these vermouth bottles out for six, eight months, and of course that’s gonna taste terrible.”

The whole thing, really, was a disaster of misinformation. Vermouth is fortified wine, yet we treat it like liquor — so while the bottle gathers dust in your parents’ liquor cabinet, it’s oxidizing and turning to vinegar, just as a bottle of Chardonnay would. And while we relegated it to the backdrop of martinis and manhattans, we never realized that when it’s well made and properly stored, vermouth tastes delicious on its own.

Vermouth, if you believe the laudatory newspaper articles that appear every couple of years, has long been poised to become the next big thing — always on the verge of mainstream popularity, but never quite arriving.

Could it now finally be vermouth’s moment? Eight years after Sutton Cellars first made its Brown Label dry vermouth, a full-on renaissance of artisanal vermouth production has become an integral part of our larger cocktail revival here. Vermouth makes a unique sort of sense in Northern California, where its two main

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components (wine and botanicals) thrive. In fact, both Healdsburg's Alysian and Napa Valley's Massican vermouths originated when those wineries found themselves with excess wine on their hands — and surrounded by all manner of inspiring shrubs.



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

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Wormwood is a key ingredient in making certain kinds of vermouth.

As these new, local vermouth producers put a quintessentially Northern California spin on a centuries-old tradition, San Francisco's cocktail bars have stepped in to proselytize. Dedicated vermouth menus, flights and even draft taps can be found at the Interval, Wildhawk, Foreign Cinema, the Alembic and Octavia. Eager to dispel falsehoods, the Interval menu's headline simply reads: "Vermouth is delicious!"

Several factors have conspired to create this moment. Americans have belatedly

discovered the charms of the aperitif hour, a staple of life in many parts of Europe. We've warmed to bitter flavor profiles in a new way. And high-octane drinks have ceded ground to lower-alcohol options. (See also: [the spritz.](#))

“Lower-ABV cocktails are allowing people to drink cocktails throughout a meal,” says bartender Claire Sprouse, who works with the vermouth producer Lo-Fi Aperitifs. “They’re less boozy, the flavors are lighter and you don’t burn out your palate.”

“Vermouth is so versatile,” says Woody Hambrecht, managing partner of Healdsburg’s Alysian Vermouth. “It’s something wine drinkers can get behind, as well as something bartenders can use for cocktails.”

To return to Sutton’s question: What the hell is it?

Like Sherry, Madeira or Port, vermouth is wine fortified with neutral brandy. And like Sherry, it can be either dry or sweet. The base wine for the vast majority of vermouth is white; rosso vermouth usually gets its hue from caramel color, similar to what’s used for cola.

But what truly defines a vermouth’s flavor is, as with gin, the addition of various botanical elements — primarily flower, herb and fruit. It can be rich with vanilla, like Italy’s Carpano Antica; or sweetly floral, like France’s honeysuckle-inflected Dolin Blanc; or intensely woody and herbal, like France’s Noilly Prat.

Sutton’s Brown Label, for instance, is dominated by orange peel and chamomile. Alysian’s version is marked by star anise. Massican employs quassia, a tree bark. The traditional bittering agent for European vermouths, wormwood (“wermut” in German), has not yet found much favor among American producers, though Sutton uses it in his new rosé-based vermouth, called The 27th Letter. “We’ve got a maturing of the U.S. palate where people can handle bitter much more,” he says.

Despite the boom, a major learning curve remains. “We have a lot of work to do with educating the consumer,” says Massican owner Dan Petroski. One of his customers, for instance, complained that the Massican vermouth smelled like

turpentine. It's supposed to smell like turpentine.

But that episode also spurred Petroski to create something with greater commercial fluency. "If you have to provide operating instructions, you're not going to be successful," he says. "My No. 1 motivation with the vermouth is to make it so that it's nondescript but perfectly constructed, and to price it so that it reaches the back bar or the well."

Those economics can get tricky. Thanks to their production processes, artisanal vermouths can easily price themselves out of the back bar. Just think about all that specially sourced quassia bark.

"I'm not going to hate on a specialty vermouth that's buying ingredients that are grown with an eye toward sustainable agriculture," says Jennifer Colliau, the Interval's beverage director, "but it's tough to sell a martini for \$18."

That's why Colliau wanted to highlight vermouth on her menu. When you offer vermouth straight for \$8 to \$13 a serving, it's suddenly equivalent to a glass of wine.

And while it's commonplace to specify which type of gin you'd like in your martini, few bargoers request their preferred vermouth. California's artisanal vermouths, then, may find a better home in the proprietary drinks of thoughtful cocktail bars than in generic drink orders. "As bar programs become more specialized and bartenders take more ownership of their lists, this is another tool to make an original cocktail," says



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

Bartender Jennifer Colliau makes a martini at the Interval

Alysian's Hambrecht.

As you begin to explore vermouth, consider your preferences. Do you like German Riesling? Try an off-dry white vermouth. If you like drinking Fernet, try a sweet red one.

Better yet, visit the Interval, or Wildhawk, or Foreign Cinema, or the Alembic, or Octavia — and tell one of their fanatical bartenders that you're ready to try some vermouth.

Despite her menu's claim, Colliau still has to convince some guests. "People still come in and say vermouth isn't delicious," says Colliau. "So I'll pour them a little Dolin Blanc or Maurin Blanc. If you try that and you don't like it, that's cool. But 19 times out of 20, you love it."

[Click here for Esther Mobley's top picks for local vermouth.]



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