

That's amaro

Ease into the old world of Italian bitters

Even if you've never chugged fresh cow's blood with the Masai or sipped fermented yak's milk on the Mongolian steppe, there should be little doubt that tasting Fernet-Branca for the first time is as unforgettable as drink experiences get. Smelling like something you smear on your chest to open your bronchial passages and tasting like horse-strength Robitussin, the black, syrupy bitter can make a grown man grimace—even Hemingway supposedly despised the stuff. Should you come across someone sipping the herbal liqueur, you can be sure you've encountered a sophisticated, or at least resolute, drinker.

Popular in its native Italy, Fernet-Branca is also a favorite in Argentina, where it gets mixed with cola. And in recent years the drink has attained a cult-like status in San Francisco, which has been said to lead the world in consumption per capita. The exact reasons for this are obscure, though one possible explanation comes from the combination of the city's decadent nightlife and Fernet's reputed ability to counter the sexual downsides of too much alcohol. But while the singular Fernet-Branca serves as many Americans' first (and last) experience with Italian bitters, its harshness isn't necessarily representative of what can otherwise be an accessible, warmly satisfying conclusion to an over-indulgent meal.

Unlike in many other countries where a single brand dominates (Jägermeister in Germany, Unicum in Hungary), most towns in Italy make their own varieties of bitters, which they call "*amaro*." Some *amaro* recipes, especially those from monasteries, go back hundreds of years, but most derive from 19th-century apothecary elixirs meant to settle the stomach and aid digestion.

Though there is no strict definition for *amaro*, it's typically made with a base of grain alcohol or grappa (or, in the case of Fernet-Branca, fermented beet molasses) to which a secret combination of herbs, roots, bark, leaves, flowers, rinds, spices, sugar, and caramel-coloring is added. A single variety can contain some 40 flavors and aromatics, including frankincense, myrrh, saffron, aloe, menthol, orange peel, gentian, and cardamom. That many of these count as components of church incense explains why *amaro* often has a whiff of old-world Catholicism about it.

The drink comes in hundreds of varieties that differ widely in bitterness, flavor, body, color, and alcohol content, ranging from 20 to 90 proof. In contrast to Fernet-Branca's aggressive bitterness, there is Averna—bittersweet, delicate, and redolent of caramel. The brand called Borsci might as well be butterscotch, while another called Meleti conjures up saffron and honey. Almost deserving a category of its own is the acerbic and bizarrely vegetal Cynar (chee-NAR), which is made from artichokes, of all things. Containing a substance called cynarin that makes food taste

sweeter, it's best drunk as an aperitif with club soda—but be warned: it causes a foul reaction when followed with red wine.

Amaro is usually served at the end of a meal, with or after coffee. Aficionados drink it neat and at room temperature, though in the summer they might add an ice cube or two. Downing it as a shot is acceptable, but a fuller appreciation comes from sipping. Should you ever have the good fortune to dine at someone's home in Italy, you'll find that the common method is to drink *amaro* out of one's emptied espresso cup.

Increasing numbers of restaurants in New York are offering Italian bitters, and most of the credit goes to the apostles of traditional Italian cuisine Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich. Lupa, their Roman trattoria, was the first place in the U.S. to offer an extensive *amaro* selection, which now includes over 20 varieties. Diners wishing to follow the lead of the redheaded chef should know that his personal favorite is the creamy and complex Nardini, which has vanilla undertones and a licorice finish.

In addition to the other restaurants in the duo's empire (Babbo, Del Posto, Esca, and Otto), other places that offer a wide selection include Cesca, a rustic Italian restaurant on the Upper West Side; Franny's, the artisanal Park Slope pizzeria; and Employees Only, an art-deco speakeasy and restaurant run by mixologists with waxed mustaches. Keep in mind that *amaro* is an acquired, even hard-won, taste. But as many an intrepid drinker can tell you, converts are the biggest fanatics. —Justin Shubow

