



This October, Martini & Rossi is introducing their Riserva Speciale Bitter Liqueur, joining the recently launched vermouths Rubino and Ambrato. Potent in flavor but not ABV, amaros are ideal for creating lower-octane cocktails. ABOVE: The Wooden Nickel at Sable Kitchen & Bar in Chicago is based on single malt Scotch and Ramazzotti Amaro.

BITTER SWEET SPOT

AT HOME AND BEHIND THE BAR, SPRITZY AND STILL, BITTER AMAROS ARE BEING EMBRACED

BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

Nothing illustrates the rise of amaros (aka *amari*, plural in Italian) in the U.S. better than the dramatic growth of Aperol. At the start of the decade, the carmine-hued, citrusy, lightly bitter brand had even less impact on the U.S. bar world than Campari, which at that time was languishing at about 50,000 cases, a far cry from its own heyday in the 1980s. Aperol was a junior partner in the team, an afterthought, really, until the emergence of the Aperol Spritz.

Growth since then has been stratospheric. The company reported last year the brand grew by more than 40%, and for the first quarter of this year, it was up almost another 20%. Based mostly on the brunch favorite Spritz—Aperol, sparkling water and Prosecco—the brand has been the biggest beneficiary of the turn to more full-fla-

vored and bitter ingredients in the cocktail world.

The proliferation of both imported brands returning to the U.S. after a long absence and the introduction of new brands from both here and abroad has fed into the growth. Both Angostura and Peychaud's, the longtime aromatic bitters producers, in the last couple of years introduced their own potable versions

aimed at bartenders. And just this August, Martini & Rossi launched their Riserva Speciale Bitter. Many of these have found a market not only among bartenders but also home cocktail enthusiasts.



“America’s palate now fully embraces bold bitter flavors,” says Richard Black, Vice President, Marketing, Vodka and Cordials, Campari America. “Bitter flavors, which were once seen as off-putting, are now desirable.

We’ve seen a steady rise in popularity of espresso, intense dark chocolates, IPAs and wild greens; bitter is now mainstream.”

NEGRONIS & MORE

Campari, stagnant in the U.S. for decades, has surged on the strength of the Negroni and the return of classic cocktails, recently surpassing 100,000 cases here, he says. As a company, Campari America benefits broadly from the bitter trend, with not only Campari and Aperol, but also the dark, citrusy sweet Sicilian Averna; the intensely bitter artichoke-based Cynar, now in two proofs; and the oak-aged Braulio in their portfolio.





Hot on the heels of “frosé,” amaros have been cropping up in frozen cocktails, like the Fernet Daiquiri at Eight Bar at Chicago’s Maple & Ash Steakhouse. / The Aperol Spritz (3 parts Prosecco, 2 parts Aperol, 1 splash of soda) has proven so popular that bars are spinning off variations, as is common with margaritas and martinis. / The bitter-edged frozen cocktail lineup at Chicago’s River North includes Fool’s Gold, Tempo Bello and Chilcano.

The importance of bitter-edged cocktails can be found at places like Sable Kitchen & Bar in Chicago, which stocks about 25 amaros and where fully half of the cocktails listed at any one time are likely to include them, says Head Bartender Mike Jones.

Among the current drinks on Sable’s menu, there’s the Wooden Nickel (Glenfarclas 12 Year Old Single Malt Scotch, the baking spice amaro Ramazotti, grenadine, pineapple juice, lemon, salt, chocolate bitters); El Fin de Sirocco (Plymouth Gin, the bitter-sweet herbal amaro Lucano, Chateau aloe liqueur, honey syrup, lemon); and Jones’s own Cobbler’s Square (East India Sherry, rum, the lightly bitter amaro Nonino, lemon, simple syrup, strawberry, bitters).

Jones says amaros have been go-to ingredients for his bar staff for a number of years, by now so ingrained they’ve flipped the model from strong spirit with modifying amaro. “My approach to a cocktail now is to start with them as the base

and build on the flavors to complement or contrast.” This approach helps create more flavorful and lower-proof cocktails, something the industry as a whole has been embracing lately.

NEW TRICKS

Elsewhere in Chicago, the summer of 2017 found some relatively new uses for amaros—frozen. Arbella in Chicago’s River North unveiled their nitrogen-frozen cocktail lineup including Fool’s Gold (mezcal, pineapple and a Mexican amaro) and a Negroni variant. And the frozen Fernet Daiquiri made its appearance at Eight Bar Patio at Maple & Ash Steakhouse.

For Travis Oler, Beverage Manager at the southern French/northern Italian New York City restaurant Italiane, building on the spritz’s popularity has been a way to introduce potentially reluctant customers to the more bitter trend. In addition to a digestif cart wheeled through the dining room, Italiane recently included spritzes made with Cappelletti and another with Nonino, as well as stronger cocktails like the Coccozza Group (bourbon, Ramazotti, crème de cacao and orange

“AMERICA’S PALATE NOW FULLY EMBRACES BOLD BITTER FLAVORS.”

— RICHARD BLACK, CAMPARI AMERICA

bitters), and the Bank Note (Scotch, ginger syrup, the mild cardoon-based Cardamaro and seltzer).

Oler says sweeter and milder amaros like Nonino and Cardamaro are easier to work into cocktails, especially in lighter drinks like spritzes, compared to the astringent Fernet’s of the world. Jones agrees, suggesting the more baking-spice-focused brands like Averna and Ramazotti have lots of applications.



The enthusiasm for bitter is also being modestly fueled by small American producers, like Washington, D.C.-based Francesco Amodeo whose Don Ciccio & Figli sells in a handful of states a range of bitters and aperitivos. Descended from a family of amaro producers, he points out that simply recreating existing brands and styles won’t work for American producers.

But the time is right for trying at least. “Customers are totally open to it now,” says Oler. “For the most part they don’t necessarily understand what’s going on in the bottle but they are open to a dialogue about it, and trying them.” ■

CAMPARI APEROL PARTY PHOTO COURTESY OF SWELL

MO’ BITTER, MO’ BETTER

Campari staged an ambitious marketing campaign in the Hamptons this summer via a bright orange “Ape-Car”—a three-wheeled Italian flatbed truck retrofitted as a bar.

