

FOOD ARTS

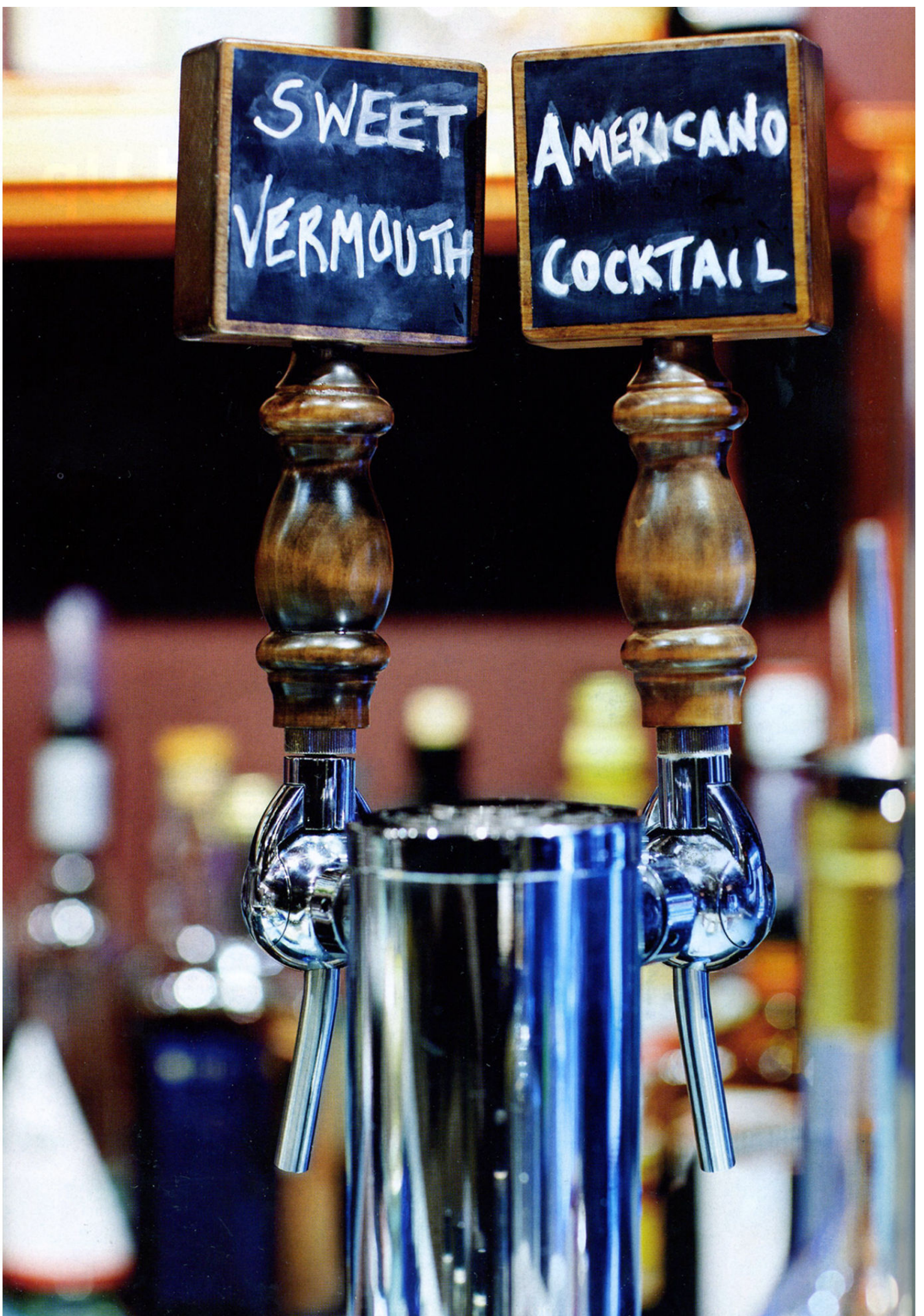
AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT ■ OCTOBER 2012

EUROPE'S ENDURING TRADITIONS



SWEET
VERMOUTH

AMERICANO
COCKTAIL



FOUNTAIN OF VERMOUTH

Not content with artisanal spirits and house-made bitters, bartenders are pursuing the perfect cocktail counterpoint by making their own vermouths. Kara Newman reports.

With vermouth on his mind and larceny in his heart, **Mayur Subbarao** jumped the fence at France's Noilly Prat distillery to get a closer look. "I slipped out of the tour and jumped the partition," admits Subbarao, now head bartender at New York City's **Amor y Amargo**, where he makes sweet and amber vermouth. "I sneaked all the way in to see the Sherrying tanks they keep on the roof."

Admittedly, this was an extreme measure. But despite the flourishing cocktail renaissance, in 2007 (when Subbarao jumped the fence), vermouth options were few for U.S. bartenders. Since then, the variety has much improved—yet a growing range of mixologists still insist on making their own vermouth. And many trace their vermouth mania back to Subbarao.

Vermouth—essentially, wine fortified with spirits and aromatized with herbs or spices—had suffered a terrible reputation until just a few years ago. Often it was abused, the dusty bottle opened and allowed to sit on the back bar for years. Few bartenders were trained to treat it like wine—as a perishable product. "No one drank it because it was pretty nasty," confesses **Jackson Cannon**, a pioneer in DIY vermouth. "It was a spiral that took it out of its proper place."

But traveling through Europe, Cannon saw a wider range of what vermouth could be. For example, Martini & Rossi offered two vermouths in the United States (red/sweet and white/dry), but nine products in Italy, including amber and rosé. "I loved their rosé vermouth, and started beg-



At Amor y Amargo, Mayur Subbarao keeps his house vermouth fresh by drawing it from an airtight tap. Portrait by Shannon Sturgis. Tap photo by Susanna Blavarg.



How to make a rosé vermouth: Starting with a Garnacha rosé, Jackson Cannon's recipe is built along a backbone of rosemary, ginger, dried gentian root, Madagascar vanilla, dried bitter orange peel, and wormwood. He serves it fresh at Eastern Standard, but likes to barrel age it for use at The Hawthorne. Photo by Melissa Ostrow.

ging them to carry it in the U.S.," Cannon says.

It never arrived. Meanwhile, Subarao shared with a group of Boston bartenders, including Cannon, an early experiment on "deconstructing" vermouth. Before long, Cannon, bar manager at Boston's **Eastern Standard** (he is now also co-owner of **The Hawthorne**), became one of the first to start making his own vermouth. Simply put, "I was looking for a flavor I couldn't get," Cannon recalls.

His version is made with Spanish Garnacha, fortified with Cognac macerated with strawberries, and steeped with flavoring agents including vanilla beans, orange peels, fresh thyme, and sage. Rosy pink and subtly spiced, it lends complexity to drinks such as L'Amérique (white whiskey, yellow Chartreuse) and the Vin Amer Fizz (apricot, egg white, Champagne).

Over time, the range of commercial vermouth offerings has broadened. Products like rich, sweet Carpano Antica became more widely available—the Italian vermouth remains a darling among mixologists, a go-to for Negronis and other cocktails. The figgy, spiced notes of Punt e Mes make it another popular choice. Meanwhile, importers such as Haus Alpenz brought more interesting specialty vermouths such as Dolin and fortified "apéritif wines" such as Cocchi Americano to the United States. Surely, bartenders now are spoiled with options.

But some say gaps still exist, and even prefer to go the DIY route. "It's not the most practical way to go," admits bartender **Chris Frankel**, who brews up exotic infused "house apéritifs"

at **Anvil Bar & Refuge** (where he's also the manager) and **Underbelly**, both in Houston, "but we want things you can't get off the shelf." Without a full liquor license at Underbelly, Frankel created two libations featuring fortified wines: The Americano infuses Torrontés, an Argentinean white wine, with gentian and an array of Indian spices such as fenugreek, coriander, fennel, and star anise. "It's really in your face," Frankel enthuses. The sweeter, bright ruby Quinquina, listed on the dessert wine menu, adds quinine to aromatized rosé wine, which is then infused with vanilla, cacao beans, plum, cinnamon, and lavender. Both drinks are served straight up.

Meanwhile, **Neil Kopplin**, of Portland, Oregon's **Beaker & Flask**, has identified another unfilled niche: local and organic vermouth. While he has long made vermouth for his bar (what he refers to as "ballistic" or "stovetop" vermouth), he has taken DIY to the next level, partnering with winemakers Derek Einberger and Jennifer Kilfoil to market the commercial Imbue brand.

Made with Pinot Gris from Willamette Valley, Imbue Bittersweet white vermouth is starting to appear at craft bars and liquor stores around the country, in many cases destined for vermouth-heavy Fifty-Fifty Martinis. Next up: Petal & Thorn, "an all wine-driven version of Aperol or Campari." The rosy hue comes from organic Oregon beets; a percentage of the wine and herbs used to flavor the product will be organic as well.

Vermouth takes time and expertise to make, and loads of experimentation to find a formula that works, concedes Cannon.



Boston's Jackson Cannon, an early pioneer of house-made vermouth at Eastern Standard and The Hawthorne. Photo by Melissa Ostrow.

“From a cooking standpoint, it’s more difficult than bitters.” He advises soliciting a pastry chef to advise on how to work with super-heated sugars. In addition, don’t embark on DIY vermouth to save money. Although “it’s not ruinous,” Cannon counsels, it can be pricey if you invest in good wine and stock up on bittering agents. However, “it comes out to be one of the more luxurious ingredients on the bar.”

He makes a new batch weekly, but has streamlined the process. “The trick became making sure we had the process lined up for a bar that was big and busy.”

While Cannon says that finding the best wine for his vermouth was a key struggle, Frankel says learning about and bulk-sourcing herbs and botanicals presented the greatest challenge—30 or 40 ingredients may go into a single batch. “*The Mixellany Guide to Vermouth and Other Apéritifs* by Jared Brown and Anistatia Miller proved a useful guide to herbs,” he says.

Still, one issue remains: even house-made vermouth “goes off” once the bottle is opened. Relentless experimenter Subbarao may have found the answer: no bottles. Following the trend for wine on draft, at Amor y Amargo he’s added an air-tight tap for vermouth. Negroni, anyone?

Kara Newman’s second book, *The Secret Financial Life of Food: From Commodities Markets to Supermarkets*, will be published by Columbia University Press in fall 2012.