

TOP 50 WINES IN AMERICA'S RESTAURANTS • PINOT NOIR SUPERLIST

# Wine & Spirits

# 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL RESTAURANT POLL

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# bitter and sweet

the inner beauty of amari

By St. John Frizell



From the Art Nouveau pastoral scene on the label of Amaro Lucano to the choir bell-shaped bottle of Amaro Montenegro, *amari* offer a lesson in the elegant product design of yesteryear. But to the typical American palate, they present a challenge. The viscous stuff that comes out of the bottle ranges in color from chestnut brown to black, and to those who haven't acquired the taste, amari can seem to be both medicinally bitter and cloyingly sweet at the same time. Amari have always been popular in Italy, where they're typically enjoyed after dinner, but their stateside fans have been few and far between. Until now, that is. Today's mixology-minded bartenders, always hungry to mix with forgotten and antiquated ingredients, have discovered the hidden potential of these *digestivi*, showing them off in cocktails across the country.

"I grew up with amari," says Tad Carducci, partner in Tippling Brothers, a cocktail consultancy. His grandfather used to pour a little Averna, a full-bodied Sicilian amaro, into his orange soda after Sunday dinner. "I used to think he was the coolest granddad ever, until I realized he was just trying to make me go to sleep."

Carducci's grandfather wasn't on to anything new—traditionally, amari have been used as medicine (though typically as digestive aids, not soporifics). When Carducci was creating the cocktail menu for a cocktail lounge in Philadelphia, amari were a natural fit—after all, the bar is called *Apothecary*. He pairs Averna with Bluecoat gin, mint, rosemary and muddled apple to create the Thrashing Eve. "Bartenders tell me they don't know how to mix with amari," says Carducci. "Yet they contain every ingredient we like to play with at the bar—herbs like sage and thyme, spices like nutmeg and cinnamon, vanilla, chocolate, citrus peel, all in different combinations."

Much has been written about the inexplicable popularity of one of the boldest amari, Fernet Branca, among the bartenders of San Francisco, who drink it as a shot, or mixed with ginger ale. Its characteristic aggressive flavor makes it especially difficult in mixed drinks, according to Ryan Fitzgerald, bartender at San Francisco's *Baretta*. "You can use it, but you have to be careful," Fitzgerald says. "Too much and it starts to bully the other flavors in the drink." For his Black Daiquiri, he

adds a mere quarter-ounce of Fernet Branca to dark rum, lime and sugar, and the amaro adds a profound herbal complexity, much the way a dash of Angostura bitters would.

At *Eastern Standard* in Boston, bar manager and beverage director Jackson Cannon prefers Amaro Nonino, a lighter, more elegant amaro made in the hills of Friuli. To a martini made with Junipero gin and dry vermouth, Cannon adds a healthy splash of Amaro Nonino, which lends a bitter punch, tempered by a nutty sweetness. "It provides that bitter note that belongs in a cocktail, but in a nuanced and sophisticated way. It's a bitterness that's softer and more diffuse," Cannon says. But when looking for an amaro that could hold its own in a hot coffee drink, Cannon chose Amaro Abano, produced by Luxardo, a spirits maker famous for their maraschino liqueur. In the Cafe Amaro, Cannon combines Abano with a rich brown-sugar syrup and hot coffee.



Amaro Nonino provides that bitter note that belongs in a cocktail, but in a nuanced and sophisticated way. —Jackson Cannon, *Eastern Standard*

## Amaro Julep

2 ounce Amaro Averna  
1 ounce Appleton VX  
½ ounce honey syrup (honey  
mixed with water in equal parts)  
1 dash Angostura bitters  
4 sprigs mint

In a mixing glass, combine amaro, rum, honey syrup, bitters and 2 sprigs mint. Muddle. Strain contents into a highball glass filled with crushed ice. Swizzle lightly and add more ice if necessary. Garnish with two sprigs mint and a straw.

"Where the Nonino is austere and refined, the Abano has some dust and gravel notes, and a fat texture," Cannon says. "A lot of lighter amari get swallowed up by the coffee, but the Abano can hold its own."

While amari make strong supporting players, they seldom take centerstage as a cocktail's featured ingredient. One grand exception is the Amaro Julep, a drink that bartender Kenta Goto developed with Audrey Saunders, owner of New York City's *Pegu Club*. The bar's recipe book included drinks like the Little Italy (rye, vermouth and Cynar, a bittersweet liqueur flavored with artichoke)—a short, gutsy variation on the Manhattan—but Goto wanted to see if an amaro could work in a long, summery drink. He also chose Averna as his star player for its light anise and licorice notes—flavors that traditionally pair well with mint—and its full, robust body, which could withstand the dilution of a julep's crushed ice. The result is surprisingly light and refreshing; the mint flavors are zippy and fresh. Honey adds sweetness, Jamaican rum adds body and depth and the amaro, in this case, tastes just as pretty as the bottle it comes in. ■