

THE NEW APERITIF

Shake up the way you sip before dinner with the West's fresh batch of artisanal vermouths. *By Sara Schneider*

DRINKS BEFORE DINNER? In this country, thoughts traditionally turn to martinis or Manhattans. The answer to the question in France, Italy, or Spain, though, is often vermouth—neat, chilled, or over ice.

In the aperitif-wine family, vermouth is lightly fortified wine steeped with an array of botanicals, from roots, bark, and spices to fruits and flowers. The tradition was founded in the late 1700s in Northern Italy and in the South of France out of trust in the medicinal benefits of these natural ingredients—especially wormwood, which came to define the product.

As our cocktail culture emerged in the late 1800s, we embraced vermouth—but only as a minor player. In true American fashion, we rejected nuance in favor of alcoholic power, and until recently tended to just wave the dry vermouth bottle over our martini glass or splash a bit of the sweet variety into our Manhattan.

Evolution is alive and well, though, on our pre-dinner drinking front. A handful of West Coast wineries and distilleries have begun producing handcrafted vermouths, ranging from dry French-style versions to sweeter Italian-leaning ones, that are worthy of sipping on their own.

They also shine when they're given the starring role in simple cocktails (at right)—serendipitously, just when many people are looking for a little more nuance and a little less, well, alcohol in their drinks. Because the botanicals vary so widely among producers (the recipes are closely guarded secrets and don't necessarily include wormwood), you have to play with formulas to get just the right one.

Only one admonition: Don't leave these vermouths on your liquor shelf for three years. They just don't keep like high-proof spirits. Store them in the refrigerator for up to a month—if you can resist sipping them that long.

1. WEST COAST MANHATTAN

Combine 2 oz. **Matthias-son sweet vermouth**, 1 oz. **rye whiskey**, and 2 dashes **orange bitters** in a mixing glass filled with ice. Stir until well chilled, about 20 seconds. Strain into a lowball glass or coupe, and garnish with 1 or 2 good-quality **maraschino cherries** and/or an **orange twist**.



2. WINE COUNTRY AMERICANO

Combine 2 oz. **Vya sweet vermouth** and 1 oz. **Aperol** in a mixing glass filled with ice. Stir until well chilled, about 20 seconds. Strain into a flute, top with brut sparkling wine, and garnish with an **orange twist**.



3. UPSIDE-DOWN MARTINI

Combine 2 oz. **Interrobang Recipe No. 73 white vermouth**, 1 oz. **London dry gin** (such as Tanqueray), and 2 dashes **Angostura bitters** in a mixing glass filled with ice. Stir until well chilled, about 20 seconds. Strain into a chilled martini glass and garnish with a **lemon twist**.



Best sippers & mixers

Imbue Classic Dry Vermouth

(750 ml.; \$25). Citrus, honeyed stone fruit, florals, and herbs, with a little wormwood and spice.

Interrobang Recipe No. 73 White Vermouth

(375 ml.; \$18). Forest aromas and cloves with a sweet-savory balance of citrus and resinous herbs.

Lo-Fi Dry Vermouth

(750 ml.; \$25). Distinct cardamom and star anise balanced by whiffs of florals, fruit, and fennel.

Hammer & Tongs "Sac'Révine" Vermouth

(750 ml.; \$35). A mélange of citrus, starfruit, peach, and honeysuckle with a hint of bitterness.

Matthiasson Sweet Vermouth

(375 ml.; \$35). Nutty, with a little caramel carrying dried flowers and cherries, honey, and spice.

Ransom Sweet Vermouth

(500 ml.; \$20). Woody, with root beer, vanilla-scented orange peel, dried fruit, and cardamom.

Vya Sweet Vermouth

(750 ml.; \$22). Sweet allspice and saffraas balanced by bitter roots and savory herbs.

FOOD STYLING: KAREN SHIRO; PROP STYLING: KELLY ALLEN