
VERMOUTH SLEUTHS FIND THEIR PROOF

CALIFORNIA VINTNER'S VYA IMPRESSES A TEAM OF TASTERS

By Jon Erickson • Special to the U-T2 p.m. March 10, 2015



In the blind taste test, wine experts tasted six sweet vermouths neat and also in Manhattan cocktails. *Getty Images*

I recently set out to answer one of the most commonly asked cocktail questions: Which sweet vermouth is the best?

Vermouth is a fortified wine made from white wine and neutral grape spirits that are blended with herbs, botanicals, spices and other natural additives, including wood and bark. Fragile by comparison to other fortified wines like Madeira and port, sweet vermouth needs to be kept out of the sunlight, stored cold and consumed within a matter of weeks of opening. And while it is quite popular in Europe as an aperitivo, here in the U.S. it is best known for its starring role in classic cocktails, most notably the Manhattan.

I sat down at Jaynes with three of my trusted drinking companions, including local cocktail writer D.A. Kolodenko, to blind taste our way through six common vermouths. First, we tasted all six neat, from newly opened bottles. Each taster took detailed notes while circling back on each glass, finally reaching what I consider a solid analysis of each bottle. Second, local bartender Alex Maynard of the Rumbling Tins Co., prepared us six carefully jiggered and stirred straight-up Manhattans using 2 ounces of Bulleit bourbon, 1 ounce of sweet vermouth, a dash of Angostura bitters and a Luxardo maraschino cherry.

Here is a synopsis of this beguiling meet-up.

- The Boissiere (French company, Italian production) served neat performed adequately, with abundant baking spices, caramel flavors and medium complexity. It was on the sweeter side of the lineup and had a “hot” alcohol-forward profile. When served in a Manhattan, it did not contribute much to the party, receding far behind the bourbon. But at the bargain price of \$10 for a liter, Boissiere is a good choice, given the right context.
- Cocchi is another Torino Italy-based bottling and was the lightest of the group. The nose had notes of holiday spices like nutmeg, cinnamon and clove, and these aromas carried through into the taste. The Cocchi would work well as a lighter aperitif over ice with a lemon peel. It was pleasant with nothing off-putting but was somewhat lazy compared with some of the other high-end bottlings. As a Manhattan, the sweetness dominated while the complexity of the herbs receded. Retail price lands around \$20 for a 750-ml bottle.
- Carpano Antica Formula has undergone an explosion in sales over the past five years. An “antique” recipe vermouth that once was found only in old school Italian restaurants has become the most popular high-end sweet vermouth on the market. This is a complex, big vermouth and can joyfully be consumed as an aperitif. It has what one of us called a “Campari-like level of bitterness,” countered by a strong vanillin sweetness. Kolodenko called it “the essence of vermouth” and noted its deep aromatics of leather, olive and wormwood. While it was clearly a product of quality, some tasters called it “the fat boy” and “syrupy” and I could certainly see why some might prefer something with less heft. In the blind Manhattan it was clear which vermouth this was. The vanilla was instantly recognizable. The integration with the bourbon was excellent, and it retained many of the mysterious flavors we tasted during the neat lineup. It upstaged the bourbon without completely overpowering it. In our discussions we noted that the Carpano would be well served by a 100 proof bourbon to offset the strong vanilla. At \$29 for a liter, it is the most expensive of the group, but it’s required tasting for anyone getting serious about cocktails.

Both neat and in a cocktail, Noilly Prat, a French vermouth, was the least interesting of the lineup and had a vinegar-like sourness. Kolodenko commented that “the hallmark of a bad vermouth is that it tastes like salad dressing.” This translated into a strange Manhattan where vermouth and bourbon are at complete odds with each other. A 750-ml bottle is about \$15.

Dolin (pronounced Doh-leen) is another French vermouth and also retails for around \$15. It had a pronounced Band-Aid-like taste, yet managed to achieve a higher level of respect than the Noilly because of its more complex herbal and citrus notes. It had a refreshing flavor served neat but struggled in the Manhattan context, disappearing behind the bourbon while maintaining the mild hints of plastic. However, it’s perhaps the best value of the group and could certainly please many drinkers.



The Vya vermouth was a big hit with the tasting panel.

- The complete surprise of the evening was not from a European producer but from the California winery Quady and its stunningly good Vya sweet vermouth. Our tasting group found this one to be the most complex, balanced and enjoyable of the lineup. It was also the most dry. There was a strong perfume of bark that melded perfectly with the cherry and spices and made for a delightful drink neat. Like the Carpano it had a timeless mystery to it. Kolodenko said it “catered to an antique audience.” It also made for the best Manhattan of the group, edging out the Carpano’s bold approach with a more elegant, complex touch. At nearly the same price as the Carpano — \$21 for a 750-ml bottle — it was the out-and-out winner of our tasting.

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