

→ A GUIDE TO SINGLE MALT WHISKEY → TOUR McMinnville's vibrant scene

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CELEBRATING WINES, BEERS, SPIRITS & CIDERS

BY AMY PENNINGTON

Bitter Sweet

Moving Vermouth from Glass to Plate



Vermouth was one of the spirits I learned to avoid as a teenager sneaking hooch out of my dad's liquor cabinet. The floral-infused sweet flavor did not appeal. A fortified wine (a wine in which a distilled spirit, such as brandy, is added) infused with botanicals, vermouth is offered in a range of flavors, from subtle to obtusely herbaceous and sweet.

Like wine, sweet or dry vermouth adds flavor to dishes, introducing bitter or honeyed qualities alongside floral notes and spices that chefs use in both sweet and savory iterations. Somewhat confusing to newcomers, vermouth is typically offered in "sweet" (red) or "dry" (white) and the two should not be used interchangeably in recipes. Sweet vermouth is, as billed, sweeter and likely the less offensive of the two – most will find a sip of sweet vermouth over ice is quite pleasing. White vermouth, however, is more dry and botanical, an acquired taste in the glass.

Traditionally, vermouth was drunk as an aperitif and used as a medicinal elixir. In more recent years, vermouth took center stage as the perfect foil to vodka and gin during the late '90s martini craze. History has a way of repeating itself and today, what's old is new and we're back to sipping vermouth.

Chronology aside, chefs and cooks have always relied on vermouth of all styles for its elegance and subtle flavor profile. "My favorite thing about vermouth is its complexity," says Jesse McMillan, chef de cuisine at **CAMPAGNOLO ROMA** in Vancouver, British Columbia. Plus, vermouth has the added benefit of a long shelf life – it will keep for months in the fridge after opening without losing flavor or fermenting further, as wine does. McMillan says he leans on vermouth to brighten up many of his charcuterie products. In traditional wine sausages and chicken liver mousses, dry vermouth is added for flavor boost and balance.

Personally, vermouth is one of my secret ingredients for lifting up simple homemade stocks and sauces, a poor man's trick for adding flavor that works particularly well on vegetable broths, which lack the body found in bone broths. Turns out other cooks agree.

"When you cook with vermouth you have the benefit of cooking with wine,

Chefs and cooks have always relied on vermouth of all styles for its elegance and subtle flavor profile.

while giving yourself an added opportunity to increase depth of flavor," says Greg Atkinson, chef and owner at **RESTAURANT MARCHÉ** on Washington's Bainbridge Island.

At Marché, Atkinson softens saffron threads in white vermouth and uses them in an aioli. Red vermouth is worked into sauce made with shallots and used to flavor the butter served atop grilled steaks. The subtle astringent quality vermouth offers has the ability to cut through heavy, fatty flavors like you find in oils and meats.

To bring the complexity and power of vermouth home, try deglazing your sauté pan with a hit of dry vermouth when searing meats or vegetables. Once the pan is dry and the food cooked, add anywhere from a quarter to half of a cup, scraping up the brown bits left from cooking. This creates a flavorful gravy or sauce in seconds.

Do the same for vegetarian dishes: Caramelized onions get a smack of flavor when dry vermouth is added to the pan in the last stage of cooking. For example, **RANSOM SPIRITS** infuses its dry vermouth with wormwood, rosehip, orange and chamomile among many other herbs commonly found in bitters, bringing an apothecary-style infusion to the plate.

Ever the versatile ingredient, dry vermouth is an excellent lifter but it can also be used for its delicate hint of botanicals. "The infusion of botanicals gives my dishes a more complex and satisfying aroma," Atkinson notes.

Many local producers offer an aromatic complexity that can be tasted even after cooking and with the addition of other ingredients. "I enjoy the overall crisp finish of a dry vermouth, especially with lighter fish dishes," says Executive Chef Ben Jones at **THE RESORT AT PAWS UP** in Montana. At the resort, Jones puts a spin on traditional oysters Rockefeller and deglazes sautéed spinach with vermouth before adding cream and blue cheese. The vermouth helps lighten what would otherwise be a heavy sauce. He serves this under cornmeal-fried oysters as an appetizer that has been on the menu for years.

Sweeter red vermouth is more often used in sweet methods. Jones spikes Zabaglione, an Italian dessert of booze-infused





custard, with sweet vermouth. McMillan uses dry vermouth in the preserves and jellies that accompany his charcuterie plates, like a citrus marmalade made with a bittersweet vermouth.

With proliferation in recent years of small local producers, vermouth is currently trending. And while it makes for an excellent pantry staple, it is a fruitful time to keep your eyes open for vermouths meant for sipping. At the **HERBFARM** in Woodinville, Washington, Chef Chris Weber opts for bittersweet vermouth from Oregon producer **IMBUE CELLARS**. Served cold and poured over a fresh, crushed bay leaf, vermouth is paired with a small plate of pickled steelhead, leeks and heirloom potatoes from their farm.

Or you can skip the foodie fanfare all together and simply stick with an aperitif. "Right now I'm crazy about the **ODD SOCIETY SPIRITS** Bittersweet vermouth in a Sbagliato," McMillan says of the refreshing traditional cocktail of Campari, vermouth and sparkling wine cocktail. With hundreds of years as a sipping concoction, pouring vermouth can't be beat. As I said, what once was old is now new. ●

RECIPE BY AMY PENNINGTON



RUSTIC ONION TART

This approachable tart – made with rustic and rough dough that is meant to fall apart – takes its savory onion filling and pairs it with soft, vermouth-soaked raisins piled high in the center. A stinky cheese is a lovely addition, helping to cut through the sweetness of the onion mixture.

▶ SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

DOUGH

¾ cup all-purpose flour
 ¾ cup whole wheat pastry flour
 1 teaspoon sugar
 ½ teaspoon salt
 6 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
 1 egg, beaten
 1 teaspoon cold water

FILLING

¾ cup raisins
 ¾ cup Ransom Spirits dry vermouth
 1 tablespoon butter
 1 tablespoon olive oil
 1 pound (4-5 medium-sized) onions, sliced
 ¼ cup chopped fresh thyme
 Pinch of salt
 2 ounces soft goat cheese

DIRECTIONS

To make the dough, combine the flours, sugar and salt in a medium-sized mixing bowl or a food processor. Add the pieces of butter and work in with your fingers, pinching the flour into the butter until small crumbs, like sand, are formed.

When the butter is well incorporated, add the egg and water, mixing until just coming together. Turn the dough out on a counter and knead gently, three to six times, to combine and push the dough together into a ball. It will be quite crumbly and uneven. Shape into a disc and flatten out. Cover well with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

While the dough is chilling, put the raisins in a small bowl and add the vermouth. Set aside.

To make the filling, set the butter and olive oil over medium-high heat in a medium-sized saucepan. Once the

butter has melted, add the onions, thyme and pinch of salt. Cook and stir continuously, until the onions are starting to brown and the pan has gone dry. Once the onions are cooked through and browned, add the raisins, along with their liquid. Stir, scraping the bottom of the pan, and cook until most of the liquid has evaporated, about 2 minutes. The onions can be syrupy but should not be watery. Once the mixture is thick and jam-like, remove from the heat and set aside to cool.

Preheat the oven to 350° F (176° C). When the dough has chilled properly, remove it from the fridge and set it on the countertop. Layer the disc of dough between two long pieces of plastic wrap so they are perpendicular to each other in the shape of a wide cross, with the dough securely in the center. Starting from the center and working out, roll out the dough to form a 10-inch circle, flipping over occasionally.

Once the tart crust is shaped, remove the top layer of plastic wrap and flip the delicate dough onto a sheet pan or cookie sheet, centering it as best you can.

Remove the plastic wrap and pile the onions into the center of the tart, leaving a 2-inch edge of tart dough. Dot on dollops of goat cheese. From there, fold the tart dough on top of the onions, creating a pentagon-shaped tart with an opening in the center. Put the tart in the oven and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until the tart shell is golden brown and crispy. Remove from the oven and let cool 10 minutes before serving in wedges.