BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

February 2007

Herbed Aperitifs

Presented by Jack Ziebart and Tony Pearson (Nanaimo Chapter)

INTRODUCTION

We have consulted a number of sources for information on herbed Apéritifs, but for a brief overview of the topic, one can hardly improve on what Ted Underhill has to say in Making Better Wines, (page E16.7) and much the same material appears in his article in the September 1993 Grapevine.

An Apéritif is simply defined as an alcoholic appetizer. The word is derived from the Latin aperire, which means to open, and, as Ted has pointed out, this implies opening the palate prior to a meal. The purpose of an Apéritif, then, is to activate the taste buds and start the saliva flowing: and strong flavours and alcohol can best do this. So we would expect an Apéritif to have characteristic strong flavours (Usually from herbs and spices) and a relatively high amount of alcohol (usually through fortification).

The BCAWA Competition Handbook lays down the following parameters for herbed Apéritif:

- no restriction on ingredients
- no restriction on colour
- 16 to 18% alcohol
- 1.000 to 1.040 specific gravity
- 4.0 to 5.0 gm/l acidity
- medium to very sweet sugar
- tannin -- may be somewhat astringent, and
- a bitter characteristic is permissible.

ORIGINS

What we now call a herbed Apéritif did not originate as a before dinner appetizer. Centuries ago, medicinal herbs were often added to or infused into wine which made them more palatable and at the same time acted as a better solvent than water. The tonic and restorative properties of some herbed wines (not to mention liqueurs) are still touted today. Strongly flavoured herbs have also been often used through the ages to make the flavour of bad or spoiled wine. Further, in some cases, aromatic flavours were imparted to the wine from the containers in which it was stored or shipped. The taste of the Greek wine Retsina presumably originated with the pitch used by the ancient Greeks to seal their wine jars.

CLASSIFICATION

Herbed Apéritifs come in a wide variety of flavours which appeal to a wide range of tastes. Many are commonly drunk with ice, or mixed with other drinks such as soda water, fruit juice or fruit liqueurs. Apéritifs also come in a wide range of alcoholic strengths. Some are mixed as a matter of taste as, say, a dry Martini or Manhattan cocktail, but others with a higher proof, such as Campari at 25% or Pernod at 40% must be diluted. And this is without getting into the herbed liqueurs such as Chartreuse at 55%.

Generally, though, when we look at the wines we find on our judging table we can group herbed Apéritifs into Vermouths and other, although, as we shall see shortly, other Apéritifs can by subdivided further.

VERMOUTH

Vermouth had its origins in the 16th century Germany: in fact, its name comes from the German word for wormwood, a shrub whose flowers were used to infuse Rhine wines with erratic results. The Italians had a little more success around 1775, producing a bitter-sweet flavoured wine from Muscat grapes. A few years later, around 1800, a drier vermouth was made in the South of France using Midi wines aged in oak. These were fortified with brandy and aged further. Italian vermouth was originally sweet, and French originally dry; now it should be noted that both countries produce both types, and, in fact, vermouth is made in most wine-producing regions of the world.

Nowadays, much more than wormwood flowers goes into vermouth. Up to 100 different herbs, spices and botanicals can be used, and, typically, one type of good vermouth may contain a blend of 40. In addition to such familiar flavours as vanilla, anise, cinnamon, allspice, orange peel, nutmeg and rosemary, one may also find more exotic ones such a blessed thistle, dittany of Crete, hart's tongue, European century and zeodary. Needless to say, every vermouth maker's blend of ingredients is a closely guarded secret.

There are probably as many methods of making vermouth as there are labels. Generally, the base wine is aged and fortified, and then infused with the mixture of herbs fo r several weeks or months, perhaps at an elevated temperature. The entire batch may be infused with the herbs or an extract prepared with a smaller portion of more highly fortified wine that is added back later. After infuse, the wine is filtered, fined, and further fortified. Other finishing and stabilizing procedures, pasteurization, refrigeration and more filtering will take place. Processing, however, is kept to a minimum to prevent loss of flavours. In some cases, the vermouth will undergo more aging after infusion.

There are certain processes peculiar to the French or dry vermouth. Rather insipid Midi wine such as Picpoul, Bourret or Clairette from the base. These may be blended with white port or angelica, and fortified with cognac to about 16%. The wine is aged outside in oak casks (One maker uses Canadian oak), exposed to sun and rain for up to 2 years. After aging, a "mistelle" of unfermented Muscat juice, fortified with brandy, is added to the wine before the herbs are introduced. Four to five years is needed to make a quality French vermouth.

Italian or sweet vermouth begins usually with an unspectacular Muscat or muscatel wine from the southern plains of Italy. As well as brandy to fortify the wine, caramel is added to give it the dark colour. The wine is aged in wooden casks, but not outdoors. The remainder of the method is similar to that for French vermouth, but does not take as long. Typically, the entire process for Italian vermouth is complete in about two years.

After opening Dry Vermouth should be refrigerated and keeps for about 6 months. Other vermouths generally keep for about 1 year when stored in a cool dry place or refrigerated.

OTHER APÉRITIFS

There are a great variety of herbed Apéritifs other than vermouths, but two distinctive flavours are common quinine, or cinchona bark, and liquorice, or anise. Ingredients vary widely, but the method is essentially the same as with vermouth: a base wine is fortified, aged, and infused with the appropriate blend of herbs.

The common quinine flavoured Apéritifs such as Dubonnet, St. Raphael, and Byrrh (spelt BYRRH) begins with a red wine, often Algerian. Most tend to be sweet, but there are drier variations, white Dubonnets for example.

Apéritifs of the anise family are found all around the Mediterranean: various types of pastis in France such as Pernod and Ricard, Ouzo in Greece, and arak or raki in the Middle East. Many of these are distilled and end up with high levels of alcohol, but they are generally considered Apéritifs nonetheless.

Finally, there are a few Apéritifs that have distinctive flavours of their own, but do not conveniently fit into any other category. Some, such as Campari, Fernet Branca and Amer Picon and actually bitters. Others such as lillet and Pineau des Charantes tend to be sweet.

JUDGING

Judging this category can have its difficulties. Herbed apéritifs are usually fortified. The herbs and spices can vary from a rather delicate flavour in some whites to a very robust flavour in a dark vermouth. Therefore it may be advantageous to separate the entries into light and dark classes and taste the light before the dark. We should also be aware that most herbed apéritifs are to be served chilled, over ice, or mixed with soda water or even fruit syrup. Therefore, what may be overpowering in flavour when tasted from a warm bottle may be and excellent apéritif when served over ice or mixed with soda water. Just as one looks for the balance of sugar and acid in a wine there should be a balance of flavours in this category. Bitterness, to whet the appetite, is a desired quality.

To quote Ted Underhill: *"An apéritif is best able to start the saliva flowing if it has an assertive flavour."*

SOURCES / READING LIST

- J. E. Underhill, Making Better Wines, (1991)
- J. E. Underhill, Apéritif Wines,
- The Grapevine, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Sept. 1993)
- M. A. Amerine & V.L. Singleton, Wine, University of California Press, (1976)
- Waugh, Wines and Spirits, Foods of the World, Time Inc., (1968)
- J. Craddock, Wine for Today, Muller, (1975)
- Lichine, New Encyclopedia of Wines and Spirits, (1982)11
- John Storr, Presentation notes (1995)