

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

2015

Herbed Aperitifs

An aperitif is most widely known as a beverage consumed prior to a meal that prepares the taste buds and palette for an upcoming meal. Aperitifs are often infused with herbs, roots and bitters. Herbed Aperitifs come in a wide variety of flavours which appeal to a range of tastes. Many are commonly drunk with ice or mixed with other drinks such as soda water, fruit juice or fruit liqueurs. Aperitifs also come in a wide range of alcoholic strengths. Aperitifs include Vermouth type wines. There are no restrictions as to ingredients or to the colour of the aperitif. Aperitifs are fortified wines, with alcohol levels up to 18%. Aperitifs range in sweetness from mild to very sweet.

The intent of this tasting is to familiarize ourselves with herbed aperitifs. Generally, we should be looking to aperitifs to “open the mouth” prior to a fine dinner. Aperitifs are meant to be served fifteen minutes to a half hour prior to sitting down to dinner where different wines will be served.

There is no one specific wine or drink that is always served as a starter; it varies depending on where you are and what cuisine is being featured. However, there are no rules. An aperitif is generally light in body, fresh, lively and often served cool. An aperitif should be refreshing, not too serious or overpowering. The goal is to enliven the palate, not clobber it. You want a drink that guests can sip easily while talking and greeting other guests. In general, you do not want something really heavy which will overwhelm your palate.

Aperitifs can vary with the season. While a cool, crisp wine might be perfect opener on a hot summer afternoon, in the dead of winter it might not be ideal, whereas a slightly richer or more alcoholic drink when it is cold out to “warm their bones” might be more appropriate before settling to dinner. Typically the aperitif is an introduction, not a drink you will continue the rest of the night.

In some areas, people prefer more alcoholic, flavored liqueurs to start a meal. Some examples are Ouzo in Greece and Pastis, in southern France. Pastis is anise-flavored and usually served on ice with some cold water. In Italy, bitter-tinged drinks like Compari and Aperol, either on the rocks or with cola or orange juice, are often served. While the bitterness can be an acquired taste, it can definitely wake up your palate.

Many regions produce special wine drinks that are flavored with various botanicals. One of the most common is dry vermouth. Alone, on the rocks, it can be a nice opener. Another example is Lillet, a flavored wine popular in France, which is slightly sweet and best served chilled or on the rocks.