

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

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Herbed Aperitifs

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Intended Outcomes:

After completing this session, you should know:

- The description and technical characteristics of this class
- The areas of the world which produce herbed aperitifs.
- The characteristics of some aperitifs.
- History and origin of herbed aperitifs
- The manner in which some herbed aperitifs are served.
- Tips about judging this class

Description - Class B. Aperitif

Herbed or otherwise flavoured wine for use as an aperitif. Wines that exhibit the strong aperitif characteristic of the ingredient such as citrus, Muscat, or other strongly flavoured fruits belong in this class. The class includes vermouth type wines as well as those similar to the patent aperitifs. Most tend to the sweet rather than the dry end of the sugar spectrum.

Technical Characteristics

Ingredients:	No restrictions.
Alcohol:	16% - 18%
Colour:	No restrictions.
Sugar:	Medium to very sweet
Specific Gravity:	1.000 – 1.040
Acid:	4.0 g/L – 5.0 g/L
Tannin:	May be somewhat astringent.
Bitterness:	A bitter characteristic is permissible.

All entries in this class will be considered for the AWC National Competition as AWC Class B. Aperitif.

History

Apéritif is a French word derived from the Latin verb *aperire*, which means "to open". The French slang word for *apéritif* is *apéro*, although in France an *apéro* is also food eaten in the late afternoon or early evening.

In our usage an *apéritif* is an alcoholic beverage usually served before a meal to stimulate the appetite and is therefore usually dry rather than sweet. However, the types of wines within this class have a varied history of development, but in general originated not as a before dinner drink, but to better ingest a variety of medicinal herbs in a more palatable manner. It was also found that alcohol was a better solvent than water to extract the medicinal properties of these herbs.

Some of the more widely known aperitifs include Vermouth, Dubonnet, Lillet, Campari and Aperol.

Canada and Australia now produce herbed aperitifs for the world market. Herbed Aperitifs 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 liquids such as soda water, fruit juice or fruit liqueurs.

Jack Ziebart and Tony Pearson (2007) note that the wines within this class which are found at the judging table can be grouped into Vermouths, and other. However, they also note that Aperitifs can certainly be subdivided further. This distinction of 'Vermouth' and 'Other' will now be used to group, for discussion purposes only, the broad range of aperitifs available.

Vermouth

Vermouth had its origins in 16th century Germany. In fact, its name comes from the German word for wormwood (Wermut), a shrub whose flowers were used to infuse Rhine wines. The Italians had more success around 1796, when the Turin distiller Antonio Carpano produced a bitter, sweet, fortified wine from Muscat grapes in combination with various botanicals (roots, barks, flowers, seeds, herbs, and spices). Other styles and brands born in the Piedmont region are Cinzano, Gancia and Martini and Rossi, just to name a few. The classic Italian aperitif is usually served chilled, neat, or with a splash of sparkling water and twist of lemon.

A few years later, around 1800 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 both countries produce both types, and in fact, vermouth is made in most wine-producing regions of the world.

Today there may be up to 100 different herbs, spices and botanicals used in the making of vermouths, while a single type may contain as many as 40. Cinchona bark (quinine), Wormwood flowers (Wermut), and Gentian root, are used to give aperitifs their distinctive bitterness.

Wormwood was used to treat skin infections, improve digestion, and kill tapeworms.

Cinchona Bark (Quinine) is used to treat Malaria by killing or preventing the growth of the parasite that causes Malaria.

Gentian Root was traditionally used to fight inflammation and swelling, treat infected wounds, and animal poisoning (there are few, if any, scientific studies on its effectiveness).

Today these three botanicals are used to flavour aperitifs and for their medicinal value.

In addition to such familiar flavours as vanilla, anise, cinnamon, allspice, orange peel, nutmeg and rosemary, one may also find more exotics ones such as Blessed Thistle, Elecampagne, Balm Leaf, Yarrow, European Centary, Angelica Root, and Saffron. 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 for several weeks or months. 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 the infusion, 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 the loss of flavours.

There are certain processes peculiar to the French of dry vermouth. Rather insipid Midi wines such as Picpoul, Bourret or Clairette form the base. These may be blended with white port or angelica and fortified with cognac to about 16%. The wine is then aged outside in oak casks, exposed to sun and rain for up to 2 years, or inside in specially constructed cellars that mimic the four seasons (Noilly-Prat). 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 generally needed to make quality French vermouth.

Italian or sweet vermouth begins usually with Muscat, Trevviano or Catarratto wine from the southern plains of Italy or Sicily. As well as the brandy used to fortify the wine, caramel is added to give it a 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 2 years.

Other Aperitifs

While there are a great variety of herbed aperitifs other than vermouths, two distinct flavours are most common: Cinchona bark (quinine), and licorice (anise).

The aperitif Dubonnet was introduced in France in 1846 when a French chemist, Joseph Dubonnet, created a drink in response to a competition run by the French Government to find a way of persuading French Foreign Legionnaires in North Africa to drink quinine to combat malaria. (The British Military held a competition to develop a tonic (Angostura Bitters) that would persuade members of the British forces in India to take Quinine to prevent Malaria). The medicine was a bitter brew, so he developed a formula of herbs and spices to mask quinine's sharp flavor, and it worked so well that the recipe has remained well-guarded ever since. Dubonnet's wife was so fond of the drink that she had all her friends try it, and its popularity spread. Other quinine flavoured aperitifs include St. Raphael and Byrrh. Most tend to be sweet, but there are drier variations, for example, white Dubonnet.

Dubonnet brand ownership was taken over by Pernod Ricard in 1976. It is available in Rouge, Blanc and Gold (vanilla and orange) varieties. Dubonnet is commonly mixed with lemonade or bitter lemon, and forms part of many cocktails.

Lillet was created in 1872 when two French brothers blended white Bordeaux wine with a mixture of macerated fruits and a small amount of quinine. Today, numerous fruits, some of which are a well-kept secret, along with green oranges from Morocco, sweet oranges from Valencia, bitter oranges from Haiti and cinchona bark (quinine) from Peru are cold-macerated in French brandy for four to six months before the brandy is mixed with wine and then aged.

Two types of Lillet are made: non-vintage (also called classic) and vintage (known as Jean de Lillet), being the only vintage aperitif in the world. Vintage Lillet is aged in newer oak barrels. Both types are made using Bordeaux grown Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Muscatels grapes. Lillet Rouge, whether vintage or non-vintage is a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Lillet produces a white, Rose, and Red aperitif.

Aperol is an Italian aperitif made of bitter orange, gentian, rhubarb and cinchona, among other ingredients. Aperol was originally produced by the Barbieri Company, but is now produced by the Campari Company. While Aperol was originally created in 1919, it did not become successful until after World War II. Although it tastes and smells much like Campari, Aperol has an alcohol content of 11% —less than half that of Campari. Aperol sold in Germany has an alcohol content

of 15% to avoid container deposit regulations. Aperol and Campari have similar sugar content, while Aperol is less bitter in taste. Campari is also much darker in color.

Although it has not been frequently submitted to spirit ratings competitions, in two submissions, Aperol received high marks. In 2007, Wine Enthusiast rated Aperol in its 90-95 point category. At the 2010 and 2012 San Francisco World Spirits Competition, the Aperol entry received double-gold medals—the highest available award.

Aperitifs of the anise family are found all around the Mediterranean; French types include Pernod and Ricard, while Ouzo is found in Greece and Arak or raki in the Middle East. Many of these are distilled and end up with high levels of alcohol (and consequently are outside the parameters of this class), but are generally considered Aperitifs never less.

Serving

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. 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 a perfect opener on a hot summer afternoon, it might not be ideal in the dead of winter. A slightly richer or more alcoholic drink might be more appropriate for this situation.

In some areas, people prefer more alcoholic, flavoured liqueurs to start a meal. Some examples include Ouzo in Greece and Pastis in southern France. Pastis is anise-flavoured and usually served on ice with cold water. In Italy, bitter-tinged drinks like Campari and Aperol, either on the rocks or with soda water or orange juice are often served.

Judging

Judging this category can have its difficulties. Herbed aperitifs are usually fortified. The herbs and spices can vary from a rather delicate flavour in some whites to a very robust flavor in 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 aperitifs are to be served chilled, over ice, or mixed with soda water or even fruit syrup. Therefore, what may be overpowering in a flavor when tasted from a warm bottle may be an excellent aperitif 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 (in Ziebart & Pearson), “an aperitif is best able to start the saliva flowing if it has an assertive flavor.”

When judging this class of wines, it is important to ensure the palate is well refreshed by using both bread and water between each tasting. These wines provide a wide variety of intense flavours, herbs, and sweetness. It is important to ensure the previously tasted wine does not impact the taste profile of the next wine being tasted in the flight.

Food Pairings

Guidelines for Pairing: When it comes to pairing Aperitif drinks with appetizers and snacks, there are a few key principles to keep in mind:

Complementing Flavors: Look for flavors in both the Aperitif and the food that complement each other. For example, a citrusy Aperol Spritz pairs beautifully with salty olives or cured meats, while a sweet white Aperitif pairs well with savory and slightly spicy foods.

A sweet red Vermouth would pair well with olives or salted almonds, or, for something more substantial, try a ham and cheese charcuterie board with Salami, cured hams and Pecorino cheese.

Considering Intensity: Pay attention to the intensity of flavors in both the Aperitif and the food. A bold and bitter Aperitif like Campari may overpower delicate appetizers, so opt for heartier dishes like cheese boards or charcuterie platters to balance the flavors.

References:

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