

Take a bite of your city | thetomato.ca

05
06
2021

THE TOMATO

food & drink



Hello Spring!

✓
TAKE ME HOME
AM Alberta Magazine
PA Publishers Association

RAISING OUR SPIRITS

Cocktails in the Time of Covid

PAMELA YOUNG

The Long Hello

“Pastis? You know pastis?”

A small smile of approval tugged at our waiter’s mouth. It was July 2013. On our first evening in Caromb, a tiny community in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region of southeastern France, Lorne and I were trying out Rick Steves’ mantra: “To connect with the locals, drink what the locals drink.” So far, it seemed to be working.

Somehow, in Canada, the pre-dinner drink tradition had eluded us. But in France, *apero*, transitioning between the workday and the evening leisure hours with a drink and a few snacks, is part of the culture. And in Provence, pastis is the apero drink of choice.

The waiter reappeared with two tumblers on his tray, each half an inch full of amber liquid; a small jug of water, sweating condensation; and a bowl of black olives. We added the water to our glasses and, like alchemical magic, the pastis swirled into a cloud the color of buttercream. The first sip was heaven, a licoricey, slightly herbal taste of Provençal summer.

Having a pastis on our deck in Edmonton brought back fond memories of our French vacation. As the autumn evenings chilled and chased us inside, we craved a cozier drink before dinner. On recommendations from the staff at deVine Wines and Spirits, we began to explore amaro, a bittersweet Italian liqueur tasting of orange and spice, a warm invitation to our taste buds before winter Sunday suppers.

Over the next seven years, we dabbled in other pre-dinner drinks—gin and tonic, Aperol spritzers, prosecco. But our lives were busy with full time jobs, the joy of attending live theater and movies, going out with friends and planning our next vacation. Further

immersing ourselves in the world of aperitifs was not on our priority list.

Hard Times

And then, March 2020.

Doors closed against the virus, we worked from home and monitored the news. Alternated weeks doing the grocery shopping. Watched the remaining plays in our Theater Network season disappear. Wondered if we should be wearing masks, in spite of the government telling us we didn’t have to. Learned Zoom.

Our pre-dinner drink tradition continued but didn’t take on greater significance than before. As the ice melted outside, we were too busy planning ways to escape the house. I walked with friends, opting for wide paths where we could keep our distance. Lorne went for long bike rides. I played pickleball and planted many, many packets of flower seeds I had ordered online, thinking bedding plants might be in short supply. We went camping and tried not to think of where we might have gone if the world hadn’t closed its doors too.

Eeyore’s Requiem

“Days. Weeks. Months. Who knows?” – Eeyore the donkey, on how long it might take to get Pooh out of the honey hole.

The darker, colder days of autumn and the second Covid wave joined forces to boot our butts back inside after a shot glass of summer freedom. The somewhat cozy social isolation of last March now felt claustrophobic. How long would we be stuck inside this time?

One Saturday in November, Lorne arrived home from Silk Road Spice Merchants with two books by Brad Thomas Parsons—*Bitters* and *Amaro*—and a traveler’s box set containing five

mini bottles of bitters. “Maybe I’ll get into making us a cocktail before dinner sometimes,” he said, kicking back in his recliner to read.

The next night, he served me a Negroni. Its festive cranberry hue made me feel a little more cheerful and its symphony of bittersweet flavors with herbal and fruity accents lifted my spirits a lot.

The next weekend, having read most of the *Bitters* book, Lorne realized his meager supply of cocktail making paraphernalia—a shaker and a jigger without measurement markings—wouldn’t be sufficient for the stirred not shaken cocktail recipes he wanted to try. He found a set of Japanese-made metal implements on clearance at Knifewear: a mixing glass; a jigger with milliliter lines; a long, spiral-handled muddling spoon; and a Hawthorn strainer, named for a Boston bar and designed to hold back all but the liquid when pouring the cocktail from the mixer to the glass. He would wait to make us Manhattans. The graceful coupe glasses in which they’re traditionally served were out of stock all over Edmonton. Luckily, he had found some online which should arrive in a couple of weeks.

Transformation

Our liquor cabinet then—meagre at best. Two or three gift bottles of good Scotch. Rum from a tropical vacation. A bit of brandy left over from dousing Christmas cakes. A too-old bottle of Baileys. Frangelico.

Our liquor cabinet now—the appearance and aroma of a 19th century apothecary. Angostura, in its oversized label à la Don Cherry’s collar. Fernet Branca, an Italian amaro which, like many bitters, began its life as a patent medicine, known to have been offered to cholera patients. Psychaud’s

Bitters, which when coupled with Sazerac Rye whiskey forms the basis of New Orleans’ official cocktail (the Sazerac) and the introduction to Lorne’s Cajun-themed Sunday dinner the week of Mardi Gras. Green Chartreuse, its grassy color the result of 130 herbs and plants known to only two Chartreuse Monks, whom we bet weren’t allowed to travel together even before Covid. Luxardo Maraschino cherries made from marasca cherries. If you think these bear any resemblance to the radioactive-red Shirley Temple garnishes of your youth, treat yourself to a jar.* There’s no going back.

Foregone Conclusion

The past year has contained very little that was either foregone or conclusive. And we’ve certainly had times when Eeyore’s description of Saturday nights at his house has crept into our psyche—“end of the road, nothing to do, and no hope of things getting better.”

But when I’m finishing up the Sunday Times crossword and Lorne sets a cocktail down beside me—its name, ingredients, and historical anecdotes kept a secret until serving time—my novelty-deprived spirit does a little dance. My first sip tells me that somehow, we’ve managed to make it to the end of another week.

No wonder the cocktail hour is becoming a permanent tradition at our house and, hopefully soon, out of our house as well. 🍷

Pamela Young is looking forward to sipping a Negroni somewhere in Italy. Lorne Dmitruk has just added to his cocktail paraphernalia with a book on pastis and a citrus juicer.

**Find Luxardo Maraschino at the Italian Centre Shops and Color de Vino.*

COCKTAIL RECIPES

The Long Hello

Damon Boelte, Prime Meats, Brooklyn NY

- ¾ oz apple brandy (preferably Clear Creek)
- ¾ oz St. Germain elderflower liqueur
- 1 dash Fee Brothers whiskey barrel-aged bitters or Fee Brothers old fashion Aromatic Bitters
- Champagne (or dry sparkling wine)
- freshly grated nutmeg

Combine apple brandy, elderflower liqueur and bitters in a mixing glass.

Add ice and stir until chilled.

Strain into a chilled coupe glass or flute and top off with Champagne.

Garnish with grated nutmeg.

Hard Times

Feast Restaurant, New York

- 2 oz Collective Arts Rhubarb & Hibiscus gin
- ½ oz ea Campari, Pineau des Charentes (or Lillet Blanc) and grapefruit liqueur
- 2 dashes Peychaud's bitters

Place all ingredients in a mixing glass, then strain into a double rocks glass with fresh ice. Garnish with a strip of citrus peel or a stirrer cut from a stalk of rhubarb.

Eeyore's Requiem

Toby Maloney, Violet Hour, Chicago

- 1½ oz Campari
- ½ oz Tanqueray gin
- ¼ oz Cynar
- ¼ oz Fernet Branca

- 1 oz Dolin Blanc vermouth
- 15 drops orange bitters (Fee's, Regan's, or a mix)
- 3 twists orange

Fill a mixing glass with ice. Add Campari, Tanqueray, Cynar, Fernet, vermouth, and bitters. Stir until well chilled and strain into serving glass. Twist orange peel over drink to express oils and discard.

Transformation

Jekyll and Hyde Club, Greenwich Village

- 2 oz light rum
- 1 oz orange juice
- 2 oz blackberry brandy
- 2 oz strawberry puree
- 1 c ice

In a blender, combine ingredients and blend until smooth.

Pour into a large glass and serve.

Foregone Conclusion

A.J. Rathbun

- 3 oz Cesari Sangiovese Riserva or another intense, full-bodied red wine
- 1½ oz dark rum
- 1 oz Galliano Ristretto coffee liqueur
- ½ oz Punt e Mes

Fill a cocktail shaker or mixing glass halfway full with cracked ice. Add everything. Stir well.

Strain into a goblet or wine glass or two, if you feel like sharing—this is a good-sized drink and sharing might not be bad.

COCKTAIL ACCOUTREMENTS

DanESCO Wood Muddler

Muddlers crush fruit or herbs and spices to release flavour, essential for mojitos, caipirinhas and sangria. Think of it as the bartender's mortar and pestle, \$10. Find at Barb's Kitchen Centre, Bella Casa, Color de Vino, Freson's Rabbit Hill, Spruce Grove and Stony Plain; Gifts and Gadgets (Spruce Grove), Heart of the Home, Italian Centre West and South.

Belberry Elderflower Syrup

Belberry makes exquisite high-quality syrups. Add a splash to a glass of sparkling wine, soda or tonic. Or, use in a cocktail. \$23. Find at Italian Centre North, South and West.



Bittermilk No. 5 Charred Grapefruit Tonic

The charred grapefruit skin adds flavour and complexity as does a hint of sea salt along with lime, lemon and cinchona bark. Vary your gin and tonic routine, add a shot of mezcal or tequila or gussy up a glass of mineral water, \$23. Find at Italian Centre North, South and West.

Split Tree Cold Brewed Coffee Cocktail and Soda Mix

Brighten up your iced coffee or your

espresso martini with this bold and bitter blend, made with Ethiopian Moka Harar coffee and zero sugar, \$16. Find at Bon Ton Bakery, Freson's Rabbit Hill, Italian Centre North, South and West, Maven & Grace, Secret Sweets, Swish and Company.

Gimber

This delicious ginger concentrate is made with fresh ginger, lemon, cane sugar and herbs and spices. Add to soda water with mint leaves, with or without spirit, add to a Bloody Mary

or drink with hot water if you are feeling a little under the weather. For ginger lovers, \$40 large, \$26 small. Find at Bon Ton Bakery, Freson's Rabbit Hill, Home & Cottages, Italian Centre South and West, Lift Me Up Market, Maven & Grace, Swish and Company.

OXO Good Grips Citrus Juicer

Remember those metal citrus presses everybody brings home from Mexico? This one is better—super efficient, sturdy and gets all the juice, \$27.

Find at Barb's Kitchen Centre, Color de Vino, Freson's Stony Plain and Fort Saskatchewan, Italian Centre West.