



Spritz: Italy's Most Iconic Aperitivo Cocktail, with Recipes

By Talia Baiocchi, Leslie Pariseau

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A narrative-driven book on the surprising history and current revival of spritz cocktails (a wine-based drink served as an aperitif), with 50 recipes, including both historical classics and modern updates.

From Milan to Los Angeles, Venice to New York, the spritz—Italy’s bitter and bubbly aperitivo cocktail—has become synonymous with a leisurely, convivial golden hour. But the spritz is more than just an early evening cocktail—it’s a style of drinking. In *Spritz*, Talia Baiocchi and Leslie Pariseau trace the drink’s origins to ancient Rome, uncover its unlikely history and culture, explore the evolution of aperitivo throughout Northern Italy, and document the spritz’s revival around the world. From regional classics to modern variations, *Spritz* includes dozens of recipes from some of America’s most lauded bartenders, a guide to building a spritz bar, and a collection of food recipes for classic Italian snacks to pair alongside.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

2017 JAMES BEARD FOUNDATION BOOK AWARD NOMINEE: BEVERAGE

“Some of the most pleasant hours I’ve ever spent have involved sipping spritzes, nibbling from little bowls of olives or potato chips or whatnot, and watching the life of whatever Italian town I’m in go by as the waiter lazily circles around to see if I’d like another. *Spritz* is the perfect introduction to that unique culture.”

—David Wondrich, author of *Imbibe!* and *Punch*

“These brilliantly illustrated pages deliver a supremely approachable account of the spritz while unveiling the deeper meaning of the drink—one that flows far beyond its flirty fizz. *Spritz* offers a beautifully rendered portrait of an iconic cocktail, an indispensable guide for channeling the spirit of Italian cocktail culture at home, and a drop-dead gorgeous visual experience.”

—Katie Parla, co-author of *Tasting Rome*

“The ... book is compact (it would live nicely atop a crowded bar cart), beautifully illustrated, and filled with anecdotes and recipes for classic takes as well as more modern iterations from top bartenders.”

– *Vanity Fair*

“Talia Baiocchi and Leslie Pariseau's extensively researched history of the cocktail comes with enough spritz spins to make it through every beautiful day of the year, plus recipes for the food to match with them, like *mondechili*, the country-style meatballs found in northern Italy.”

– *Saveur*

“... the authors make an excellent case for the chic, Italian-style cocktail—bubbly, low in alcohol, and with an edge of bitterness, it's ideal for sipping in the golden hour before dinner.”

– *Bloomberg*

“The beautiful tome explores the history of the classic cocktail and provides 50 different recipes for drinks and snacks to try at home. Each recipe sits beside a full color photograph and elegantly chosen typography.”

– *Mental Floss*

“Talia Baiocchi and Leslie Pariseau’s “*Spritz: Italy’s Most Iconic Aperitivo Cocktail, With Recipes*” is a compact volume that touches deftly on drink history and throws in a dash of travelogue. But it is built around the recipes, which suggest that with just a few building blocks ingenuity can flow and flavors blossom.”

– *Wall Street Journal*

“This saucy beauty of a book manages to capture the easy chic of modern Italian life and the delicious simplicity of spritzing.”

– *Food Republic*

“Beautifully designed, small enough to slip into a tiny tote bag, and full of 50 recipes for both drinks and snacks to nibble on while sipping, this book is as refreshing as its namesake drink: Italy’s iconic spritz.”

– *Saveur*

"... smart, fun to read and look at and unquestionably approachable."

– *New York Observer*

About the Author

TALIA BAIOCCHI is the editor-in-chief of *Punch* and the author of James Beard Award–nominated *Sherry*. She has written for *Bon Appétit*, *Saveur*, and many more. She lives in Brooklyn.

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Introduction

The Italian word *sprezzatura* doesn't have an English translation. Coined in the early sixteenth century by Renaissance author Baldassare Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528), *sprezzatura* implied the sort of effortless grace that royal attendants of that gilded era embodied. For Castiglione, *sprezzatura* was a definitive pillar of true art—to work so hard at something that its beauty, to the beholder, appeared easy, agile, blithe. It was, in essence, the art of concealing art's design.

Today the word has taken on a more colloquial meaning. It's often tossed around in menswear publications in reference to details of rakish sophistication—imperfectly folded pocket squares, oxfords worn without socks, the perfect five o'clock stubble. Although the spritz and *sprezzatura* are not officailly related, it's this I-woke-up-like-this mix of beauty and ease that perhaps best describes the drink.

This would, admittedly, be the perfect place to tell the story of our respective first spritzes, but neither of us can remember when we met the Technicolor dreamboat for the first time. It was likely during our “formative” drinking years, on one of a couple trips to Italy in the mid-2000s, wherein the spritz was likely shoved into an evening that very well could've included everything from red wine to lighter fluid (not really, but practically)—hence the foggy memory.

We do, however, remember when the drink became a part of our everyday routines, about three summers ago. Little did we know that this frivolous cocktail, seemingly built to be tossed back with abandon, had such a backstory.

While the proto-spritz can be traced back to Greek and Roman times, the modern spritz has its roots—the Italian mythos goes—in Hapsburg-occupied northern Italy in the nineteenth century, when Austrian soldiers introduced the practice of adding a *spritz* (spray) of water to the region's wines, in an effort to make them more pleasing to their Riesling-weaned palates. The drink went through a number of iterations, first with the inclusion of soda water at the turn of the nineteenth century, then the addition of the all-important bitter element (which made it both undeniably Italian and a proper cocktail) in the 1920s and early 1930s, and finally the widespread addition of prosecco in the 1990s. Today, the spritz archetype is more or less a combination of three parts prosecco, two parts bitter liqueur, and one part soda. And thanks to Aperol, it's now Italy's most popular cocktail.

But more than just the ideal combination of bubbles and bitterness in a low-alcohol package, the spritz has become a window into understanding not only the evolution of Italian cocktail culture but also the importance of ritual and leisure to Italian identity.

In America, our homegrown cultural reference point for the spritz (or “spritzer,” as ladies of a certain generation might refer to it) is a less enchanted one. It’s a word that, for decades, was synonymous with perms, thong leotards, Richard Simmons, salad bars, and blush wine. Born as a half-hearted diet fad in the 1980s, the white wine spritzer was the softer sister of the vodka-soda—a monument to the era that oversaw the slow death of sophisticated flavors (and, simultaneously, many overwrought attempts at the opposite). But the current cocktail renaissance has left no stone unturned.

Now, in place of the spritzer, there are countless riffs on the bitter, bubbly, low-alcohol formula that has become nothing short of a phenomenon in Italy. But in true American fashion, the drink’s blueprint has birthed an entire category of new drinks here, from those that swap in lambrusco for prosecco, tonic for soda water, sherry for white wine, and shrubs for fresh fruit. And though not always explicitly called spritzes, the low-alcohol cocktail movement, which includes classic *aperitivi* (drinks meant to open a meal, see page 14) like the Americano (page 99), coolers, and more, often carries spritzes under its own umbrellas of easygoing effervescence. Spritzes incognito, you might say.

With all of this avant-garde spritzing happening anew in the United States (which we’ve explored with great vigor), we wondered what might be going on with the spritz in its spiritual home. How was it faring amidst the incredible success of the Aperol Spritz campaign, and what secrets did its stomping grounds in northern Italy still hold? It was out of a sense of duty that we went off to find the answers to these very important questions.

Over the course of ten days, we cut a path across northern Italy, from the many old *bacari* (wine bars) in Venice to the legendary Bar Basso in Milan to the old gilded cafés of Turin. In the process, we discovered that the spritz’s biggest secret is that it really is much more than a recipe or a category of drinks that calls for the mixing of Italian booze and wine. The spritz is a regional perspective on the aperitif—or, as Leonardo Leuci, one of the owners of the Roman cocktail bar The Jerry Thomas Project and a leading expert on Italian cocktails, eloquently points out, “a cultural way that certain regions in the north—Veneto, Trentino, Friuli—think about aperitifs.”

It’s also a mantra, an attitude, and a state of being.

The spritz really is sprezzatura itself.

What we aim to offer you in the pages to follow is a glimpse of the spritz’s past and present, in Italy and in the American craft cocktail bar. We also hope to translate how the spritz became so much more than a recipe and a marketing campaign, but part of a ritual and a means to understand an entire country’s philosophy on socializing—the “spritz life,” if you will.

And after many a golden hour spent in the north of Italy, we wanted to extend and share the ritual back home, so we’ve provided you with all of the advice and tools to create your own aperitivo hour (Italian happy hour)—from building your go-to spritz bar to devising the ideal snack spread to match. We’ve created a framework of drink recipes that present the evolution of the spritz from classic to modern to the drink’s philosophical relatives. But they are simply that: a set of little tried-and-true blueprints that are meant less as ending points than as trailheads.

So, without further ado: spritz on.

It all began with the Greeks and Romans, naturally.

Back in the fourth and fifth century B.C., when Alexander III was slaying his way to “Great” and Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle were fathering modern philosophy, these men were also, for all intents and purposes—proto-spritzing.

During the heady days of empire building, it was considered gauche to drink wine without first mixing it with water. “Only Dionysus, they believed, could drink unmixed wine without risk,” writes Tom Standage in *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*. Drunkenness, as it were, was not next to godliness. Thus, lengthening and diluting the concentrated wines of the day meant that you could, say, drink a pitcher of wine at the symposium without getting yourself in trouble with the symposiarch (essentially an ancient mash-up of host and chaperone).

After Rome overtook Greece as the dominant Mediterranean powerhouse in the middle of the second century B.C., many of the cultural achievements of the Greeks lived long in Roman culture, not least among them the cultivation and appreciation of wine.

As the Italian peninsula established itself as the premier supplier of wine to the Mediterranean basin, a number of Greek wine-mixing rituals were improved upon, notably the addition of water to wine, or even seawater, as the Greek wines of Cos and Lesbos became famous for. Falernian, a white wine grown on the slopes of present-day Mount Massico near the border between Campania and Lazio, was considered the most expensive and sought-after wine in the Roman Empire, and one of the most mythologized in the history of wine. In a testament to the importance of the “proto-spritzing” ritual, even the oldest and most prized vintages of Falernian were mixed with water—an act akin to dumping your water glass into a decanter full of very old, and very expensive, Montrachet.

Bacchus wept.

While Falernian loomed large in the Roman psyche, a number of other wines established themselves as all the rage; most notable among them (at least for our purposes) was Setine. A spritz of sorts, Setine, or Setinum, was a strong, sweet wine often diluted with snow that became the premier summer drink and a pan-seasonal favorite of Augustus, owing both to its flavor (according to the Roman poet Martial, it tasted of salty Chian figs, for what it’s worth) and the fact that it did not cause him indigestion. Other wines, like Mulsum, which had honey added to it; Conditum, which was mixed with herbs and spices; and Rosatum, which was flavored with roses, were often consumed as aperitivi.

Fast forward 2,000 years, and the foundation of our modern notion of the aperitivo drink is being built, bar by bar, in northern Italy—first in the northwest with vermouth in the eighteenth century, bitter liqueurs in the nineteenth century, and a combination of vermouth and bitters at the beginning of the twentieth century (hello, Americano). At the same time, the northeast is busy with its own interpretation of the archetypal aperitivo cocktail: the spritz.

Water into Wine

The word “spritz”—derived from the German *spritzen*, meaning “to spray”—is the first clue to the modern origins of the drink. The Italian legend is that the spritz either originated in the northeast of Italy in the nineteenth century, when the region was ruled by the Hapsburgs (centuries-strong Austro-Hungarian imperialists who had some notorious trouble with inbreeding), or during World War I, when Austrian soldiers were, likewise, a fixture in the region.

These folks, used to their high-acid Rieslings and Grüners, apparently didn’t take to the wines of the area, the story goes, which—depending on who you ask—were considered either too bitter, too strong, of poor quality, or all of the above. The Austrians ultimately resorted to ordering their wine with a spritz of water to dilute it, in an unintentional nod to the ancients.

As with most Italian tales of uncertain origin, the spritz story has acquired a very Italian dose of embellishment—including one dead-serious story a notable Italian bartender told us involving beach-going German counts and Valpolicella—to the point of parody. Roberto Pasini, in his book on the spritz phenomenon in Italy, *Guida allo Spritz*, sarcastically recounts an alternative origin story wherein a bartender, outraged at the notion that his patron would ask for water in his wine, punches him in the face, causing a

“spritz” of blood from his busted nose to splash into his glass, coloring his drink a shade of red. “Okay, I allowed myself some license,” he jokes, “but I swear I based it on the most reliable historical hypotheses.”

Whether or not the modern spritz’s origins involve foreign soldiers with an aversion to the strength (or quality) of the wines is difficult to confirm—and every person really will give you a different answer. What we do know is that the early spritz was simply a combination of white wine and still water, à la Greek- and Roman-style.

But as far as we’re concerned, even if the widespread practice of adding water to wine in the north of Italy—or at least the introduction of the word “spritz” to define it—does belong to the Hapsburgs, the spritz really doesn’t become the modern spritz until it gains its now-inseparable sparkle. Or as Guido Zarri, the former owner of Select (the Venetian red bitter brand often credited as the first to be added to the spritz formula), puts it, “the spritz is born when soda is born.”

While soda water was present in Italy by the end of the nineteenth century—and siphons began appearing in aspirational advertisements for everything from Campari to Bitter Pastore in the first years of the twentieth century—according to Fulvio Piccinino, a drinks historian and the author of *La Miscelazione Futurista* (Futurist Mixology), it only started to become a widespread fixture in bars about a decade and a half into the twentieth century. By the late 1910s, soda water was at least popular enough that it prompted the invention of what remains one of Italy’s most important aperitivo cocktails: the Americano, which is documented for the first time in Ferruccio Mazzon’s 1920 *Guida al Barman*. During this same time, the first iteration of the modern spritz began planting its flag in the northeast of Italy and beyond. You could order the spritz *liscio* (plain) or spritz *bianco* (white)—a simple mixture of soda water and white wine that is now known as the “spritzer” in the United States and Austria, *gespritzer* or *schorle* in Germany, *fröccs* in Hungary, *gemist* in Croatia, and so on.

This white spritz, though, is neither a cocktail (the common creed is that a cocktail is not a cocktail if it contains less than three ingredients) nor exactly Italian. Those two designations come with the addition, in the 1920s and 1930s, of what is arguably the spritz’s most important ingredient: bitter liqueur. When it comes to the modern Italian perspective on mixed drinks (and, sidebar, fascism—but never mind that), it’s in this period that, according to Fulvio Piccinino, “everything is born.”

The Rise of the Italian Bitter

The production of bitter liqueurs—wine- or spirit-based concoctions infused with bitter herbs, citrus, other ingredients, and sweeteners—and vermouth had become a cultural imperative in Turin by the middle of the nineteenth century (and earlier, in the case of vermouth).

Coffee, it turned out, was—then as it is now—inseparable from alcohol in Italy. By 1842 Turin had around one hundred coffeehouses, or *cafés*, that played host to a broad cross-section of society. Decked out in marble, gold, and glass, with preternatural lighting that seems to melt into the furnishings, the surviving *cafés* (many of them beautifully preserved) exude a sort of halo effect—as if to remove any doubt about their divinity within Italian culture. Manned by bow-tied and white-jacketed barmen, these *cafés* in their original forms may have been all-business in the front, but there was very often a party in the back.

The cellars and backrooms of these *cafés* became defacto labs manned by a *maitre licoriste* or *specialiare*—an alcoholic alchemist of sorts tasked with, among other things, mixing formulas for bitters, both proprietary and from established recipes. It’s here that some of the most important figures in the world of Italian drinks—notably Gaspare Campari (of Campari) and Alessandro Martini (of Martini & Rossi)—would get their starts. And just as the seeds of the American Revolution were sown in our early taverns, the Turinese coffeehouses played host to many of the early intellectual rumblings of the *Risorgimento*, or the political movement that led to the unification of Italy.

While the *café* was a definably social place, the bitter liqueur was considered medicine, often sold based on your ailment. So how,

then, did it go from being a cure-all to a symbol of Italian leisure?

“You had a lot of wine being made in the area, and by fortifying it or mixing it with spices and herbs and medicines, it was a whole other product that could be kept longer,” says Rachel Black, an assistant professor of gastronomy at the University of Lyon who’s done extensive research on Italian bitters, in reference to the production of everything from vermouth to chinato (aromatized quinquina wine). “So they created new products and then created a market for them through advertising.” These advertising campaigns didn’t seek to eradicate the medicinal aspect of bitters and vermouth (that still persists today) but to create an association between the products and a social moment—whether it’s before the meal (in the case of vermouth and aperitivo liqueurs) or after a meal (in the case of amari bitter liqueur).

Much of the imagery surrounding the branding of bitters not only featured your standard aspirational, upper-crust vignettes—couple

at white-tablecloth restaurant in Edwardian garb, provocative lady sipping daintily from tiny glass—but also contained a “strong dose of forbidden fruit,” writes Mark Spivak in *Iconic Spirits*. Bitter, after all, is a flavor that represents both poison and antidote (brassicas, anyone?). In one telling Campari ad from 1904 by Marcello Dudovich, the “bitter” appears to be represented by a slick proto-Zorro cloaked in all black, presumably seducing the woman sipping Campari at the bar.

Even Campari’s current press kit plays up the sort of provocation evident in early ads from artists like Dudovich and Leonetto Cappiello, who is famous for his 1921 depiction of a jester climbing out of an orange peel: “With its colour, aroma and flavour, [Campari] has always been a symbol of passion. This passion expresses itself in terms of seduction, sensuality and transgression.”

Transgression. We’ll take two.

During the Futurist era (see page 17), the commingling of avant-garde contemporary art and iconic advertising artists like Fortunato Depero (who declared that “the art of the future will be largely advertising”) helped further elevate many of these brands from mere medicinal tonics to symbols of Italianism—using imagery that seemed to suggest that, with one sip, sex, power, and freedom could be yours. With this in mind, bitters soon became more than a cure for indigestion shot back with the wince-and-bear-it enthusiasm of a dose of Robitussin. It was the core ingredient in a ritual—the text to this tiny budding religion called aperitivo—and one of the most important ingredients in a new Italian attraction: cocktails.

The birth of cocktail culture in Italy during this period was not merely an appropriation of an American tradition, though. More than drinks, many of the first Italian cocktails—the modern bitter spritz, the Americano, and any number of Futurist cocktails, which adamantly called for the use of only Italian ingredients—were expressions of Italianness, regionality, and, in the case of the Futurist cocktails, an exploration of the contemporary Italian psyche.

Even the evolution of the white spritz to include Italian bitters was, in its own way, an expression of nationalism—an Italianization of a Germanic tradition inherited under imperialist rule. And it’s in this moment, and the prosperous decades to follow after the war, that the spritz became a symbol of leisure and prosperity.

Bitter into Wine

By the 1920s, the social ritual of taking an aperitivo—whether Campari and soda, an Americano, or a spritz—had become big business in the north. Capitalizing on the trend, a rash of new products entered the market during this period—most notably, for our purposes, Aperol (1919) and Select (1920), both of which would go on to become the spritz’s most popular bitter companions, along with Cappelletti Aperitivo Americano, aka “Specialino” (1909), Campari (1860), and Cynar (1950s).

Primo Franco, the third-generation owner of the famed prosecco producer Nino Franco, recalls that when he was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the addition of a bitter liqueur to the classic white spritz was still

“just a few drops,” and was offered as a spritz upgrade. “You’d see a regular spritz on the menu and then a *spritz con l’amaro* at a higher price; it was the luxury version of the spritz,” says Franco. Then it was merely a combination of still white wine, soda, and a dash of bitter—a far cry, says Franco, from the heavy dose that’s now common in the spritz.

While Aperol looms large as the primary bitter liqueur used in the modern spritz, its dominance is a fairly recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1980s, when many of the bitters brands that once had a foothold in the market began to lose ground—from Rosso Antico to Gancia Americano—the spritz varied more widely from city to city, even from bar to bar, in northeast Italy. Today, some of these regional loyalties still persist. If you are in Venice your spritz will often be served with Select; in Padua it’s Aperol; in Brescia it might be Cappelletti Aperitivo, and so on.

Just as there are a million tiny rituals in Italy, there are also a million tiny allegiances. “Which bitters do you prefer in the spritz?” is basically like asking, “Which soccer team is the best in Italy?” Even the precise manner in which the spritz is assembled (ice first, then prosecco, then bitters, and then soda) is not a joking matter.

Many point to Select, which was created by the Pilla company on the island of Murano (of blown-glass fame) just outside Venice in 1920, as the first bitter that found its way into the white spritz. In the 1920s and 1930s, Select ran a number of very successful ad campaigns—featuring famous Italian actors and actresses of the day claiming that it was the best aperitif in the world—that helped bolster its loyal foothold in Venice and surrounding cities. By the time Leonida Zarri, of the brandy producer Villa Zarri, purchased Pilla in the 1950s, Select was the company’s most important brand, and the spritz con l’amaro—according to Guido Zarri, Leonida’s grandson and the current head of Villa Zarri—was already an embedded fixture in Venetian bacari.

This spritz formula, a mixture of still white wine, soda, and a bitter liqueur, remains a consistent local ritual from Trieste to Brescia and beyond. But the spritz underwent one more important evolution in the 1990s, when prosecco—which by then was a market force in and outside Italy—began to replace still wine. “The phenomenon of prosecco really happens at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s,” says producer Primo Franco, referring to the rise of the bubbly Italian wine as a global brand. Much of this had to do with the widespread introduction of the Charmat method—a means of creating sparkling wine by allowing it to undergo second fermentation in a tank rather than in the bottle, as in *méthode champenoise* or *méthode ancestrale*. This tank method generally produces wines of less complexity and longevity—but that was precisely the point. “Prosecco became a lifestyle in the sense that it was an elegant wine, but a wine you can have every day,” says Franco, referring to the sparkler’s light flavor profile and affordability, especially in comparison to Champagne—hence its “poor man’s Champagne” reputation.

With the advent of the tank method, the majority of the wines coming out of the region were sparkling (before this, Primo Franco estimates that half of the prosecco sold was still, or at least still by the time it reached the bar) and exported in greater quantities, carving out a bigger culture of sparkling wine consumption in Venice and surrounding cities, including the area’s beach resorts.

It was here, on the beach, that the spritz met prosecco.

According to Vito Casoni, who spent twenty years as the marketing director for Aperol, prosecco and ice (the latter often absent from the spritz before this) became part of the spritz equation on the beaches and in the bars around Venice—notably Bar Capannina in Lido di Jesolo—in the mid-1990s. “They started to use a bigger glass to fit the ice cubes and replace still wine with prosecco,” Casoni says. “The success of this was immediate.” Seizing on the local popularity of this new version of the spritz, which was longer, colder, bubblier, and fancier (it was now routinely being served in a larger white wine glass rather than a rocks glass), Aperol focused its attention on marketing the brand via the spritz. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The Spritz as Global Phenomenon

While the spritz had been the most popular aperitivo drink in the Veneto and many parts of Friuli and Alto Adige for decades, it's not until Aperol began marketing the spritz in the 1990s that it went from being a mostly local ritual to Italy's most popular cocktail.

"The spritz is not a global phenomenon," says Leonardo Leuci, one of the owners of Rome's lauded craft cocktail bar The Jerry Thomas Project. "Aperol Spritz is a global phenomenon."

When Aperol first began marketing the drink in the 1990s, the spritz made up "10 percent of the sales volume of Aperol," says Casoni. Today it is the primary way in which Aperol is consumed, worldwide.

By the late 1990s, Casoni began marketing the Aperol Spritz to other parts of Italy by traveling to bars from Florence to Rome and farther south, to teach the new prosecco-and-ice recipe. During this period, Italy was still dealing with the aftershocks of a 1980s countrywide campaign to curb alcohol consumption—and in a way the Aperol Spritz, at a maximum of 8 to 10 percent alcohol, was the perfect compromise. Between the late 1990s and the launch of the first

Aperol Spritz campaign on Italian national television in 2007, sales of Aperol doubled.

The first ad campaign ran as a short spot with two women in a Fiat who get boxed into a small square filled with young people drinking spritzes; the bartender eyes the ladies and crowd-surfs two spritzes—made with soda, Aperol, and prosecco, of course—to them through their sunroof. "There was no sex or love story—just simple people," says Casoni. Just simple, good-looking people drinking in the town square during the day—no jobs, no responsibilities. Just spritz. It ends with a question, which carries far more significance now than it did then: "Spritz Life?"

"Yes," it turns out, was the universal answer.

Aperol's success in exporting the spritz all over Italy (and beyond) lies in the genius of translating the spritz culture of the north and the symbolism of the drink as a modern, tangible incarnation of the *la dolce vita* of the 1950s and 1960s—or, "as a symbol of wealth and prosperity of the urban people," says Roberto Pasini, author of *Guida allo Spritz*—to a new generation. "The lifestyle is simple," Pasini says, referring specifically to the culture of aperitivo and spritz in the Veneto. "Drink a lot, but drink well; don't hurry; and don't worry about your hangover—people around will understand you." Ice. Prosecco. Bitters. Soda. Olive. Orange slice. Clink, fizz, splash, fizz, splash. At 7:00 p.m., that is the sound of Italy.

A drink that hit its stride amidst The Italian Miracle, a period of economic growth following World War II, the modern spritz is something of a sociological oddity—a vestige of *la dolce vita* and the see-and-be-seen cosmopolitanism of midcentury aperitivo, exported with flagrant democracy to a new generation that knows nothing of economic miracles. The "spritz life," or #spritzlife as it were, is a "revision of that era," says Fabio Parasecoli, an associate professor of food studies at The New School.

La dolce vita if only for an hour.

The word aperitivo is derived from the Latin *aperire*, which means "to open." It refers, plainly, to the ritual of taking a drink—nowadays with snacks—to open one's stomach before a meal. It is Italy's take on happy hour. But it is also, as Roberto Bava, the managing director of Cocchi, points out, "an attitude"—a devil-may-care moment in the day when the Italian Dream (one not unlike America's, just with less working) seems a little more tangible.

If you stumble into any bacaro in Venice during the golden hours, or into Turin's Piazza San Carlo, or Milan's Navigli, you will find variations on the same scene—a sea of orange and red spilling out onto the street, clouds of cigarette smoke, and café tables littered with tiny plates of crostini, potato chips, and olives. How, we wondered, did everyone simultaneously agree to do this every day? To meet at the same place and drink the same drink, at the same time, like loyal employees clocking in just to hang out?

In the early spring, we made our way from the Veneto to Milan to Turin, along our own northern spritz crawl, four humans and their luggage crammed into a Fiat 500 like a version of *National Lampoon's Vacation* in which the Griswolds trade their Wagon Queen Family Truckster for a Little Tike's Cozy Coupe. All in the name of finding out.

As Americans raised with the urban promise of never having to do one thing twice, we tend to regard routine as a synonym for resignation. But Italy is a country made up of a million tiny rituals that crisscross into a repeating pattern, which plays out like a never-ending run of a Broadway musical. By 8:00 a.m., it's the whistle of the espresso machine against the staccato of cups hitting saucers, a woman yelling something-or-other from a third-floor window as she pins sheets to a clothesline, while bicycle bells chirp like a gaggle of earlybirds announcing the day.

By 1:00 p.m., the ensemble emerges again. Waiters thread through outdoor tables, carrying steaming plates of pasta, the vibration of the customers' chatter punctuated by the swish of a wine bottle being pulled from an ice bucket. A thousand Lambrettas hum in the distance, providing the midday rhythm, until espresso cups meet saucers again and the masses retreat.

It'd be easy to write these scenes off as cliché if they weren't so pervasive in so many Italian cities. It's as if the whole country cast a vote on what its day should look like, asking only that it unfold with the kind of grace uncommon to two humans perpetually buffed out by the friction of New York.

In the fluid hustle and flow of the typical Italian day, there is arguably no time more triumphant than the golden hours, when the crowds emerge again, descending upon bars and squares in a crescendo that's a pack of tie-dye-and-denim-swaddled hippies away from the "Age of Aquarius" scene in *Hair*. They nibble on *tramezzini* (tiny crustless sandwiches, page 134) and *crostini* (page 144) topped with everything from figs and chicken livers to *baccalà mantecato* (page 151), spritz in hand, turning piazzas into their very own urban living rooms.

Describing Venice's St. Mark's Square in a 1938 article for *Corriere della Sera's* monthly magazine, *La Lettura*, entitled "Omaggio All'Aperitivo" ("Tribute to the Aperitif"), the author might as well be describing a scene today, detailing passengers descending from *vaporetti* (water taxis), while sirens hiss and the "waiter lines up battery after battery of shimmering glasses." And for a moment, "everything on land and water seems to glimmer more than ever."

It's that glimmer that seems to live inside the spritz, like a snow globe that's trapped the life you'd really like to have. A life spent sitting out in tables lining the narrow canals in Venice's Canareggio neighborhood as the sun gets drowsy and the waterways turn into glassy two-way mirrors, a life where the long-lost era of gilded Venetian prosperity is merely a partition away. It's practically a matter of ordinance that the spritz became the modern icon of aperitivo. "Spritz Life?" asks Aperol at the end of its inaugural spritz campaign. Who could say no?

Aperitivo to the People

How far back the ritual of aperitivo goes really depends on how you define it. The Italians would be pleased about our invoking the Romans here, and it would not be false. The Romans did indeed have their own tradition of drinking wine flavored with herbs and spices to alleviate indigestion or other ills. And by medieval times, the term *aperitivus* had come to refer to anything, food or drink, that had the effect of stimulating the appetite, often including certain plants that were either cooked or mulled into wine. They kept the ritual alive, albeit amidst excessive violence and the history's most devastating pandemic.

Not exactly *la dolce vita*, but still.

It was during the Renaissance that the first seeds of modern aperitivo were sown. Catherine de Médici, the Italian noblewoman who went on to marry King Henry II of France, was well known for her party-planning skills and, ultimately, her influence on French dining culture. When she arrived in the French court, she apparently brought her cooks, produce, tableware, manners, recipes, flair, and the social ritual of the pre-dinner drink with her. It was here that aperitivo became associated with the higher classes and typified by the ritual consumption of wine infused with herbs and sweetened primarily with honey.

But the social rite of Italian aperitivo as we know it today was born in the northwest as something of an urban manifestation of the rural Piedmontese tradition of *merenda sinoira*—sometimes referred to simply as *merenda*, meaning “snack” in Piedmontese dialect—wherein workers coming out from a day in the fields would join their families and colleagues for a sunset snack usually consisting of various cold foods, like salami and cheese, served outside with wine. The tradition usually ran through the farming season, from spring to early autumn, and eventually spread to noblemen and women who would practice a similar ritual when visiting their countryside villas in the summer.

With the birth of vermouth—often credited as the original aperitivo drink—in the late eighteenth century, a culture of pre-dinner consumption began to grow up in the aromatized wine’s hometown of Turin. But this was still largely a rite of the rich, as vermouth was, throughout much of the nineteenth century, considered *un vino bianco di lusso*, or a “luxury white wine,” as Alfio Durso Pennisi’s *Dizionario Enologico* (1910) describes it.

While it remained an upper-class affair, aperitivo had, by the early twentieth century, taken root in Milan, Genoa, Venice, and beyond. “From noon to one and nineteen to twenty it’s practically impossible to cross [Milan’s] Galleria without being seized by a friend eager to offer an aperitif,” writes the author of that same 1938 article in *La Lettura*. By this time the cities had also developed their own respective aperitivo vibes—something that persists today. Milan’s Galleria was “ecumenical and bourgeois,” Rome’s Via Veneto had “an easy spirit,” while Turin’s scene—housed beneath the city’s famous *portici*, or classical porticos—was “dignified and chatty.” If you really wanted to get the full effect of aperitivo, you had to head to Venice’s St. Mark’s Square, where “even the pigeons, it seems, are enchanting.”

In the years following the World War II—once Mussolini’s fascist government had been overthrown and Italy entered that famous period of economic growth—aperitivo became the collective, democratic social ritual it is today. The dream of Italy that took form in those Turinese coffeehouses during the middle-to-late nineteenth century

of a unified, prosperous Italy had finally taken hold. It’s this era that bore the cultural kaleidoscope through which we still view Italy—all Lambrettas and Vespas, white linen, and Portofino; the Italy of Fellini and the era of “Hollywood on the Tiber.” This vision of the country is still exported (even to Italians) with the same tinge of exoticism reserved for tiki culture or the samba. And in a way, it’s this same vision of Italy that was repackaged for a new generation of drinkers in the 1990s.

The Spritz Trail

Venice, it turns out, had no use for our tiny Fiat coupe. This is a walking city, and it’s a good thing, because there is a real reason why the Venetians are regarded as some of Italy’s most enthusiastic drinkers: they can drink.

Around two hundred sixty thousand people call the Floating City home, while an estimated twenty-two million pass through it each year. But despite the odds, the spritz life still feels most deeply ingrained, and best preserved in its true form, here. There are very few *apericena* buffets (the much-maligned mutation of aperitivo into *cena*, or dinner, featuring mostly cheap, low-quality food) and almost no overwrought cocktails outside the hotels; even updates on classic *cicchetti* (small bites, meant to be consumed at a bar) hew closely to, or riff off of, traditional Venetian recipes. And while food is not included in the price of your

drink, as it generally is in Turin and Milan, a spritz will run you around three euros and accompanying cicchetti rarely crest over a euro or two.

Aperitivo hour is arguably at its finest in Canareggio—which feels a world away from St. Mark's selfie sticks and packs of German tourists dressed as if ready, at any moment, to scale a cliff. As the sun began to set, we piled into any number of bacari, like Al Timon—a kinetic little spot that makes its bones during the golden hours serving plates piled high with crostini anointed with toppings like smoked mozzarella and tomatoes, baccalà mantecato, and chicken livers, all of it washed down with spritz al bitter after spritz al bitter. And then it's on to the next one.

Like the tapas tradition in Spain—moving from bar to bar sampling a few small bites at each—aperitivo in Venice is best experienced as a moveable (mostly liquid) feast. Or, as the Venetians call it, *giro di ombre*, which refers both to a round of drinks (*ombre* is a dialectical word for glass of wine or drink) and the act of taking aperitivo in rounds—spreading it between a couple of bacari and letting it last as long as you can stand. (Tradition dictates that if you want to make it to dinner, you best limit the number of people you're rolling with—each person in your group counts as one round.)

“[In Venice], teetotalers have great social problems,” says Michela Scibila, a Venice native and the author of a number of guides to the city's wine bars and restaurants. No joke. We quickly acquired the hangovers to prove it.

From Venice and on through the spritz's other two Veneto strongholds—Treviso (capital of prosecco) and Padua (home of Aperol)—you'll find the same talent for drinking and a similar passion for aperitivo.

These surrounding regions hew relatively closely to Venetian tradition, with a few departures. In Padua, for example, you'll often find slight variations of the spritz that include everything from Aperol to Cynar to Campari to Select to gin. Some even go so far as to assert that a true Paduan spritz features a combination of all five (god help those people).

Further north along the spritz trail, the variation that used to be much more common before the spritz became synonymous with Aperol still persists. Amidst the Dolomites, in Alto Adige, the spritz even loses its bitter altogether, subbing in *acqua santa* (holy water), which refers to an elderflower cordial that's often made locally by allowing the flowers and sugar to ferment in the sun. It's used in the Hugo Spritz (page 81)—a simple mixture of elderflower syrup, mint, prosecco, and soda, garnished with a lemon—the second most popular spritz behind the classic Venetian formula.

Down from the mountains and through Brescia, the locals call their spritz *pirlo*, which, in the Brescian dialect, means “fall,” referring to the way the red bitter descends through the drink and to the bottom of the glass. Brescia is a Lombardian town just west of Lake Garda and about an hour by car from Milan, where Cappelletti's red bitter—which originated just after World War I and is commonly referred to in the area as Specialino—has maintained a stronghold. It's typically consumed with white wine and soda as a variation on the Bicicletta (page 62)—a popular Campari-based Milanese version of the spritz invented in the 1930s.

It's in Milan that the pre-dinner scene shifts drastically. We had our first Milanese spritz at Armani Café (yes, that Armani), a half-serious stop on our planned route, where you'll find your reflection in every surface and no shortage of studded and bedazzled attire.

We wouldn't dare judge Milan from this vantage point, but as a cosmopolitan town that's provided the industrial heartbeat of Italy for decades, there's no denying that it's a severe, hulking city in comparison to

Venice and its environs. But it's true that beneath the facade there is more energy for the new than anywhere else in Italy—which is why aperitivo has strayed so far from tradition here, both in form and purpose.

“Milano is really the only city in Italy where aperitivo is a mix of pleasure and business at the same time,” says Maurizio Stocchetto, the owner of Bar Basso, one of Milan's most famous and traditional bars and the birthplace of the Negroni's bubbly cousin, the Negroni Sbagliato (page 58).

All mirrors and gold, emerald velvet, and vintage glassware, Bar Basso had us rubbing elbows with marketing men in suits, women who looked like they'd rolled out of a Dolce & Gabbana display window, old men, tourists, and a few sophisticated university students.

The bar swells, starting around 6:30 p.m., to two- or three-deep, a cabinet full of crostini and tramezzini are discharged to the tables and bar tops with rapid fire, while Negronis and their Sbagliato siblings are served in handblown goblets the size of pineapples.

Beyond legendary bars like Bar Basso and Caffé Camparino (a glittering art nouveau bar in the Galleria), Milan's aperitivo trail twists and turns through spots serving everything from sushi to crudité, from spritzes and sbagliatos to craft cocktails that could've been plucked from any number of urban American menus. Milan is the only city where that pattern of tiny rituals is constantly being unraveled, and then raveled again.

But less than two hours away to the west, the clock seems determined to stop. Turin is a city that is as notorious for its stuck-in-time nature as Venice is for hitting the bottle. The capital of coffee and chocolate, and the former seat of the Savoy Kingdom, it feels more like a French city—hence its “little Paris” nickname—than an Italian one, with its baroque architecture, grand portico-encased walkways, and wide boulevards.

Culturally, it's just as baroque. Its people are regarded as being among Italy's most traditional, many of them taking their aperitivo in the same grandiose bars—Caffé Mulassano, Caffé Turin, Caffé San Carlo—that Turin residents frequented a century ago. And in a manner so dignified that it feels downright antimodern.

Fittingly, of all the northern Italian cities, there is no place where aperitivo is quite as grand. While Turin isn't immune to the budget apericena deluge of soggy *pizzetta* and yesterday's pasta, it's here that a more buttoned-up sort of buffet spread has its longest history. Tiered platters piled with tiny *stuzzichini*, or “finger foods,” coiffed Turinese bathed in yellow light sipping spritz and vermouth—it's a scene that likely would have made Catherine de Médici proud. “Under the portici,” the scene, it turns out, is indeed, “dignified and chatty.” And it's fitting to have put our coupe to rest under those portici, where the ritual of aperitivo that bore the modern spritz began.

So, you might ask, all of this running around for just one drink? But who wouldn't want to chase the drink that symbolizes, for much of Italy, that all-important transition from work to play?

It's a drink splashed together with a rakish dedication to leisure, and one served during a sacred time of day that asks nothing except, says Roberto Bava of Cocchi, “that you be yourself.” And after one or two—like a beloved friend or trusted companion—the spritz's bewitching plea to pause and drink draws out the best in all of us. Because who *isn't* better, and perhaps more oneself, with a spritz in hand?

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