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# Easy Spirits

Low in alcohol and high in old-school cool, light, predinner cocktails known as **APÉRITIFS** are making a comeback.

**IN AN AGE** of recipe apps and molecular gastronomy, the cocktail world's latest obsession is reassuringly retro: The apéritif, once considered a grandmotherly tippie, is suddenly chic. Designed to prep one's stomach for a meal, "a classic apéritif is dry, not sweet, usually bitter with a little bit of alcohol but never too much," says San Francisco mixologist Charlotte Voisey.

According to Voisey, the current revival got its start in San Francisco, where the widespread foodie culture led restaurants to explore lighter cocktails that pair well with meals. But these drinks originally hail from France as well as Italy, where they're dubbed *aperitivi*. The best known, the Negroni, is a mix of gin, vermouth, and Campari. Legend has it that the ruby-hued cocktail was developed in the early 20th century for an Italian count, Camillo Negroni, who, according to one account, picked up a taste for British gin while traveling in England to indulge his passion for horse racing.

Mixing up a Negroni is decidedly low effort (see below), and such simplicity is another hallmark of apéritifs. Recipes rely on basic bar staples, and, even better, most true *aperitivi*—including vermouths and fortified wines—can be served simply with a squirt of soda or just on the rocks.

The best brand to try that way is the fortified wine Lillet. Though delicious straight up, it's also the crucial ingredient in one of James Bond's favorites, the Vesper: a vodka martini laced with Lillet. That cocktail is too boozy to be considered a true apéritif, but bartenders have come up with a different twist on the martini that does qualify: the reverse martini. Take a standard recipe—say five parts gin to one part vermouth—and flip it. "You've taken a flavor profile you already know you love and made it drier and easier to drink before dinner," says Voisey. And thanks to Bond, you've also channeled some of the retro vibe that makes apéritifs so cool. — MARK ELLWOOD

## stocking an apéritif bar

Start with a bottle of *Campari* and another of *Lillet* (for a Lillet Rosé cocktail recipe, see "Simple Spring Supper," page 80). Then pick up some vermouth—try the classic *Martini Bianco* made from white wine or the new *Rosato*. Another option is the French vermouth *Noilly Prat*, which tastes like a hybrid of *Martini Bianco* and *Lillet*. Think of *Aperol* as a lighter, sweeter *Campari*: With just 11 percent alcohol, it's easy to drink. And the wild card addition is *Punt e Mes*, which has an herbal taste with a slight chocolate edge.

### THE NEGRONI

- 1 ounce gin
- 1 ounce Campari
- 1 ounce sweet vermouth

Pour all ingredients into an ice-filled mixing glass. Stir well. Strain into a cocktail glass. (Alternatively, combine ingredients in a tumbler and serve in the same glass.) Garnish with an orange twist.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Aaron Dyer

Waterman martini glasses, by Martha Stewart Collection, \$25 for 4, [macys.com](http://macys.com). Paper napkins, in Chevron Green, \$5 for 20, [casparionline.com](http://casparionline.com).