

Castello di Vicarello



SPIRIT OF... Amaro

Crafted by monks in ancient times, there are vast variations of Italy's rich, herbal digestif, and all offer a taste of – and a glimpse into – the country's soul, writes Becca Hensley

At Castello di Vicarello, a restored 12th-century castle that caps a hill in Italy's unspoiled Maremma, I watch the sun set over a seemingly endless expanse of vineyards, brushy forest, and olive groves from the frame of my room's original Gothic window. Transfixed, I savour a tiny portion of Fernet Branca, neatly poured into an antique crystal glass. I imagine myself someone regal from bygone days, sipping a tonic brewed by a loyal monk. Glimpsing the view, I muse that it hasn't changed a bit since the castle was built. And just like that, in a moment of synchronicity, I recognise that the earthy, gentian and orange peel-intoned bitterness of *amaro* swirling in my mouth tastes exactly like Italy. I taste the terrain in my glass, see it in the horizon, and smell it in the perfume of pine trees wafting up from the valley.

Amaro, it seems, is a direct route to the soul of Italy. I first tasted this newly trendy, but long-tipped spirit years ago at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto near Siena in Tuscany (www.monteoliveto maggiore.it). There, across a drawbridge, through a tower and inside a cloister, the monks continue to make a number of elixirs: medicines, spirits and wine, according to centuries-old recipes passed down through generations. Their amaro comprises a secret mélange of herbs, barks, roots, plants and botanicals, blended and

aged according to tradition. First made in ancient times in monasteries by monks who gardened and dabbled with concoctions they hoped would heal the populace, *amari* (the plural for *amaro*, which translates to "bitter" in Italian) is said to be a reliable digestif, good for relaxation, and generally vivifying.

As the years passed, the beverage became more popular and in the 19th-century, large companies started making it too. Today, there are infinite varieties with wide ranging styles and flavours – each an adventure in swilling and all evoking the

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richness of Italy. Liqueur-like, bracing, nerve calming and silky down the gullet, all amari have secrecy in common. Unique and artisanal by definition, each is born from an experiment of foraging until the makers at last arrive upon the perfect combination of bark, roots, herbs and spices (from cinnamon



Hassler Roma

to sage), and flowers (from elderflower to orange blossom). Amari makers then soak their plant mixture in neutral spirits or wine, adding sweetener and aging it in casks – usually for at least six months.

Bitter to bittersweet with an average proof of 38, diverse in hue, and nuanced with sundry herbal tones (imagine most anything found in your cupboard from ginger and mint to chamomile), amari tend to have a syrupy texture that coats the mouth, peppering the tongue or ending with a burst of citrus, as graceful and elegant as a well-choreographed dance troupe. Drink them as Italians do: straight up in a short glass at room temperature and as a digestif (a few sips really does settle the stomach), or with ice and an orange garnish as an aperitif. For a hipster approach, quaff an amaro cocktail – it's the latest fad, and worth embracing. Some amari to try? Ramazzotti Amaro, Meletti Amaro, and Fernet Branca.



Clemente Bar



FOUR PLACES TO TRY AMARO IN ITALY

MAREMMA MOMENT

In Tuscany's furthest flung environs, Castello di Vicarello beckons. Located about halfway between Rome and Florence, the Small Luxury Hotels of the World property with just seven rooms is best reached by car, and once you check in, you'll be tempted to remain, awestruck by the grounds. A restored 12th-century castle, encircled by vineyards and olive groves, the owners, Aurora and Carlo Baccheschi Berti say: "It's not a hotel; it's a home." Here, you can swim in one of two freshwater pools, or practice yoga in the studio that hovers over the vines. Ideally, you'll let Aurora teach you to cook local fare (she's the author of *My Tuscan Kitchen*) or join Carlo as he tends to his vines or heads into the bucolic countryside to hunt for wild boar. Mostly, in this place that feels like home, you'll sip whatever amaro Carlo has on hand, languidly on a bench surrounded by blood-red geraniums and sunflowers.

VISIT Castello di Vicarello, Poggi del Sasso Cinigiano, Tuscany

TEL: +39 0564 990718

WWW.CASTELLODIVICARELLO.COM

ROMAN REVELATION

Rome's ebullient spirit haunts the top of the Spanish Steps, where the city's palpable energy animates the atmosphere. There, rising like yet another Roman icon, stands the elegant Hassler Roma. Run by a fifth-generation hotelier, the family-owned Hassler manages to make you feel you've been invited to summer at your wealthy uncle's spectacular city mansion. With classic Roman décor, which means cool white marble and a preponderance of noble reds, old-world art, and glittering chandeliers, the Hassler's sumptuous being carries into its 96 rooms and reaches its peak in The Hassler Bar, which is the ideal location to imbibe an amaro. Like a secret room, annexed to the Salone Eva, this dark-wood flanked meeting place dramatically reflects your beauty in its gilded mirrors. Sit back in a cosseting leather chair and watch for Marcelo Mastroianni (or someone who looks like him) to join you. Serving at least 20 brands of amari in the Hassler Bar, barman Stefano Santucci also makes amaro cocktails, such as Averaroma with added ingredients such as ginger and vermouth.

VISIT Piazza Trinità dei Monti, 6, Rome

TEL: +39 06 699340

WWW.HOTELHASSLERROMA.COM



Grand Hotel Tremezzo

CHE BELLO

Imagine lingering over an amaro with a view of glassy Lake Como in your purview, the craggy Alps tucking you into an ambiance as magical as a fairytale. That's how you'll feel at Grand Hotel Tremezzo, beloved by Greta Garbo, and hanging over the water just minutes from George Clooney's villa – where he's likely sipping an amaro, too. This 76-room, art nouveau masterpiece with meandering gardens and perfect service has a masculine old-school nook for quaffing called T Bar, and a lakeside hangout called T Beach. Handsome Carmelo Cilia helms T Bar, where he says he usually serves amaro neat. "When guests ask for a suggestion, I recommend amaro because it's the Italian elixir for long health," says Carmelo. His favourites from the bar's wide amari selection? "I like Amaro Averno because it comes from Sicily as I do, but many guests enjoy Valtellina from Lombardia – our region."

VISIT Via Provinciale Regina, 8, Tremezzina, Lago di Como

TEL: +39 0344 42491

WWW.GRANDHOTELTREMEZZO.COM

VENERABLE VENICE

What better place to fall under the spell of an amaro than a former monastery? A speedy boat ride from bustling Saint Mark's Square, the 190-room San Clemente Palace Kempinski Venice revels in its medieval past. Imposing gardens contrast with an historic church and an antique courtyard; rooms showcase the Venetian skyline; and the spirit of bygone Venice and its Doge rulers fills the air. Far away from the touristic throngs, this island hideaway brings tranquility and peace. Its Clemente Bar, drenched in Venetian references including Byzantine shapes and grand mirrors, edged in the light brought in through the abbey's original windows, evokes the otherworldly. Let bar manager, Alessio Venturini, pour your aperitivo. "Drinking a glass of amaro, above all, is a social ritual," he says.

VISIT Isola Di San Clemente 1, Venice

TEL: +39 041 4750111

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