

Italy is home to many revered facets of art and culture—the Colosseum in Rome; iconic artists such as da Vinci and Raphael; and, widely appreciated in the last half decade, its aperitivo culture. Aperitivi (plural for aperitivo or aperitivo bitters)—a type of bittersweet, herbal liqueurs—have existed for hundreds of years. Yet many brands have only been introduced to the American market over the last two decades.

Aperitivo hour, though, is a time when family and friends gather to enjoy small bites and appetite-stimulating, low-ABV tipples before dinner—typically from 6 to 8 p.m.—as a way to unwind from the day. At the center of the occasion are these aperitivo bitters, which are native to Italy and typically radiate an eye-catching sunset hue (think Campari and Aperol) — synonymous with the time at which they're often consumed. Cities across America have eagerly embraced this slow, mindful drinking occasion with bars such as New York's award-winning Dante and Seattle's intimate Barnacle recreating the cultural phenomenon stateside.

Whether you want to elevate your pre-dinner drinking rituals at home or experience an authentic Italian aperitivo in its place of origin, consider this your guide to must-try aperitivi, and where in Italy to best enjoy them.

### Contratto Bitter

If you're a Campari lover, then the Canelli, Piedmont-based Contratto Bitter should be the next bottle in your cart. Founded in 1867 by Giuseppe Contratto, it is best known as the oldest continuously operating producer of sparkling wine in Italy—but their aromatized wines and aperitivo bitters are also vastly popular among bartenders and aperitivo enthusiasts. In the last decade, Contratto has dedicated resources to recreating archival aperitivo recipes, resulting in their 2015 releases: Contratto Bitter and Contratto Aperitif.



The Contratto Bitter formula is inspired by a 1933 recipe, which uses a base of Italian brandy that's infused with a variety of herbs, spices, fruits, vegetables, and seeds; bitter orange peel, cloves, gentian, ginger, hibiscus, rhubarb, juniper, and berries. At 22 percent ABV it's got enough of an alcoholic backbone to be used in any classic cocktail where you'd find Campari, including the Negroni and Boulevardier.

Because Contratto also claims a vineyard and winery, travelers have the opportunity to try the brand at the source by booking a day tour. But for those looking to find Contratto Bitter in the wild, the Atrium Bar at Four Seasons Florence, one of the “meccas for the Italian aperitivo,” according to The Champagne Bar's Longo, is one destination to put on your list. Another is Caffè Mulassano in Turin where The Connaught's Bargiani claims the modern Italian aperitivo was born. “It truly is a precious location,” says Bargiani, as it's also “where they invented the tramezzino [sandwich] to serve with their homemade vermouth liqueur.”