

Bitter is Better: How to Use Herbal Liqueurs in Cocktails

You can thank the Italians and the French for bettering your bartending game

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Stray down the wrong aisle at the liquor store and you may come across a variety of bottles—dark and bitter [Fernet-Branca](#), sunshine yellow [Suze](#), [Chartreuse](#) the color of Oz's Emerald City—that, both in name and bottle design, are more J.K. Rowling than Jack Daniels.

Here's our advice: stop and take a chance! Yeah, you came for some vodka and a can of Coco Lopez, but these eclectic *aperitifs* and *digestifs* have the ability to transform cocktails from every category—say, [a one-note grasshopper into a multifaceted milkshake](#) or a basic G&T into an [earthy revelation](#). These herb-infused liqueurs are not only fantastic on their own, they add a deep complexity to drinks that could be described as, well, magical.

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Aperitif vs. Digestif

A digestif is an umbrella term for any alcoholic beverage sipped at room temperature after a large meal to aid the digestive process (hence the name *digestif* in French, *digestivo* in Italian). Not to be confused with their pre-dinner counterpart, the *aperitif*, which is served before a meal to stimulate the appetite.

France's brandies (Cognac, Armagnac) and Spain's fortified [wines](#) (sherry, Madeira, port) are common after-dinner digestifs. But herbal digestifs from Italy and France are

particularly renowned for their use of herbs and spices to create a multi-layered liqueur with both medicinal and gastronomic applications.

A mysterious origin story often accompanies these elixirs. Parisian monks supposedly conceived Chartreuse by deciphering a 17th century recipe for a drink with curative powers. Alexander Le Grand of Benedictine claimed monks from Normandy developed said aromatic beverage...when in fact he created the recipe and concocted the story after the fact. One common thread remains throughout: the recipe remains closely guarded, often only known by a few people in the company. The traditions of secrecy and myth, sometimes developed over hundreds of years, have cemented the aura of mystery surrounding a number of these bottles.

Best of the Bitter

Understanding the flavor profiles of these centuries-old spirits is key to using them in cocktails. Here, our four favorite bottles.

Suze

A French creation, Suze came on the scene in the late 19th century when Fernand Moureaux and Henri Port sought a spirit based on the earthy and bitter gentian root. The two debuted the spirit in time for the 1889 World's Fair, where it won over Parisians and became a staple in the café scene. (Picasso even painted a bottle of it.)

Today, the light 40-proof aperitif is produced alongside Pernod and Absinthe in a factory designed by Gustave Eiffel. The base of gentian root (also found in Campari and Aperol) imparts both a bitter and citrusy flavor that shines in our Floral G&T with a splash of elderflower tonic.

Lillet

The first and only aperitif from Bordeaux, Lillet Blanc's full and fruity aroma blends seamlessly with a variety of spirits. The wine-based spirit is made from Bordeaux grapes and macerated fruit liqueurs—sweet oranges from Turkey, Spain, or Morocco, bitter

oranges from Haiti, and quinine from South America. Lillet Rouge, its red counterpart, was added in 1962 as a stronger alternative with a powerful dark fruit bouquet.

As Lillet made its way across the pond, bold advertisements from French artist Robert Wolff put the spirit in vogue, and those [vintage posters](#) are still recognizable today. Lillet's most famous application is in [James Bond's drink request](#): the "Vesper" called for Gordon's gin, vodka, and Lillet with a thin slice of lemon peel. Go the way of Bond at the bar, or sample Bordeaux's finest in our [My Sherry Amour](#) and [The Rose G&T](#).

Chartreuse

The monks of the Chartreuse monastery cracked the code for the so-called "Elixir of Life" over 100 years after first receiving the recipe in the early 17th century. (It was a gift from Francois Hannibal d'Estrées, Marshal of King Henry IV's artillery). Since then, only a handful of monks have known [Chartreuse's](#) exact 130-herb formula. The spirit has survived the French Revolution and a temporary relocation to Spain when the French government nationalized the distillery for a spell in the early 20th century. It's made today in the monks' distillery in Voiron, France.

Green chartreuse, the original, is known for its herbaceous quality and brilliant green hue. (It claims to be the only liqueur in the world with a completely natural green color.) The 110-proof spirit gets its intense floral and herbal aromas from cloves, citrus, thyme, rosemary, and cinnamon (among many others). Its yellow counterpart, introduced in 1838, is a more mellow 80-proof and has distinct notes of citrus, violet, anise, and honey. Try it in our [Lillet Miss Sunshine](#) topped with prosecco and pineapple juice.

Cynar

A liqueur made from artichokes—yes, artichokes—has only been produced since the early 1950s, but has already earned a spot in the ranks of classic Italian spirits. Its foundational thistle is among 13 other herbs and botanicals, which produces a woody, earthy quality that most certainly doesn't taste like artichokes.

The affordable (about \$20 a bottle), low-proof [Cynar](#) is considered both an aperitif and a digestif. Pre-meal you'll typically see it served with tonic, soda, or orange juice. But it has

a number of creative applications, such as a partner in rye cocktails and a Campari substitute in Negroni variations.