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Modern Aperitivo Cocktails Beyond the Spritz

Ten bartenders share their lightly bitter, low-ABV takes on the style made with L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink.

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So often it seems that the category of aperitivo drinks gets equated with only a handful of cocktails—the spritz, the Negroni Sbagliato, the Americano, the Garibaldi. No shade to tradition, but the range of lightly bitter, low-ABV drinks and their early evening-loving brethren now stretches far beyond the codified Italian classics.

In part, that's thanks to a new wave of liqueurs from producers thinking outside the traditional aperitivo box, in turn inspiring bartenders to do the same. New bittersweet liqueurs, red and otherwise—such as L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink, from the legendary Friulian distillery—have lately been claiming their place on bar shelves. Lightly bitter, subtly sweet, bright with citrus and, most notably, golden in color, this new liqueur exemplifies the current revolution taking place in the aperitivo world. As bartenders experiment with this fresh, new category of spirits, innovative golden-hour drinks are emerging, from Los Angeles and New York to Chicago and Houston.

Take the L'Aperitivo Caffè, from Julia Momose of Kumiko in Chicago. “At its most simple, it is a highball,” says Momose, who conjures up the ephemeral time of day in an Italian café—“afternoons spent ... sipping on spritzes and recharging with espresso”—with a touch of delicate shochu, a measure of coffee liqueur, bittersweet Nonino and a splash of tonic water. “I was thinking about one of my current favorites, the Americano, a combination of fortified wine with bitter liqueur, topped off with soda. This is just a couple of steps away from that.”

In reinterpreting aperitivo in Los Angeles, Dan Sabo of the Paligroup takes cues from a modern classic, the Paper Plane, which makes use of Amaro Nonino along with bourbon, lemon and red bitter liqueur. Sabo swaps in Japanese whisky and L'Aperitivo Nonino, and integrates a pink peppercorn and chamomile syrup to play up the floral aspects of the liqueur. “[This] new expression of the aperitivo format ... had a lot of classic elements with some new fun flavors,” he says. “I also

really love a product that focuses on who made it, and the strength of the women who made it. That's a fascinating and timely story to tell," he says.

Alicia Perry, of San Diego's Polite Provisions, rethinks the very classic Pisco Sour with a low-ABV twist in her Tre Sorelle (meaning "three sisters" in Italian). "A traditional cocktail variation utilizing not-so-traditional ingredient pairings," Perry's aperitivo refresh blends pisco, L'Aperitivo Nonino, muddled grapes and lemon juice for a fragrant, fluffy, wholly modern drink.

Taking a fresh look at aperitivo, many bartenders note that a balance of flavors is key when layering ingredients: You have to let each one shine. When Kristina Magro, of Lone Wolf Tavern in Chicago, created her autumnal sour, The Chill of the Night, she chose ingredients that wouldn't overpower one another. "The aged tequila creates a nice backbone ... while complementing the other flavors and adding a slight vegetal quality to the drink," she says.

Stacy Swenson, of aperitivo bar Pisellino, says she approaches the aperitivo from a place of simplicity, so her flavors can sing. In creating her Meleto Highball, she focused on the flavor of apple and built around that. "The Japanese Highball, which although [not] low-ABV, still feels like an aperitivo, as it's light, refreshing and easygoing," she says. She balances Japanese whisky with honey, lemon, apple and L'Aperitivo Nonino, which, Swenson says, has complementary fruit and spice notes—qualities that "make it perfect for spritzes and long drinks."

Though the culture of aperitivo is entirely Italian in origin, it's the tradition's air of freewheeling looseness that allows it to translate the world over. Today, the aperitivo—spritz, Sbagliato and all—is most recognizable in its classic form, but also wholly open to interpretation. It's exactly this sense of openness that has allowed the tradition's liqueurs and cocktails, as well as experiments born of them, to become firmly established in stateside cocktail culture.

Meleto Highball

Stacey Swenson | Pisellino, New York City

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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With his Americano riff, Max Green took inspiration from the Nonino family's efforts to uplift grappa in Italy, and their choice to opt out of DOCG classification. "We decided it was better to declare that having Nonino on the label is of much higher value than anything else," Elisabetta Nonino was once quoted as saying. Green's Higher Value hews to the classic build of vermouth, soda and amaro, with L'Aperitivo Nonino subbing in for the latter. Lighter than the original, it's a touch sweet, with notes of summer fruit and gentian.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 1/4 ounces L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

3/4 ounce Japanese whisky (preferably Toki or Akashi)

1 1/2 ounces fresh-pressed Granny Smith apple juice (see Editor's Note)

1/4 ounce clove honey (see Editor's Note)

1/4 ounce lemon juice

light, dry apple cider, to top

Garnish: three paper-thin apple wheels

DIRECTIONS Build in a Collins glass over ice and stir gently. Garnish with apple wheels fanned out on the inside of the glass.

EDITOR'S NOTE Juice the Granny Smith apple immediately before making the cocktail, or it will oxidize and turn brown.

Clove honey

6 ounces water

1/2 cup honey

several cloves

Heat water in small saucepan on the stove until it boils, then reduce to lowest setting. Add cloves and let infuse for 5 minutes. Stir in honey, then strain to remove cloves.

The Seamstress

Abigail Gullo | Ben Paris, Seattle

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Abigail Gullo's dark, stirred Seamstress cocktail gets a lift from sparkling wine and bright, citrusy L'Aperitivo Nonino, whose botanical flavors balance the rich, spicy notes of Armagnac. The yin to L'Aperitivo's yang, Amaro Nonino lends a rounded, honeyed quality. The Seamstress takes its inspiration from the employees of Seattle madame Lou Graham, whose brothel workers' occupations were listed officially as "seamstresses."

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1-ounce L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

½ ounce Armagnac

½ ounce Amaro Nonino

½ ounce lemon juice

1-ounce dry sparkling wine

Garnish: lemon twist

DIRECTIONS Add first four ingredients to a mixing glass over ice, and stir until chilled. Strain into a coupe, top with sparkling wine, and garnish with a lemon twist.

L'Aperitivo Caffè

Julia Momose | Kumiko, Chicago

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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L'Aperitivo Caffè: Julia Momose's refreshing late-afternoon aperitivo calls on barley shochu and coffee liqueur. [Recipe]

Afternoons in Italy spent sipping spritzes and recharging with espresso were the inspiration for Julia Momose's L'Aperitivo Caffè. "I was thinking about one of my current favorites, which is the Americano, a combination of fortified wine with bitter liqueur, topped off with soda," says Momose. "This is just a couple of steps away from that." Barley shochu and L'Aperitivo Nonino's delicate flavors combine with coffee liqueur and tonic to create a simultaneously rich yet refreshing late-afternoon sipper. "An aperitivo is meant to give you a little pick-me-up."

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1-ounce L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

½ ounce barley shochu (preferably Kintaro Roasted Barley Shochu)

1/4 ounce coffee liqueur (preferably Don Ciccio & Figli Concerto)

tonic water, to top

Garnish: lemon peel (for expression), manicured lemon swath

DIRECTIONS Build in a chilled highball glass over ice, and garnish with an expressed lemon peel and a swath of lemon peel.

Cornucopia

Alex Negranza | Anvil Bar & Refuge, Houston

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Cornucopia: Inspired by the Pimm's Cup, Alex Negranza's pre-dinner cooler calls on autumnal flavors. [Recipe]

Light and refreshing, Alex Negranza's Cornucopia takes its lead from the Pimm's Cup. With its autumnal flavors, it's meant to be a pre-dinner cooler. "The goal here was to create a cocktail that was not so heavy, both in ABV [and] flavor," says Negranza. Pairing the sprightly flavor of L'Aperitivo Nonino and the spicy, floral notes of Amaro Nonino, this long drink is brought together with a rich, cinnamon-tinged brown sugar syrup and a touch of lemon.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 ½ ounces L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

1-ounce lemon juice

½ ounce cinnamon–brown sugar (2:1 ratio of brown sugar to water, with a cinnamon stick to infuse)

½ ounce Amaro Nonino

Prosecco, to top

Garnish: apple or pear slices and mint sprig

DIRECTIONS Add all ingredients to a shaker tin with ice and shake well. Double-strain into a Collins glass over ice. Garnish with fanned fresh fruit slices and a mint sprig.

The Chill of the Night

Kristina Magro | Lone Wolf Tavern, Chicago

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Chill of the Night: Kristina Magro's spiced tequila sour channels the changing seasons. [Recipe]

Kristina Magro, of Lone Wolf Tavern in Chicago, typically gravitates toward tequila, so when she set out to make a cocktail that evokes the switch from early to late fall—its brisk air and changing leaves—she paired an aged tequila with the spicy flavors of Becherovka and honey syrup spiked with cinnamon and nutmeg, along with L'Aperitivo Nonino.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 ounce El Tesoro Reposado Tequila

1 ounce L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

½ ounce Becherovka liqueur

¾ ounce fresh-squeezed lemon juice

½ ounce spiced honey syrup (2:1 ratio of sunflower honey to water, spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg)

1 dash 18.21 Prohibition Aromatic Bitters

Garnish: marigold and grated cinnamon

DIRECTIONS Add all ingredients to a mixing glass over ice, and stir until chilled. Strain over a large ice cube into a double Old-Fashioned glass. Garnish with a marigold and grated cinnamon.

Winter in Miami

Valentino Longo | Le Sirenuse, Miami

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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For all but a few days each year, winter does not exist in Miami, Florida. For this reason, bartender Valentino Longo, of Le Sirenuse, created this spicy aperitivo to evoke the season's traditional flavors. "It's light in alcohol, refreshing. Coffee plays an important role in incorporating all those botanicals and spices together," he says. With L'Aperitivo Nonino as its base spirit, the Winter in Miami is an interlude of tropical (lent from banana) and cozy (all those baking spices), underlined by Nonino's gentian and chamomile notes to keep the whole thing in balance.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 1/2 ounces L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

3/4 ounce cold-brew coffee (not concentrate, or concentrate that's been diluted)

1/4 ounce spiced banana syrup (see Editor's Note)

1-ounce soda

1-ounce tonic

Garnish: banana salt (see Editor's Note)

DIRECTIONS Add all ingredients except the soda and tonic to a mixing glass over ice and stir until chilled. Strain over ice into a highball glass prepared with a rim of banana salt, and top with soda and tonic.

EDITOR'S NOTE *Spiced Banana Syrup*

2 ripe bananas

1 stick cinnamon

1 whole nutmeg seed

10 dried juniper berries

2 ½ cups sugar

1 cup water

Scant ½ teaspoon citric acid

Cut bananas into 1-inch slices. Add all ingredients except citric acid to a saucepot, and simmer for 20 minutes. Take off heat, and add citric acid. Once cooled, strain syrup into a container and store in the refrigerator. Reserve banana slices.

Banana Salt

Put the bananas left over from the syrup in a dehydrator overnight. When cooled, sprinkle with salt and process in a spice grinder until finely ground and uniform in texture.

Tre Sorelle

Alicia Perry | Polite Provisions, San Diego

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Tre Sorelle: Alicia Perry's delicate, low-proof variation on the Pisco Sour. [Recipe]

Alicia Perry qualifies her Tre Sorelle as a “delicate yet revitalizing variation on the Pisco Sour.” To complement the grappa at the heart of L’Aperitivo Nonino, Perry combined it with a moscatel pisco, whose notes of pear, orange blossom and cardamom pair with Nonino’s own floral flavor profile. Its name, “Tre Sorelle,” means “three sisters” in Italian and is a nod to Nonino’s current team of distillers: sisters Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta. “I wanted to create a cocktail that highlighted the soft citrus and floral notes of the product,” says Perry, “whilst also paying homage to the story behind it.”

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1-ounce L’Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

1-ounce pisco (preferably Capurro Pisco Moscatel)

½ ounce simple syrup

½ ounce fresh-squeezed lemon juice

1 egg white

4 grapes

Garnish: lavender sprig

DIRECTIONS Add all ingredients except grapes to a shaker tin and dry shake. Add grapes and ice, then shake firmly to ensure proper dilution and muddling of grapes. Fine-strain into a coupe and garnish with a sprig of lavender.

Nakatomi Plaza

Dan Sabo | Los Angeles

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Nakatomi Plaza: Dan Sabo's Japanese whiskey highball is kicked up with a measure of chamomile–pink peppercorn syrup. [\[Recipe\]](#)

Somewhere between a Collins and a spritz, Dan Sabo's Nakatomi Plaza looks to bartender Sam Ross' modern classic, the Paper Plane, for its flavor combination. "Low-proof enough to be sessionable, it packs more of a punch [than either]," Sabo says. The chamomile and peppercorn provide a touch of tannic dryness and spice, which play nicely with the Japanese whisky and highlight L'Aperitivo Nonino's orange, herbal flavors. Named for the location where the action-Christmas film *Die Hard* took place, Sabo nods to its seasonal quality, and his wish that everyone drink this around the holidays.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1-ounce Nonino L'Aperitivo Botanical Drink

1-ounce Nikka Coffey Grain Whisky

$\frac{3}{4}$ ounce chamomile–pink peppercorn syrup (see Editor's Note)

$\frac{3}{4}$ ounce lemon juice

2 ounces soda water (preferably Topo Chico)

Garnish: pink peppercorns

DIRECTIONS Add all ingredients except soda water to a shaker tin with ice. Shake well and strain into a highball glass over ice. Garnish with pink peppercorns.

EDITOR'S NOTE Chamomile–Pink Peppercorn Syrup

8 ounces hot water

1 tablespoon cracked pink peppercorn

2 bags chamomile tea

8 ounces white cane sugar

Add peppercorns and chamomile tea to hot water and allow to steep for 8 minutes. Remove tea bags and allow peppercorns to continue steeping for another 7 minutes. Strain out peppercorns, and mix in sugar.

Quando e Dove

Lauren Corriveau | Proprietors, LLC, Los Angeles

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Quando e Dove: Lauren Corriveau's dreamy modern aperitivo falls somewhere between a spritz and a Collins. [\[Recipe\]](#)

Named for the Italian phrase that means “when and where,” Lauren Corriveau’s Quando e Dove conjures up the dreamy experience that a spritz so often provides. “Just say the time and place, and I’ll be there,” says Corriveau. “There’s something so romantic about a spritz. I always like thinking of it as a great escape.” The recipe is a mashup between a classic spritz and a Collins, using lemon to highlight the bright citrus profile of L’Aperitivo Nonino, and saline fino sherry to bring out its subtle vegetal notes.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 ½ ounces fino sherry (preferably Lustau Fino Jarana)

1-ounce L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

1/2 ounce fresh-squeezed lemon juice

¼ ounce Rothman & Winter Orchard Apricot liqueur

¼ ounce simple syrup

1 1/2 ounces Fever-Tree club soda

Garnish: thyme sprig, lemon wheel and Castelvetrano olive

DIRECTIONS

Add all ingredients except club soda to a mixing glass over ice, and stir until chilled. Strain into a wine glass over ice, and top with club soda. Garnish with a thyme sprig, lemon wheel and Castelvetrano olive.

Meleto Highball

Stacey Swenson | Pisellino, New York City

photo: LIZZIE MUNRO

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Meleto Highball: A lightly spiced, apple-inflected Japanese highball from Stacey Swenson. [\[Recipe\]](#)

Although she admits it isn't low in alcohol, Stacey Swenson, of aperitivo bar Pisellino in Manhattan, says that the Japanese highball feels as if it's low-ABV in spirit. It's from this structure that she began working on the Meleto Highball, a soft, elegant take on the whiskey-based classic. "The soft fruit and spice notes of L'Aperitivo Nonino need to be balanced with like flavors, so as not to overpower

its elegant subtleties,” says Swenson. To the L’Aperitivo base she adds Japanese whisky, a dose of tart, fresh apple, spiced honey, lemon and a dry cider topper. Altogether, the Meleto (which means “apple orchard” in Italian) evokes an autumn afternoon outdoors.

INGREDIENTS

Serving: 1

1 ¼ ounces L’Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink

¾ ounce Japanese whisky (preferably Toki or Akashi)

1 ½ ounces fresh-pressed Granny Smith apple juice (see Editor’s Note)

¼ ounce clove honey (see Editor’s Note)

¼ ounce lemon juice

light, dry apple cider, to top

Garnish: three paper-thin apple wheels

DIRECTIONS Build in a Collins glass over ice and stir gently. Garnish with apple wheels fanned out on the inside of the glass

EDITOR’S NOTE

Juice the Granny Smith apple immediately before making the cocktail, or it will oxidize and turn brown.

Clove honey

6 ounces water

½ cup honey

several cloves

Heat water in small saucepan on the stove until it boils, then reduce to lowest setting. Add cloves and let infuse for 5 minutes. Stir in honey, then strain to remove cloves.

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