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# Diana Henry on the art of the apéritif: bitter-sweet drinks and salty snacks

By **Diana Henry**, JAMES BEARD AWARD WINNER

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**W**hat words are thrilling to hear? Most would choose “I love you” or – the less romantic – “You are due a tax rebate”, but the phrase I find irresistible is “Tu veux un apéritif?” It signals relaxation, an enjoyable preamble to a good dinner, a bit of gentle socialising. With a drink.

**‘In Italy, an apéritif isn’t just something you taste, it’s also an attitude’**

Talia Baiocchi

Corks pop, ice hits glass, sparkling wine fizzes, tumblers clink. My first experience was as a teenager on an exchange trip to France. While the grown-ups

(family, friends, the builders working on the house next door) gathered for cloudy pastis, citrus-flavoured Lillet and deep-red Dubonnet, I was given pineau de Charentes, a sweet, fortified wine. Little salty accompaniments – salami, olives, croutes with goat’s cheese – were served alongside. Having an apéritif seemed like the most civilised activity in the world. The British famously like a G&T before dinner, but the trend for other apéritifs, particularly Italian ones, has gained ground. If you follow food-loving folk on social media, you’ll know when it’s “negroni o’clock”.

Negronis are becoming a popular pre-dinner drink in the UK CREDIT: CHRIS TERRY

The word (apéritif in French, aperitivo in Italian) comes from the Latin *aperire*, meaning to open. “The idea is that a drink and a few bites to eat open one’s stomach,” says the drinks writer Talia Baiocchi. “But in Italy, an apéritif isn’t just something you taste, it’s also an attitude. Go into a bacaro in Venice, or a bar in Milan around 7pm and you’ll see variations – in Venice, they’ll be drinking Aperol spritz and eating delicate sandwiches called tramezzini; in Milan, they’ll be sipping negronis – but the laid-back, ‘devil may care’ atmosphere will be similar. It’s the time of day when Italians feel they’re living *la dolce vita*”

## “Aperitivi were enjoyed as far back as Greek and Roman times”

you might be offered a sweet wine, such as Monbazillac or muscat de beaumes de Venise. But the most popular choices are fortified wines made with the addition of herbs and spices, such as vermouth, and bitter drinks such as Campari and Aperol.

A glass of wine or champagne, with or without the addition of something like crème de cassis, is the simplest apéritif. In France,



## ‘Perhaps this will replace the British pint’

Luca Missaglia

fortified wines) using gooseberries, cherries and even fig leaves, and The Ethicurean, near Bristol, has perfected the Collector, its Somerset vermouth.

Missaglia makes me a perfect negroni: equal measures of Campari, gin and **Cocchi vermouth**, shaken over ice and poured into a chilled glass. He adds a twist of orange. “Perhaps this will replace the British pint,” he says, grinning. Perhaps. I certainly know what I’m having. It’s negroni o’clock. And I’m living *la dolce vita*.

Certainly apéritifs are appearing more often on menus. Darshan Nurseries in Suffolk is making *vins maisons* (home-made