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Skip the Champagne Tower. A Vermouth Service

Is the Holiday Party Move Your Guests Will Remember.

Many bars and restaurants offer a tableside selection of vermouths and garnishes for guests to choose from as they design their own drinks. For holiday entertaining, do try this at home. Plus: eight giftworthy bottles to buy now.

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NO PARTY I love more than a holiday party. A fabulous frock, a little lippy, something special to sip on. But this year, instead of shots and Champagne towers (which I adore), I'm craving something more relaxed. For a drink that still feels special but also suits nights when I don't feel like tearing up the dance floor, I can think of nothing more perfect than vermouth.

Years ago, in a tapas bar in Palma, Mallorca, I had my first vermouth on tap and with it, an epiphany: The casual ceremony of sipping vermouth while snacking on salty morsels speared with toothpicks is a delight. Strangely, it's taken me years to figure out how to re-create this social ritual at home.

Now, thanks to Nialls Fallon, co-owner of Cervo's, a Spanish- and Portuguese-inspired seafood restaurant on Manhattan's Lower East Side, I've unlocked the festive-yet-easygoing setup known as vermouth service. To pull it off at home, you only need a selection of

red and white vermouths, soda and/or tonic, ice, citrus twists and olives.



Vermouth, soda and sliced lemon make a scintillating spritz. Gilda pintxos and potato chips are the salty bites you want to pair with it.

I asked Fallon what makes the vermouth service at Cervo's so popular. "People love the discovery and suggestion in it," he said. "We'll introduce people to a vermouth they might not have tried before, then always ask: Do you want it neat, or with soda or tonic? With an olive, or a twist?" This choose-your-own-adventure approach to beverage building is an ideal party concept.

Vermouth is having a bit of a moment, too. My local liquor store has dedicated an entire wall to it. When shopping for interesting bottles, look not only to the Italians and the French, but to other wine-producing countries as well. Vermouth is, after all, fortified wine "aromatized" with herbs, spices and other botanicals. Producers in Argentina, Australia, California, Brazil, Patagonia and Uruguay are changing the perception of what vermouth can be.

Vermouth also makes a great holiday or host gift. The ABV is low (typically 16-18%) compared to spirits. And when it comes to hosting yourself, this beverage's full, complex flavor and particular glamour make it a kind of holiday miracle: Invite friends over for nothing more than vermouth and snacks, and they'll be thrilled.

How to Set Up a Vermouth Service

Buy a selection of red and white vermouths, and chill them. When setting up service, I like to display the bottles so folks can see the (often pretty) labels and choose accordingly. You can also pour the different vermouths into cocktail decanters. Either way, keep them on ice.

Have more ice on hand for the drinks you'll make, in an ice bucket or bowl. If you own a soda siphon, this is its moment to shine, but handsome bottles of chilled soda and tonic water also do the trick. The point is to give everyone agency over what type of drink they make with their chosen vermouth. I always put out a bunch of glassware so I have something larger for spritzes, smaller for on-the-rocks. Provide different garnishes to choose from, too: green olives and citrus twists at the least; or go really festive with thin slices of lemon, blood orange or crisp pear, plus sprigs of fresh herbs like mint and dill.

Your friends can take it from there and may well try different things over the evening.

3 Vermouth Service Ideas

1. Cocktails Revamped

Experimenting with bespoke vermouths can put a new flavor spin on classic drinks like the Negroni, Americano, Manhattan, Vesper, Martini and Old Pal.

2. Aperitivo Hour



Like author Odette Williams, the mood we're going for here is relaxed elegance.

You might start the night off with a fresh, aromatic, light vermouth spritz or cocktail that wants to be paired with salty and/or fatty pre-dinner bites such as gilda pintxos (skewered olives and anchovies), pickled guindilla peppers, cured meats and cheeses, gougères, tempura anything, warm focaccia with olive oil, or potato chips.

3. After Dinner

End with a persistent, spicy, complex red vermouth on the rocks with an orange twist. Vermouth can be dessert in itself, but it also pairs very nicely with a rich chocolate soufflé or flourless cake, nougat and nuts, lacy Florentine cookies, poached fruit or a cheese plate.



Set out a selection of bottles for your guests to try and garnish as they choose. Vermouths make great gifts, too.

8 Vermouths Guaranteed to Make Your Season Bright

Most of us know the reliable, all-purpose vermouths like Noilly Prat and Martini & Rossi. For those looking to mix it up a bit, these bottles offer less-expected flavors and the right dash of dazzle for holiday hosting and gifting.

Primitivo Quiles Vermouth Rojo | Dating back to 1780, from Alicante, Spain. The Quiles family macerates a light white-wine base with 30 extracts of aromatic herbs. Easy to drink, balanced, with a sophisticated-cola vibe. Needs absolutely nothing but ice and orange peel to shine. Perennial.

Atxa Vino Vermouth Blanco | From a Basque Country vermouth house founded in 1831. The recipe has been passed down through the Acha family to Gabriel Acha, who now runs the show. With a pretty light-chartreuse hue and a refreshing profile, it pairs very well with gin. Try it in a Vesper or Wet Martini.

La Fuerza Primavera En Los Andes | Made in Mendoza, Argentina, by four friends who wanted to create great vermouth from the Andes, using local wines and botanicals. The Primavera, a beautiful blush color, is excellent in a spritz. You'll want to eat something tasty while you sip. (Vegan certified.)

Mauro Vergano Bianco | A Piedmontese aperitif-style vermouth from Mauro Vergano, a producer based in Asti, Italy. Made in small quantities, this pale-gold, polished, delicate organic vermouth is a treasure. Drink it on the rocks to really appreciate it.

Carpano Antica Formula | Produced from the original recipe, dating back to 1786, by Antonio Benedetto Carpano in Turin, Italy. It feels classic and luxurious in its dark, mysterious bottle, with an amber hue and unmistakable vanilla notes. Try it in a Manhattan or Negroni.

Lustau | Made since 1896 in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, this vermouth showcases its Sherry base. Lustau makes Rojo, Blanco, Rosé and Dry vermouths, each containing unique botanicals. Use in cocktails, a spritz or on the rocks.

Tximista Blanco | Another Basque Country vermouth. Tximista is the Basque word for "lightning," and this fresh, lively vermouth is just that, in a bottle. Try it as a spritz with soda water, ice and a twist.

Antica Torino Bianco | Friends Filippo Antonelli and Vittorio Zoppi set out to bottle a refined recipe that captured the spirit and tradition of drinking vermouth made from Piedmontese wines. I'll admit it was the bottle design that lured me in, but the vermouth inside turned out to be fabulous in a White Negroni. Serving it with shaved ice would be fun and fabulous for New Year's.