

APERITIVO TIME

It may be best known for its trend-setting style, but Milan also has a claim to fame when it comes to Italian cuisine: aperitivo, the pre-dinner cocktail snacks that have become art forms

Words: Josephine McKenna
Photos: Susan Wright



It's a proud tradition that dates back centuries – some say as far back as the Roman era, when the word 'aperitivus' was first recorded in Latin, meaning a beverage used to 'open the stomach'. But while that may sound like a form of gladiatorial torture, aperitivo is far from punishment. Instead, the Italian version of cocktail hour involves teaming a bitter alcoholic drink with complimentary snacks, a combination designed to pique the appetite before dinner. And, true to form in Italy's fashion capital, a bowl of un-shelled monkey nuts this is not – because in Milan, even the canapes are carefully and artfully crafted. We sent a writer and photographer to discover the finest aperitivo the city has to offer.

THE HISTORIC SITE

Aperitivo may have Roman roots, but more recently the tradition can be traced back to Gaspere Campari, who, in 1860, finalised the now-secret recipe for a bitter drink he named after himself: Campari. Having worked as a waiter in Novara, around 50km west of Milan, he moved to the city in 1862, where his sons later took up the family business.

Today, at the Camparino bar in the heart of Milan, their legacy lives on. Waiters in crisp white jackets and bow ties sweep through carrying trays of vibrant red cocktails, blended using the original Campari infusion of bitter herbs and fruit. Located at the entrance of the famous Vittorio Emanuele II Galleria, Milan's historic shopping arcade, and with a glimpse of the Duomo through the window, the bar has been one of Milan's beloved landmarks for more than a century.

"This is the bar where the aperitivo was invented," says Orlando Chiari, who now runs



the bar with his wife Teresa. "For the Milanese it is part of life." Filled with Liberty era mosaics, original light fittings and furnishings inspired by Viennese artist Gustav Klimt, the Camparino opened its doors in 1915 and has a timeless elegance. "I see a thousand different faces a day, it's never boring," says Luigi, a waiter who has been at the Camparino for 25 years. Well-heeled shoppers in fur coats and pearls are seated beside 20-somethings in ripped jeans and sneakers. →

The Camparino bar, close to the Duomo, has been a Milanese institution since opening in 1915





Giacomo Arengario is one of the city's most beautiful bars, and overlooks the city square

They all come to watch the world go by and sip an aperitivo in the place where it all began. “This bar has shared the history of Milan,” says Chiari. “Many customers say ‘I used to come here with my granddad’. It’s part of life.”

Any time after midday you can order an aperitivo, from a simple Campari and soda to a choice of cocktails including the classic Americano – a blend of Campari, Martini Rosso vermouth from Turin and soda – that was created in this very bar. Like the bar, the aperitivo snacks here are somewhat old-fashioned: all drinks are served with delicate vegetable puff-pastry bites and La Bella di Cerignola olives – “the very best on the market” according to Chiari, which are named after the town of their origin, Cerignola in Puglia, southern Italy. “You should only take a bite,” Chiari insists. “An aperitivo is not dinner, it has another rhythm.”

camparino.it

THE ELEGANT EATERY

Just across the piazza from the Camparino, in front of the city’s Gothic cathedral, is the Giacomo Arengario, which has one of the most spectacular views in town. This exclusive bar and restaurant, created by renowned restaurateur

Giacomo Bulleri, sits on the third floor above a 20th century art museum known as the Museo del 900. The covered balcony has a wall of windows overlooking the cathedral and the vast square surrounding it.

“This is one of the most beautiful spots in the city,” says manager, Daniel Camerini, proudly. Here, patrons can sip their Negroni or Kir while watching shoppers scurrying across the square, or enjoy a birds’ eye view of the cathedral’s spires from the outdoor terrace in the summer months.

Inside, the luminous bar is lined with palms and fresh orchids, while the Art Deco salon, dressed in rich autumn tones, offers intimate corners for a more romantic conversation or a late afternoon business deal. Here, aperitivo has its own elegant style: every drink is served with a selection of delicate miniature dishes that includes tuna tartare, beef carpaccio, vegetable tempura or artichokes stuffed with fresh shrimp and topped with a fresh flower garnish. “We add a twist to the food, a kind of fusion that adds something interesting to the taste,” says Camerini. “We’re in Milan, after all – we want to make sure that our food looks as good as it can for our guests.”

giacomoarengario.com



Bar Martini is everything a fashion bar should be – sleek and stylish



“The waiters at Bar Martini look like they’ve stepped straight off the runway at Milan fashion week”

THE FASHION HOTSPOT

Since Milan is the country’s trendsetting capital when it comes to clothes or furnishings, it’s no surprise that design icons Dolce and Gabbana have their own bar nestled amongst their exclusive boutiques on the fashionable Corso Venezia. Nor is it surprising that here, aperitivo is reinvented again.

The iconic duo’s Bar Martini is like a shiny black bento box that reflects their notoriously extravagant and colourful style. In the early evening, fashionistas and shoppers laden with designer bags cluster around Bar Martini’s circular black bar, or recline on black leather sofas beneath a dramatic red Murano light fixture

made of upturned glasses. The waiters look like they’ve stepped straight off the runway at Milan fashion week and the lounge music is upbeat without being intrusive. Beyond the bar, there’s a covered courtyard lined with vines that lead to a separate dining area that is decorated like a classic Sicilian salon, with Bordeaux-colored velvet chairs and brocade wallpaper.

On the menu here there are more than a dozen different Martinis priced from €15 to €20, while a bottle of Dom Perignon champagne can cost you up to €1,300 a bottle depending on the vintage. Every aperitivo cocktail includes an individual plate that comes with a tiny bruschetta topped with baccalà (salt cod) mousse, a poached Gillardeau oyster topped with breadcrumbs, and a creamy chick pea dip with olive crisp bread – just right for the fashion jet-set D&G are accustomed to. Indeed, the designers themselves are regular visitors come aperitivo time.

dolcegabbana.com/martini



TASTE THE DIFFERENCE

Milan isn't the only European city waiting to whet your appetite

Stockholm

Thanks to the meteoric rise of Nordic cuisine, there are now hundreds of food tours showing off the best of the Swedish capital. Culinary Södermalm, run by Food Tours Stockholm, is our pick, taking visitors to seven restaurants in the space of four hours, while also exploring the city's trendiest neighbourhood.



foodtoursstockholm.se

Eindhoven

It might be better known as a design hub, but this city in the south of the Netherlands also puts on a good spread, and the best way to get to know it is with Taste Eindhoven Food Tours. Accompanied by knowledgeable locals, you'll tour seven eateries, tasting regional delicacies and learning about their provenance.

eindhovenfoodtours.com

Riga

Baltic cuisine is only just starting to receive the recognition it deserves, but you can get a crash course with Eat Riga, a tasting tour that will whisk you around the city's central market and surrounding area, showing visitors that modern Latvian is much more than pork, cabbage and potatoes. eatriga.lv



THE TREND SETTER

Hitting a different note, the area of Sempione lies just beyond the Arch of Peace monument and is one of Milan's hottest neighbourhoods for bars, clubs and exclusive nightspots. 55Milano is among the most popular, located in a former train depot and spread across 1200 square meters including a large rooftop terrace. It has the feel of a sprawling New York warehouse, while bookcases, lamps and artworks are used to create intimate corners.

True to its generous proportions, 55Milano offers one of the most extravagant aperitivos in the city with a 'Happy Hour' buffet available from 6pm-10.30pm every day. The bar provides generous helpings of fresh homemade pasta, prosciutto, pizzas, cheeses and salads, with more international offerings of fried chicken, couscous and vegetable tempura are also on offer. "Our concept is to provide an open buffet with 'gastronomic islands,'" says 55Milano partner and marketing director, Fabio Valenti. "For €12 you can have a cocktail – a Negroni, or a Spritz – and pass from antipasto to pasta or other dishes." Despite the huge scale of this hotspot it fills up →



55 Milano is home to one of the city's most popular aperitivo buffets and is one of the coolest spots for a night out



fast and booking is essential, particularly at weekends when the Milanese kick back a cocktail and dance the night away in their favorite label and stilettos until the early hours. 55milano.com

THE MIXOLOGIST'S LAIR

While tradition is well respected in Milan, that doesn't mean there aren't more avant-garde options available. If you want a more creative concoction, head to Pinch, located in the hip Navigli district that runs beside the old commercial canals on the city's south side.

Pinch feels like a throwback to the days of Prohibition. Antique mirrors and chandeliers hang from the ceiling and waiters look like youthful hipsters, with bushy beards and braces. "We want people to feel like they're in their own living room," says 32-year-old Mattia Lissoni, one of the fresh-faced owners. Pinch, he says, loves to celebrate the mystique of "the elixir" and intends to "distill raw ingredients into the elixir of life".

The bar has a loyal clientele of Milanese who come several times a week but the word is out and a growing number of tourists are also coming to hear the lively 1930s and 1940s music and →



Pinch is decorated with vintage antiques and has a relaxed, homely vibe



"We want people to feel like they're in their own living room. Our cocktails distill the elixir of life"



sample original cocktails like Dragon Blood and Black Tiger. Dragon Blood is described on the menu as a “spell for the palate” and is made with Maker’s Mark Bourbon, maple syrup, angostura and tarragon infusion, while the Black Tiger has a Tropical feel “for those who seek liquid courage”, combining Jamaican rum, honey, pineapple juice, cranberry juice, Petrus wine, Fernet Branca amaro, black pepper and mint leaves. “We develop all our own recipes,” says Lissoni, who spends his trawls antique markets for his furnishings.

Here, each cocktail comes with a tasting plate of fresh tomatoes, goat’s cheese, fried mozzarella balls and prosciutto – and while the aperitivo snacks respect Italian tradition, the house cocktail has more of a kick. Called the “Expecto Patron” in a nod to Harry Potter fans, it’s made from tangerine juice, tequila, prickly pear and enough Habanero chili to light up the back of your throat. [facebook.com/PinchMilano](https://www.facebook.com/PinchMilano)

THE LOCAL’S CHOICE

Just a few doors away from Pinch, it’s hard to find a table at the Mag Café. Since opening in 2011 it’s been a go-to hotspot for great cocktails, genuine hospitality and a laid-back atmosphere. Patrons hang out beside the canal in the warmer months, while the inside is filled with quirky furniture and wooden cabinets, soft lighting and lounge music.

Here, the cocktail menu includes twists on the classic Italian ingredients: the Sailor’s Negroni is made from Sailor Jerry spiced rum, Campari and Vermouth, while the Japan is made from



Ginepraio Tuscan gin, ginger beer and lime. And the cocktail list changes every six months.

One of the owners, Flavio Angiolillo, says the bar is filled with furnishings found in local markets. “It has an ambience that appeals to locals as well as foreigners who work or study in Milan.” Giorgio Fragiaco is one such example, an Australian who lives in Milan and comes to the Mag several times a week. “The decor is hip, old fashioned with lots of ironic twists and nuances. It’s intimate and warm,” Fragiaco says. “The staff are attentive and will mix your favourite cocktail even if it’s not on the menu.”

At Mag café, aperitivo drinks are served with a simple platter of fresh prosciutto, salami, cheese and grissini breadsticks: as simple and truly Milanese as it gets, and just enough to whet your appetite for the night ahead. ■ mimag.it/mag-cafe-milano

Mag Café is popular with locals for its laid-back atmosphere and classic aperitivo snacks



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