

Vermouth Winemaking

by Werner Roesener

The Vermouth wines described here are classified as sweet aperitif wines and are similar to the commercial products of sweet Cinzano or Martini. They are served chilled at 7 to 10 degrees Celsius as appetite stimulant before meals. They contain 17 to 19 percent alcohol and 7 to 9 percent sugar. Their particular flavour is derived from herbs.

As an overview, the production involves making a suitable fortified base wine and then infusing herbs into it. To make a fortified base wine, the amateur winemaker has several options:

1. Adding alcohol to an existing table wine of typically 12 percent alcohol content. This requires mixing 16.8 L of wine with 3.2 L of 40% alcohol or Vodka and 1.6 kg sugar to make a 20L batch. White table wine works best. Red wine can also be used, but very tannic wine should be avoided, because it may take several years of ageing to become drinkable.
2. Making a wine from start specifically for this purpose from grape juice or concentrate: The starting gravity should be adjusted with sugar or concentrate to 1100. A yeast with high alcohol tolerance must be used, i.e. Lalvin EC-1118 or sherry yeast. When fermentation is nearly complete as evident by reduced activity, adding small amounts of sugar (one cup per 20L batch) every few days will keep the fermentation going until activity stops, the wine will then contain about 16 to 18 percent alcohol.
3. Freeze concentrating table wine: A table wine containing about 12% alcohol is placed in a semi-soft container into a freezer and left to freeze solid for 48 hours. It is then removed and suspended upside down until about 60% of its volume has been captured dripping out. The remainder is mostly water. The resulting wine will contain about 18% alcohol.

A dry Vermouth can be made by using less sugar, the final gravity of a sweet aperitif should be in the range of 1020 to 1030, that of a dry one 1000 to 1005.

The next process is to obtain and infuse herbs. While the exact herbal mixture of successful commercial products is a well guarded secret, the following list is a good starting point. It was initially supplied to me by AWO past president Bill McDowell, modified by myself, and still occasionally undergoing experimental revisions.

Herbs are sold at Thuna's, 298 Danforth Avenue, Toronto by the ounce (28g). They do mail orders, or you may find a herbalist in your neck of the woods. I suggest to purchase an ounce of each item and subdivide each by weighing or teaspoon measuring to the required amounts. The quantity of each herb is shown in grams, 14g = one half ounce. An asteric means that trace quantities of less than one gram are required. These quantities are intended for a 20L batch. It is a good idea to steep the herbs in about one gallon of fortified base wine for about one week, then removing the herbs by pouring through a fine sieve or cloth.

This wine should be labeled "Vermouth Concentrate" and be used to arrive at the final product by blending with more base wine. This blending process should be carried out first on a small sample basis to arrive at the optimum blending ratio.

It is helpful to refer to a sample of your favorite commercial vermouth and keep accurate records of blending ratios. A more refined approach would be to make individual extracts of each herb by

infusing each into a liquid made from water and 40% alcohol mixed 1:1, after one week each extract can be sieved and then experimentation can start to determine optimum herbal mixtures.

Furthermore, one can experiment to make herbed aperitif other than Vermouth by using a selection of individual herbs from this list or from other herb sources.

List of Vermouth Herbs

Herb	Quantity
Wormwood	14
Oregano	7
Elecampagne	7
Blessed Thistle	7
Dried Tonka Beans	7
Dried Woodruff	7
Balm Leaf	3
Yarrow	3
European Centaury	3
Gentian Root	3
Dried Orange Peel	3
Angelica Root	1
Camomile flowers	1
Quinine Bark	1
American Saffron	1
Majoram	*
Rosemary	*
Sage	*
Summer Savory	*
Sweet Basil	*
Thyme	*