

Aperitivo Anyone?

The making of liqueurs in Italy has been around for centuries. The tradition can be traced back to the early middle ages when monks created them as a way to infuse herbs for medicinal use. Over time different ingredients were experimented with, both for flavour and for effect and the result is that today there are now hundreds of different types of liqueurs.

Some of the best known liqueurs such as Amaretto, Limoncello and Nocino (a digestivo made from walnuts) are readily available to buy in the shops but some of the best types you simply have to make yourself.

In the Lucca area there is a very famous Liqueur made in the city called Biadina, which is a dark, bitter drink made from a combination of herbs and bark. It is definitely worth a try if you are passing through Lucca. You can always buy a glass in Piazza San Michele at the Antica Farmacia Massagli where it is served in small glasses with pine nuts.

Liqueurs can be made from pretty much anything – fruit and nuts, herbs and spices, flowers, even bark. As a result there are hundreds of different flavours. All this variety can be broken down into a number of categories. *Aperitivo* – a pre-dinner drink served to stimulate the appetite; *Digestivo* – an after-dinner drink to help

BLACKBERRY LIQUEUR

Here is a great summer liqueur to try out. It's very simple with a great flavour. It is best served on its own with a little ice in a small glass, especially with friends on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

INGREDIENTS

- 400ml of 95° alcohol
- 400g of sugar (white or brown)
- 500g of blackberries (try and use wild or home cultivated fruits as they are untreated and have a better flavour)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- Juice from 1 lemon
- 500ml water (mountain water is best)

METHOD

1. Wash the fruit thoroughly and leave to soak for an hour in cold water mixed with the lemon juice.
2. Strain the fruit and leave out to dry in the sun (you want them to dry out quickly without getting mouldy as blackberries get mouldy easily).

3. Put the fruit along with the alcohol in an air-tight jar and leave it in a dark, cool area for about a month and a half. Give it a good shake every now and then just to get that blackberry flavour moving about.

4. When the mixture is ready prepare a syrup by mixing the sugar and cinnamon in the water. Heat the sugar mixture but do not allow it to boil.

5. When the syrup has cooled, mix it together well with the alcohol mixture in the jar.

6. Finally filter the mixture using filter paper or a very fine muslin cloth and put the mixture in the bottle of your choice. Leave the Liqueur to stand for at least one month (it is often better if it is left for much longer) before drinking.

This recipe works well with any other soft fruit like raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, red and blackcurrants etc. Just take out the cinnamon. Alternatively you could have some fun and try experimenting with the basic recipe by adding other ingredients to the fruit.

aid digestion (different flavours work with different foods); *Tonic* – a curative or pick-me-up. These have been used over the ages as remedies for sore throats, colds, stomach ailments and general aches and pains, to name but a few.

Other categories also include syrups to put on desserts or add to other drinks, flavoured grappas for any occasion, and my favourite, The Conversation Piece, usually a strange flavour or a flavour that does not fit into any other category and is just fun to drink and talk about.

The making of liqueurs requires a fair bit of patience as it can take a good six months in some cases until they are ready to drink. The most important part is good quality ingredients. The fruit and herbs you use must be fresh and free from chemicals. It is always recommended that you use fruit from your garden but if you don't have that choice make sure you wash them thoroughly.

The main ingredient is pure alcohol (95°) which you can buy in any supermarket. I have found that the more expensive, better quality alcohol gives a better result and has a less chemical odour. With a single litre of pure alcohol you can make three or four different liqueurs. It is definitely recommended to keep your quantities small as three litres of unpalatable drink is a waste.

Choosing sugar depends upon what you are making. The rule of thumb is usually white sugar for clear colours and brown sugar for dark drinks but you can also use

demerara or molasses. Water is a key ingredient and the quality can make a huge difference. The best is spring water. For those of you not halfway up a mountain a good neutral pH bottled water or distilled water works just as well.

Finally, the choice of bottle. This is probably as important as the liqueur itself. Many an hour can be spent wandering around shops and markets looking for unusual bottles to complement the flavour of the spirit or the colour, but the end result is worth it.

– by Eric Blair

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