Bitter Alchemy

This is a Sicilian recipe, they say. Gather roses in perfect bloom during the hottest hours of a June day when their perfume is at its headiest. They say, pluck the roses and separate the petals from the flower. Trim the white moons from the base of the petals; these will be too bitter. They being those who knew, Sicilians recording a family recipe at the end of the nineteenth century.

Steep the rose petals in a grain or fruit alcohol for a fortnight with a vanilla bean. Prepare a simple syrup of sugar melted in water on the stove. At two weeks strain the liqueur and remove the rose petals and vanilla bean. Add the simple syrup. Set aside in a dark corner of your pantry for another fortnight. Filter and bottle. Serve after a good meal. The drink will be quite strong, but quite nice, they say.

This recipe is for rosolio, a sweet yet bitter liqueur once enjoyed by young ladies and grandmothers in the nineteenth century and in mangia e be’ i (cat ‘n’ drink), light beignets filled with rosolio and sold at country fairs one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years ago. Rosolio is still had after a lengthy meal or late in the afternoon or before going to bed. This particular recipe was found in the musty pages of an old cookbook in a dark, narrow used bookstore in Spaccanapoli, the old center of Naples, where the cookbooks were sandwiched between Italian Victorian erotica and a stand for old postmarked postcards. I wrote the recipe down in a little notebook, and chose two postcards, yellowed watercolors of towns in Campania with faded spidery ink on the backs, “sunny and warm, with much love—…”

So many months later, in Vermont, it is now late August. I should have been gathering my roses in July when our roses are at their fullest and most obscene, but I have had difficulty procuring the grain alcohol. I’ve been trying since July, but my local liquor store does not stock grain alcohol. I’ve been trying how I got here, at the end of August, picking the last of my roses.”

I can use vodka if I’m unable to get the grain alcohol, but I’ve had limoncello, another Italian after-dinner cordial, made with vodka, and the taste is all wrong, the vodka imparting too much vodka despite its generally clean flavor.

So I wait for my three bottles of grain alcohol to arrive at the local state liquor store, a special order I have to discuss with the owner. He knows I’m well over twenty-one, and I’ve explained to him my plans. No garbage-can parties for me. I’m playing at alchemist. I’m making amaro. I’m making rosolio.

Amaro, which means “bitter” in Italian, is a kind of after-dinner cordial, a digestivo. Like a good espresso it settles a good meal. Amaro is particular to Italy, and rosolio is particular to Sicily and Calabria. Each region in Italy has its own style and recipe, and these digestivi can be made from herbs or walnuts or roses or lemons. They have antique, floralsounding names or monikers said with an almost-religious fervor: Amaro Lucano, Ramazzotti, Rosolio, Vecchio Amaro del Capo, Jannamaro, Padre Peppe.

I go to pick up my order two weeks later, and no one can find my three bottles of grain alcohol in the stockroom. I wonder about the young clerk, and summer parties, and place the order again. A few weeks later my husband picks up my order for me, but the young gentleman working, his skin still pocked with high-school acne, will only let him take one bottle at a time. Maybe if the manager was here, he could take all three, but the young gentleman doesn’t want to take any chances. My husband, who is also well over twenty-one, gets carded frequently.

At the end of August, I am picking the last of my rose blossoms during the hottest point during my day, peeling the petals away from the flower, and trimming those white bitter moons. I’m preparing my concoction on the dining-room table that my husband and I made six years ago on Thanksgiving Day before friends arrived to feast. I’m wondering how I got here, at the end of August, picking the last of my roses, obsessed like a perfumer to pick the most fragrant, most luscious, most velvety of roses—one and three-quarters ounces of them, to be exact. After I have trimmed their pale crescents, I stuff them with a chopstick down the neck of a bottle of grain alcohol. Yes, I have to ask myself, how did I arrive here?
I arrived at this bit of alchemist’s pleasure on circuitous roads, all of them stemming from Italy, a place with which I have long had a love affair. I have written this before, and I’ll write it again: Twelve years ago, my husband and I flew on one-way tickets the day after our wedding for what became a year-long honeymoon in Italy. For twelve years now I’ve been living, learning, cooking, leaving, and returning from and to Italy. Each time I return, which is now once a year, I fall down another floor of her culture.

When my husband and I first lived in Italy, we were introduced to *vin santo*, holy wine, the traditional Tuscan after-dinner drink served with *cantucci*, those little almond biscotti that are dipped into the thick, mead-like wine. From there we became enamored of *grappa*, the Italian *eau de vie*. *Grappa*, a distillation made from grape skins, can be either sublime, smooth, and scented of saddle leather or rough and tasting like lighter fluid. We became collectors of *grappa*, fascinated and infatuated with the shapes of their bottles and the out-of-the-way vineyards that took the effort to make them. From here we made the leap to *amaro*.

Although we had always been curious at those brightly labeled bottles we saw on café bar shelves...it wasn't until we traveled south that we were introduced to the father of all *amari* in the hauntingly beautiful cave city of Matera.

After a brief conversation with our waiter, Enzo, we decided to ask him to order for us. He is a consummate professional, wearing a white shirt, black bow tie, and a red vest. He poured us Aglianico, the kingly grape of the south, dry, big, elegant, and less than ten American dollars. Then the food started to arrive.

In order to tell you about the *amaro*, I must tell you about the food, as *amaro* almost always follows the food and its power lies as the final note to the orchestration of a meal. At least nine dishes of antipasti came to the table. We ate fresh *ricotta* and *sformate*, wedges of egg and herb or rice tart. Enzo delivered plates of little fried things: slices of eggplant, zucchini, olives, and roasted red peppers, the edges of the slices black with roasting.

Then there were *orecchiette*, little handmade ears of pasta, tossed with braised *cima di rapa* and seasoned with hot *peperoncino*. We ate simple roasted meats: lamb, beef, chicken, sausage flavored with only salt, pepper, olive oil, and wood smoke. Then *dolci*, but I don’t remember exactly about the dessert. I do remember the richness of this table. I have come to understand that, when I’m in Italy, true wealth is in the food of the poor.
Enzo asked if we wanted espresso to finish, or amaro. Because we like a good adventure, we chose amaro, but there was a further question from Enzo: “Fernet-Branca, or Padre Peppe?”

Fernet-Branca is a ubiquitous national brand. We didn’t know Padre Peppe. Our momentary silence as we tried to make a decision was all Enzo needed. “Padre Peppe it is then.”

This Padre Peppe is made by Franciscan monks in the plains of Altamura, only forty kilometers from Matera. It is an elixir of walnuts, so the label says. It is hot and sweet and medicinal and goes down with ease. We experienced a conversion, a glow of warmth radiating from our windpipes and stomachs.

Amaro, or drinks like amaro, have been made for a long time. Their origins include the practice within convents and monasteries of steeping herbs in alcohol, usually wine, as a means of preserving the medicinal properties of the herbs, as growing seasons can be short and winters long, especially in the many mountainous places to which religious orders had fled to practice their faith undisturbed.

Among some of the earliest writings on the subject of flavored alcohols are those found in the journals of Catalan Arnold de Vila Nova, an alchemist in Spain and France who was born in 1240. He wrote in his The Book of Wine of the distillation of wine into aqua vitae and the flavoring of those spirits with various herbs, fruits, and spices. In particular, de Vila Nova wrote of aqua vitae’s healing and restorative powers. It was even believed by one of de Vila Nova’s students, a certain Raymond Lully, that these flavored aqua vitae were so powerful and vital that their crafting was an inspired gift from Heaven.

During the Middle Ages these distillations were primarily known as alchemical potions and made only among alchemists, especially those belonging to religious orders. It wasn’t until a much later date that they were enjoyed as secular drinks. By the fourteenth century these drinks had become popular cordials in Italy and France, a popularity often attributed to the court of Catherine de Medici, the Italian aristocrat who married into French royalty. It is said she brought the recipes and use of these liqueurs to France from her native Tuscany. But there is also some evidence of an earlier diffusion of this type of drink or an independent outgrowth of these distillations prior to their introduction by Catherine. There is no doubt, however, that the de Medici court, so focused on food and the pleasures of the table, increased the interest in these amari among the nobility of France.

Between the fourteenth century and the early seventeenth century, monastic orders and village alchemists became the primary producers of amari. In the Abbey of Fécamp, around 1510, Don Bernardo Benedictine created the drink called Benedictine. The recipe for Chartreuse was originally called an Elixir de Longue Vie (an elixir of long life), given to a Carthusian monastery near Paris by the Marechal d’Estrees, a captain under Henri iv, husband to Catherine de Medici. Cusenir Mazarine, a French anise liqueur, dates to a 1637 recipe from the Abbaye de Montbenoit. Recipes, too, for herbal liqueurs like the Pugliese Padre Peppe were also originally monastic in origin. But it would be a mistake to claim that all production of liqueurs was limited to monasteries and convents. By the middle of the sixteenth century, several secular distilleries throughout Europe had been formed and were producing commercial quantities of amari and cordials. These included the Dutch distillery of Bols, founded in 1575, and Der Lachs, a German distillery that began producing Danzig Goldwasser in 1598. The first liqueur that Bols turned out was made from anise collected wild in the fields.

Commercially prepared and sold amaro didn’t make its appearance in Italy until the mid- to late 1800s. Fernet-Branca began producing its line of cordials in 1875, Padre Peppe, in 1853. Prior to that, amaro was a home brew. Fortunately, it still is.

The word liqueur comes from the Latin liquefacere, to “melt” or “dissolve,” and refers to the method used to flavor whiskies, brandies, and grain alcohols to make the base of any liqueur. Amaro, or drinks like amaro, are liqueurs. Fortunately, it still is.

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after which it is added to the bulk of the alcoholic base. In percolation either water or alcohol is allowed to drip through the flavor ingredient, or else it’s heated, and the steam of the alcohol or water passes through the flavor before it condenses. Simple maceration is just right for a juicy fruit. Liques using citrus obtain the flavor not from the juice, however, but from the oil in the skins, and this is usually done through percolation.

When using different methods, different flavors can be extracted from the same source. In many spice-flavored liqueurs a more bitter or astringent flavor will result if an alcoholic base, rather than water, is used in percolation. Depending on the taste and the type of liqueur desired, the process and base liquid should be carefully considered.

Once any of these three processes has been used, the remaining steps in production tend to be the same: mix the final blend of the aromatized base and, if necessary, age. Or mix the blend and add any desired sugar and/or water, followed by a generally short period of aging to allow the marriage of aromatics to alcohol. Then there is coloration, cold stabilizing, and finally bottling. In the fourteenth century coloration and cold stabilization would not have been considered in the same way we do now. These are modern inventions for large commercial products. When you make an amaro at home, you don’t need to worry about altering the color or providing cold stabilization. Leave it to nature and alchemy, and follow in the footsteps of medieval alchemists, or monks, or baroque royal chefs.

This is what I like about making something that has existed for hundreds of years: taste history. This is why my husband and I have collected vin santi, grappe, eau de vie, and now, ever since Enzo introduced us to the pleasures and varieties of Italian regional digestivi, amari. It is why, when in Italy, we walk into little wine shops and groceries and ask the padrona about the local brew. This is why we follow directions to out-of-the-way osterie, country cafés, to eat and then partake of the rosolio table, a tasting of five different rosolii prepared by the kitchen, liqueurs made with coffee beans or violets or rose petals or nuts and anise or a mixture of saffron and spices.

I have the great bonus of a rose garden. Along a stone wall to the south of the house is a hedge of mixed roses, here long before we bought the property, planted, I’m told, by the elderly lady who originally built our house and had a fantastic rose and wildflower garden. The owners between her and us destroyed much of her efforts through blind-sightedness and neglect, and I work hard to resurrect the few things that are left. I’ve tried to classify her roses, looking in gardening books, asking knowledgeable friends. No one really knows what they are, except for a local man whose family has been here since the French and Indian War. He tells me that the pink roses with six petals and the yellow center are seaside roses brought to our mountain by a transplant. She transplanted not only herself but also a part of the place from where she came, and these roses do give our open field and wide-view landscape a decidedly seaside look. On a moonlit summer night, walking home from the neighbor’s house, the wind in the trees sounds a lot like the ocean.

My old lady’s roses inspired me. I have many others in a more formalized garden: Seafoam, Mother’s Day, Madame de Bourbon, and Gene Bruner. This is the mixture of roses that I use to make my concoction, my rosolio, ros solis, “sun’s dew” in Latin. I pick at high noon just like my old recipe says. I’ve got my bottle of Graves grain alcohol, and I’ve trimmed the white moons from the petals and stuffed the rose petals down the neck of the bottle with a chopstick, as I don’t have a jar with a lid and mouth big enough to do it any other way. I wait. Two weeks later, I make my simple syrup. I strain the pale, now colorless petals, fragile like a moth’s wings. I remove the vanilla bean. I add the simple syrup and set the jar aside again. I wait.

It is a cold, rainy October day when we first taste the rosolio. The rain falls horizontally, and the National Weather Service has issued a High Winds Alert. We are in the middle of a house renovation, and because the roof is off, with only our cedar ceiling and a large tarp between us and the elements, leaks have sprouted around the windows and in certain places in the roof. There’s no reason this should be happening—the house has been amply protected from weather—except that the wind is so strong, it blows its way behind the window trim and insinuates itself beneath our roof tarp.

The bottoms of the windows and French doors are lined with plastic and newspaper. A few plastic buckets are positioned throughout the house to catch steady drips. We’ve finished eating a lunch of grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and leek soup I made from the last of the leeks I pulled from the garden yesterday. A plebian lunch that we positioned throughout the house to catch steady drips. We’ve finished eating a lunch of grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and leek soup I made from the last of the leeks I pulled from the garden yesterday. A plebian lunch that we

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then the vanilla and sweet behind that, with a fiery finish. I feel it in my throat and down my windpipe. The recipe did say it would be strong, and the recipe is also right in that it is nice. My husband and I discuss possible refinements: Can I cut the fervent alcohol taste? Can I tame it just a little? We decide that tomorrow I will make another simple syrup of a half cup of sugar dissolved in a cup of water and add that to my brew to see if it softens the brawny structure.

That night we dine at a friend’s house. In their dining room on a side table are jars full of liqueur rouge, a southern French style of rosolio made of brandy, raspberries, red currants, and cherries. They made this batch of liqueur in July when they, in great fortune, found cherries, red currants, and raspberries ripe and available all at the same time. After forty days of maceration, they add their simple syrup to taste. They’ve been making liqueur rouge for years after trying their hand at an old southern family recipe of peaches steeped in bourbon and sugar, started in July when the peaches are in season in Maryland and ready by Thanksgiving.

We taste their liqueur rouge after a dinner of Cambodian curry flavored with peanuts, coconut milk, basil, cilantro, mint, and a hot-pepper fish sauce. The digestif is red in color, but clear, like a cranberry juice, and I taste all three elements of the fruit, the raspberry and currant the strongest. It is slightly sweet, and our host tells me this bottle may have had a cinnamon stick added. We compare recipes and tastes and talk of an orange liqueur made with a handful of coriander seed, and I think if I start now, it would be ready by Christmas.

This is why I’ve spent the last four months preparing my rosolio, why I carefully cut the white moons off my rose petals before steeping them in pure alcohol: this is part of my philosophy of taste. Taste is connected to history, the history of the table, which is, after all, a narrative history, an oral history. The tongue experiences, the mouth tells a story. At the table we share these stories. My husband and I, alone in our leaking house, tasting and reminiscing about the rosolio tasted in the mountains of Calabria, at our friends’ table talking of the myriad versions of after-dinner liqueur and how our stashes will get us through the fall and the long, cold Vermont winter. I remember the generosity of other hosts, new and old friends in Italy, plying us with their regional, or family, concoction. I remember an Easter dinner at the seaside near Rome where we stayed up late and tasted nocino, a green walnut liqueur, limoncello, and a home brew so potent, made by the caretaker of our host’s Rome apartment building, that it defies explanation. I wrote the recipes on the back of a paper napkin.

Yes, this is why I do this. To experience, to connect, to make two things at once, a recipe and a story, both shared at the table.

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Recipe for Rosolio

Pick roses at the hottest point of the day, red roses, if possible, as they will impart more color and flavor to the alcohol. If you do not have your own rose garden, I recommend procuring your roses from a friend or a local grower so that you can be certain that the roses have not been treated with any chemicals. Separate the petals from the flower. Trim the white edge at the base with a knife or scissors. Weigh out 1 ¾ ounces of petals, and then steep the petals and a vanilla bean in a large canning jar filled with 190-proof (95 percent) pure grain alcohol. Close the jar and set aside in a dark place for two weeks. At two weeks strain the liquid and remove the rose petals and vanilla bean. Prepare a simple syrup from a pound of sugar and 3 ¼ cups of water. Add the simple syrup to the alcohol and return the mixture to the jar. Store for another two weeks. At the end of those two weeks, filter and bottle. After your first tasting more simple syrup can be added to suit your taste.