I’m trying to remember the first time I tasted Campari. What’s difficult is isolating the occasion, the sense of that first taste, the setting, the weather, the conversation, because there have been so many occasions, places, and circumstances. I’m trying to remember because I’ve only just realized that a Campari and soda, or a Campari and orange, or a negroni—that powerful elixir made of equal parts Campari, sweet vermouth, and gin (unless, like me, one doesn’t like gin and substitutes vodka)—have become a personal madeleine, the theory laid out so languorously by Marcel Proust that the taste of a pastry can bring to mind a whole catalog of memory, a key to remembrances of things past.

For me Campari is a drink that conjures a sense of holiday, of ease, of timelessness, of days spent traveling and experiences had. It stitches together a string of my own remembrances that have formed almost one half of my life. Somewhere along the line I decided that it was important to mark a place, a new place to which I’d traveled, by saluting to it with a narrow, cold glass filled with ice and liquid the color of cochineal. I want to search out that initial experience, because it clearly set the stage for my own particular era made of equal parts adventure, romance, melancholy, and inspiration. I want to examine what Proust was able to capture in his madeleine, the taste, the setting, the weather, the conversation, because there are, on each occurrence, in a different state) and marks the experience that much more clearly while at the same time bringing on a flood of all the past Campari. Perhaps, he warns, I will never really find the original experience.

Trained in philosophy, he continues, recalling a discussion of memory theory from his university days. He remembers a warm spring afternoon in the classroom and the professor, her sleeves still buttoned at the wrist despite the heat, explaining the idea that we attach various tags to memories, and later we find a tag and then, we hope, the memory, provided the tag is still linked and not lost. I want to search out that initial experience, because it clearly set the stage for my own particular era made of equal parts adventure, romance, melancholy, and inspiration. I want to examine what Proust was able to capture in his madeleine, the taste, the setting, the weather, the conversation, because there are, on each occurrence, in a different state) and marks the experience that much more clearly while at the same time bringing on a flood of all the past Campari. Perhaps, he warns, I will never really find the original experience.

By most accounts we can sense only five flavors, which to me seems to correspond quite elegantly to the inevitable events that mark our lives: sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and then a fifth flavor, which I feel is somehow synonymous with the category we might label inexplicable, made possible by an amino acid and known by the Japanese as umami.

So, I follow the braid back, the little woven string of all the Campari I have known, from the one I had just last week on the first hot day of our summer, a five o’clock cocktail after a day of gardening, of cutting back dead canes on roses, of weeding a plot of herbs, of building new cedar boxes for raised beds. This cocktail hour is reminiscent of growing up in an age when our parents would break at the end of a hot summer day and mix their gin and tonics or Irish whiskies (why did they never have Campari?) and sit on the porch in the shade or on the patio next to the white blooming camellias. This is also what their parents did, some with the selfsame Irish whiskey, others with a glass of cold, pale local beer.

We sit with our Campari on the porch looking at the garden we’ve so carefully tended all day, our glasses sweating in our hands, letting the evening heat slide by. We’ve marked the first day of our summer not by the calendar but by the first sip of this bitter, slightly medicinal liquor. My husband proffers a notion: Perhaps, every Campari is a first Campari, and each time you drink it, the taste surprises you (because you are, on each occurrence, in a different state) and marks the experience that much more clearly while at the same time bringing on a flood of all the past Campari. Perhaps, he warns, I will never really find the original experience.

On a porch in Vermont on an early summer evening, we could really be anywhere: on a piazza in Casale Monferrato, in northern Piedmont, sitting under a loggia watching everyone else enact their evening rituals riding by on their bicycles; to the seaside terrace overlooking a quiet spring beach in northeastern Sicily; to the corner brasserie
across from the École Militaire in Paris; to the warm bar in Vienna’s Hotel König von Ungarn in winter where we sit on a tufted couch and I need those medicinal properties of Campari as I’ve come down with a stomach flu. We could even shuttle back to 1842 to a little bar off the piazza S. Carlo in Turin where fourteen-year-old Gaspare expertly mixes his own bitter concoction, a recipe for a brilliant red liquid that he’s created with a combination of over sixty herbs, spices, barks, and fruit peels. He adds a flourish of bubbly water and serves it to the traveling American couple in the corner. She feels slightly ill from the heat of the city and the stays propping up her dress, and he is in need of refreshment so that he may keep a better, watchful eye over his wife.

Gaspare has been working at the Bass Bar for a couple of years (this is long before child labor laws) as an apprentice maître liquoriste, or master drink maker, the name given to bariste and bartenders to encompass the creative elements of their work. This is at the dawn of European cocktails, aperativi, digestivi as part of popular, public culture. As with the history of all alcoholic beverages, bitter drinks concocted from roots and herbs have been around for a very long time in their medicinal guises. It is said that by the seventeenth century, the term “cocktail” had been coined to describe the practice of plucking the family rooster’s tail feathers to dab alcoholic bitters on sore tonsils. Monks have been making potions to aid the digestion, or make one generally feel better, since the Middle Ages. But in the 1840s, café culture was just introducing the idea of mixed drinks as part of the social fabric. Maître liquoristes took the tools of the apothecary and applied it cleverly to pleasure. Now, unlike your neighborhood bartender, maître liquoristes are more commonly known as the creators of such beauties as cognac, armagnac, marc, and grappa.

Knowing that he was on to something, young Gaspare Campari hit the road and sold his drink throughout Italy. Twenty years later, in his early thirties, Gaspare founded his Gruppo Campari in Milan. In those twenty years France and Italy had become powerful rivals in the production and consumption of aperativi. Aperativi makers began using the names of their home cities, like Milan and Turin, on their labels as the product was distributed throughout the countryside.

In 1862 Gaspare settled in Milan, his second wife’s home city, and opened a café in front of Milan’s grand and historic cathedral, the Duomo. In Turin he opened the Café Campari. His youngest son, Davide, worked in the Campari for thirty-three years serving the elite of Turin society, like his well-loved King Vittorio Emanuele and his Prime Minister Cavour.

In the early 1900s Davide met and fell in love with an opera singer, a certain Lina Cavelieri. Shortly after they met, Lina had to move to Nice to perform for the summer. In order to follow her, Davide decided to enter the export market officially, and it was then that Gruppo Campari began its long history of international distribution. Davide’s affair with Lina is proudly known in the company profile as the “love story” of the history of Campari.

While Gaspare Campari had been the creator of the family recipe, it was Davide who broke new ground in marketing and advertising, guiding the first company to boldly grasp the concept of branding and how it would affect the public. Davide smartly sold their signature drink to rival bars and cafés as long as they agreed to display the “Campari Bitters” sign prominently in their location. As part of this effort, Davide began to work with up-and-coming designers and artists by commissioning a series of posters advertising Campari. His only criteria: the brand name must be clearly displayed, artists must use uncomplicated color, and the brand should be incorporated naturally into the design. In 1921 the designer Cappiello created one of the most memorable of the advertising posters. His Folietto displayed a dancing clown in an orange peel spiral holding a Campari bottle high above his head.

Today, the recipe for Campari is a tightly held secret shrouded in mystery, steeping the drink even further in tangled notions of passion and intrigue. The company maintains a byzantine system wherein the president of the company is the only person in the world who knows the complete list of sixty-eight ingredients and how they come together. It is said that one morning each week the president personally produces the concentrate with the help of eight assistants, each of whom is privy only to one part of the recipe.

As we sit on the porch, my husband and I try to work our way back. I think if I wander down the memory road with him as my companion, surely we’ll stumble across that first Campari on a terrace somewhere. It is somewhat incredible to me that I can go back through this catalog to such moments as sitting with friends on the pea-stone patio of a little hotel called the Stella d’Italia on the edge of Lake Lugano on the border between Italy and Switzerland. It is spring, and the plane trees—severely pollarded in the European fashion—are sprouting their green leaves, and the roses trained to the railing encircling the terrace are starting to bloom, releasing heady scents of their old Gallica line. It is evening, and the sun has just slipped behind an alp, leaving us with plenty of soft light but taking with it the net of jewels it cast on the water. A woman walks a lanky black cat on a leash on the adjacent terrace. The sound of a duck landing on the lake startles him, and he leaps into one of the plane trees and will not come down. Each of us drinks our Campari and soda,
trying to make the cocktail last because if we finish the cocktail, we must go in to dinner, and while we are greatly anticipating dinner, it will mean we are that much closer to the end of the meal, and therefore the end of the day.

As we walk back through these predinner memories, traveling across the continent, or back here at home, I find myself suddenly in Rome. It is a warm October evening, my last evening in Italy before returning home to the United States. I am leaving behind my husband who is living outside of Florence in a town nestled on a curve in the countryside so that he can continue his apprenticeship with a baker; or perhaps, he is leaving me behind when he gets on the train the following morning. We are walking on our last evening together before our brief separation. We are dressed for dinner, which is not until much later, but we are planning to stroll around to the Trevi Fountain because I am superstitious and like the idea of throwing copper coins and making wishes.

We’ve left the Hotel Suisse via the long, grand staircase from the fourth floor where it keeps its rooms, and we’ve been greeted by the little black cat who belongs to the patroness and sits on the doorstep on the ground floor in the wide loggia that leads inward to the courtyard. The little black cat likes to ride the elevator up and down with the hotel guests, or he sits in a red velvet chair next to the parlor palm in the tiny lobby. I wonder a little about this occurrence of black cats.

On a quiet street, near the famous four corners with the four fountains built into the building niches, we stop into a narrow bar for refreshment. It is there that I am convinced we taste our first Campari and soda, along with a toast to share, a grilled ham and cheese sandwich on flat, square bread. The evening is still hot in the city, and the cold bitter taste feels good down the throat, a perfect companion to our snack. I remember the frosted glass wall that separates the bar from the public phone and restrooms and a lovesick inamorato pleading on the telephone with his fiancé to take him back: No, of course he didn’t really mean to go dancing with the American girl after all…

The evening light on our porch has shifted, sunk past the horizon line just enough so that we are now in shade. I consider my husband’s remembrance of the memory tag theory, and I decide I like it in conjunction with the idea that every Campari could be a first Campari, because that is romantic. And somehow this mixes well with Proust. I find myself leaving the porch for a moment and searching out my 1928 edition of Proust’s Swann’s Way, a book I pilfered from the bookcase in the guestroom of my parents’ house. I know what I’m looking for is on or around page seventy. I don’t know why I know this, except that when I first came across Proust’s passage about a piece of cake dipped in his Aunt Leonie’s tea, a passage I had heard about for years before actually reading the book, it thundered at me as one of the great moments of my reading life.

What I’m looking for is actually on page sixty-five of my yellowed and slightly musty copy. It begins:

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings…when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flowered tea…But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered…the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

It is in this drop of essence in my glass—cold, slightly medicinal, and the color of cochineal—where my own past hovers and reassembles itself, reminding me of the little black cats, the coins in the fountain, the summers long gone, and first travels. And, yes, the memory, in all its full and strange glory, suddenly returns.

---

Vodka Negroni

This drink is adapted from an hosteria in the little hamlet of Terano Nuovo in the Abruzzo, not far from the old-fashioned seaside resort Pineto on Italy’s Adriatic coast. The padrone, a generous soul, treated us to three rounds of negroni and would have treated us to more if we had felt more stalwart.

This is the sort of drink that restores one’s faith, or in any case, its fuchsia sunset color will chase away any of the darker moods. A traditional negroni is made with gin, but gin does not always agree, and the clean elements of vodka complement the bittersweet of the Campari and sweet vermouth very nicely.

1 healthy ounce vodka
1½ ounce Campari
1½ ounce sweet vermouth
lemon twist
ice cubes

Fill cocktail shaker with ice cubes. Add vodka, Campari, and vermouth. Shake and then strain into a highball glass over more ice cubes. Finish with a twist of lemon.