

What's your

poison?

Nocino

Only in Italy could walnut husks inspire an after-dinner tippie, but the result is reasonably palatable. Sweet and friendly and surprisingly strong liqueur (35%) with undertones of mead and an agreeable, coffee-ish aftertaste. Perhaps equally good, or better, as a sauce – dip your crispy duck in it, or pour it on the Haagen Dazs.

Walnuts have to be young and virginal, harvested on the feast day of St John. Cloves and cinnamon are added. Bucolic scene on label appears to show peasants hunting walnuts with guns. Length: 330mm



Ouzo

Popular with beer among professional breakfast drinkers, Ouzo has been the traditional undoing of many a holidaymaker, producing hangovers of rare depth and quality thanks to a powerful dehydrating effect. For this reason the locals don't tend to quaff it like squash and always dilute it with water, the resultant cloudiness (of the drink) imparting a raffish, knowing air to a pretty basic 38% spirit. Turkey's equivalent anise infusion is *raki*, and Lebanon's *arack* is also similar. Treated with respect it's not half bad: slightly sweet with a powerful kick, and an aftertaste that doesn't outstay its welcome.

Ouzo fact: also goes cloudy if you stick it in the fridge.

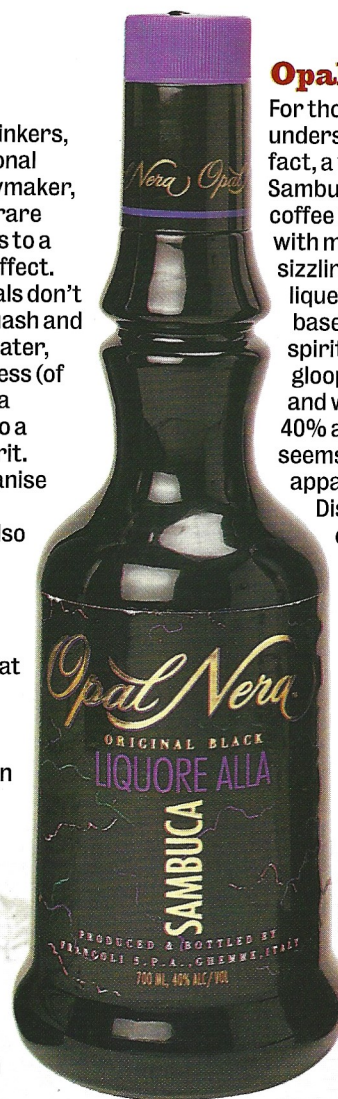


Opal Nera

For those too young yet to understand that drinking is, in fact, a viable lifestyle choice, Sambuca is flamed with a coffee bean and consumed with much fanfare and sizzling of nose hairs. This liqueur, however, although based on the clear anise spirit, is a thick, purplish gloop with the comforting and warming qualities of a 40% alcohol cough syrup. It seems wrong that something apparently produced by the

Disney animation department should be so strong, but that doubtless explains its popularity among the dispossessed fashion victims of the Antipodes.

Style quotient: nul points. It's not funny, and it's not clever. It's purple.



Liquore Strega

Only two people know the recipe for this scouring, toothpasty mouthwash, and if they drink much of this it's a wonder they can remember it. Coloured with saffron, flavoured with an involved formula of herbs, this overpowering aperitif has monastic roots typical of drinks sold originally as medicines, the principle being that if it tastes this nasty it must be good for you. Meanwhile, 40% alcohol acts as an incentive. That elegant, tapering bottle begs you to open it, but this is a drink for the eyes only.

Finish: unlikely. This will gather dust in your liquor cabinet for decades.



Soon after the fall of Carthage, in an olive grove somewhere on the Appian Way, a mule carrying a sack of oregano fell unnoticed into a vat of industrial cleaning fluid, and the Mediterranean drinks industry was born.

It is one of life's most enduring mysteries that a region which contributes so much to world cuisine should labour under such confusion when it comes to deciding on the crucial differences between a good drink and, say, a really effective kettle descaler. Give a cask of spirit alcohol and a random handful of twigs and berries to a Briton with time on his hands, and you end up with gin. Try the same thing with a Russian, throw in a potato or two, and he'll hand you a jug of

vodka. But transfer this social experiment to the cradle of Western civilisation and you end up with a funny-shaped bottle, a label covered in small print boasting about a secret recipe, and something odd inside that tastes like wood preservative.

But, when in Rome, one must at least try to tolerate indigenous customs with good humour. The local mechanic might not be able to find you a fuel filter for a TAMD71 before next Tuesday week, but he seems pretty relaxed about it and he'll probably live longer than any of us. Perhaps that mysterious digestif presented at the end of last night's dinner holds the secret. It certainly wasn't port...

Punt e Mes

An alcoholic equivalent of platform shoes, this truly horrible vermuth and its Campari-type compatriots are so archetypally seventies that at the trendy end of the bar trade they're starting to make a bizarre fashion comeback. Punt e Mes actually comes into its own as an aperitif with the simple addition of ice – provided you're sitting at a pavement cafe in Cannes and not struggling with the shakes in a Bermondsey bedsit. Connoisseurs will also add a splash of fresh orange to tart it up a little. **Hipness rating:** incalculable, but only amongst your children's friends.



Hierbas Tunel

That moulded glass, the iridescent green – why, this is lime marmalade seen through the eyes of William Burroughs, complete with alien vegetable fronds within. The initial numbing effect of the 40% spirit is alarming but soon gives way to waves of weirdness and a general damp sweat, after which the dry, licorice flavour of this true bio-hazard of a drink comes through strongly. Actually looks worse out of the bottle, but gets better the longer you look at it. **Aphrosidiasac qualities:** none. Label shows train roaring out of tunnel.

Fernet Branca

A powerful, pungent, medicinal 40% digestif intended, as a waiter once explained, "to aid your internal transit". Or possibly hasten it, one way or the other. Devotees praise its restorative powers, though if you're ever ill enough to actually want some of this it might be safer just to call an ambulance. Not a drink to be taken lightly, if at all. Straight, it seems amusing at first, because it is so extraordinarily bad. But then it simply becomes painful. Known in the bar trade as "liquid cocaine", or the ultimate pick-me-up: down it in one with iced, still mineral water as a chaser.

Alternative uses: anything requiring strong chemicals.



Floriovo

Sounds a lot worse than it is: Marsala, Sicily's fortified wine, with egg in it – why? In fact it turns out to be a well-mannered if rather sweet sherry-type tippie with a hint of chocolate raisins, which you could confidently offer your aunt before lunch. Served over ice with a splash of citrus to give it a bit of an edge, it makes an original late-morning sharpener that will have the waiter looking at you with renewed respect. **Side-effects:** none known, but the lion on the label is chewing the carpet.

