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# Aperitif vs Digestif: What’s the Difference?

Bookend your next meal with a bright and bubbly beginning and a bittersweet finish.

By [Kate Dingwall](#) | Published on July 1, 2024



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As the workday winds down, many Europeans begin a nightly ritual. Evenings start with [aperitivo](#), a pre-dinner custom involving light snacks and brightly-hued drinks like [Campari and sodas](#), [spritzes](#), or icy cold shots of herbaceous [Chartreuse](#). To wrap the night and help settle the stomach, they turn to a digestivo such as [bittersweet liqueurs](#), [grappas](#), or other brandies.

These two categories of drinks – aperitif and digestif – are often confused, and are differentiated by both the style of drink and the occasion during which it’s consumed. Aperitivos (or aperitif, in French-speaking countries) are for kicking off an evening, and digestivos/digestifs are for winding down.

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“An aperitif sets the tone for the evening – it’s almost like an introduction of what’s to come,” says [Yannick Bigourdan](#), the owner of [Lucie](#), a fine-dining restaurant in downtown Toronto. “The digestif is the closing act, a civilized way to finish dinner and a time to reflect.”

We asked beverage experts to explain the difference between these two styles of drinks, what cocktails and liqueurs fall into which categories, and how to enjoy these drinking rituals the European way.

## When to choose an aperitif or a digestif

Aperitifs and digestifs are both occasions and beverage categories.

Aperitifs are enjoyed the hour before dinner. They tend to be bright, low-ABV beverages meant to open up your palate to food. Digestifs are the closer, beverages that signify the end of an evening and traditionally contain botanicals that aid in digestion.

“Aperitivo is a signal that your workday is through and it’s time to settle into the evening,” says Nate Hayden, beverage director for [Mother Pizzeria](#) and [Giusto](#) in Newport, Rhode Island. “It’s a small ceremony to mark that your time is now yours. On the other hand, digestivo is for when the meal is over but you’re still enjoying your company. It’s a way to elongate your meal and relax with friends over one last drink.”

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“Aperitifs are perfect for any dining occasion,” says Bigourdan, who was raised in the South of France by three generations of chefs. “The category is so broad, so you can adjust to the mood and spirit of the evening. Digestifs are more serious. They should be enjoyed after a celebratory dinner or a magnificent meal.”

Raymundo Arvizu, the lead bartender at [Bar Sprezzatura](#) in San Francisco, pairs aperitifs with sunny-day finger foods: crudo and oysters. “For digestivos? Tiramisu is perfect,” he says.

“Aperitivo is best paired with light, salty snacks and finger foods like cured meats, cheeses, and olives,” says Hayden. “For me, digestivo rides alone.”

## What is an aperitif?

The concept of aperitivo dates back to ancient times, when Romans would gather before dinners to enjoy grapes and sip wines infused with botanicals. The addition of bitter herbs into the wine [was said](#) to help the stomach to relax and open (the Latin verb aperire meaning “to open”).

Around a similar time, St. Diadochos of Photiki, a Greek theologian in the fifth century, called an aperitif a drink that “opened a way to the stomach for the vast meal which is to follow.”

Aperitif Fast Facts

- Starts before a meal
- Served alongside light bites
- Usually lower ABV and light on the palate
- Often involves a carbonated element

In modern times, the word aperitif and its derivatives can take different forms, though all lead back to the same intentions. Aperitivo can refer to a specific moment in the day, the golden hour after the daily grind winds down and before dinner begins. If a friend invites you to aperitivo, you’ll probably end up nibbling on finger foods and sipping spritzes around sunset.

Aperitif can also refer to cocktails that are lower-octane and light on the palate. They’re not overly fussy or bogged down with a dozen ingredients. Usually, aperitifs are just a liqueur (traditionally a botanical-based or infused one), citrus, and sometimes, seltzer or another carbonated element.

“For aperitifs, I prefer something on the lighter side, like Lillet Rosé,” says Bigourdan. “I like to prepare mine with some ice cubes, an orange zest, and a touch of soda water.” At aperitivo hour, Hayden sticks to a [Spritz](#).

Aperitif can also loosely refer to a style of liqueur that shines in aperitif-style cocktails, including Italian classics like Cynar, [Campari](#), and [Cocchi Americano](#), French aperitifs like Lillet, Dubonnet, and Chartreuse, as well as next-generation products like [Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto](#) and [Bruto Americano](#).

“My favorite [aperitivo] are Aperol, Ramazzotti Rosato, Cocchi Americano, or Select – the original bitter used in the very first spritzes,” says Arvizu.

## What is a digestif?

Digestifs are after-dinner drinks, or “the perfect nightcap,” says Arvizu. Hayden adds that “it’s best served after a meal as both a way to settle one’s stomach and to spend a little more time with your friends and family.”

Initially, digestifs were used medicinally as a salve for stomach woes and other medical ailments. Eventually, drinkers grew wise to the category’s more enjoyable qualities and digestifs have transitioned to become an alcoholic, end-of-meal drink. Today, digestifs are served after the main course has been served, the dessert eaten, and the espresso finished.

Digestif Fast Facts

- Served after a meal
- Once used medicinally, still used as a way to settle one’s stomach
- Often served on their own
- Amari and bitter, herbal liqueurs as well as brandies are popular digestifs

Hayden has an extensive list of amari at both Mother and Giusto, but he’s particularly fond of the fernet and amari from Faccia Brutto. Bigourdan is keen on anything that adheres to his “GBD” mantra: gold, brown, and delicious. “I’d go for a Cognac like Martell XO or a bourbon, perhaps the Eagle Rare bottling,” he says.

Arvizu favors Amaro Sibilìa, Braulio, or “a good aged palo cortado,” but also 1960 Branca Menta, a mint-ified [Fernet Branca](#), and Sicilian-made Etrusco amaro from 1970. “They’re my deathbed drinks,” says Arvizu.

Other popular digestifs include brandies like grappa and [Calvados](#), the latter is often served in Normandy as a palate cleanser between courses.

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