



"Christopher Villano"

After thoughtful experimentation, Catherine Lombardi co-owner Francis Schott and head bartender Chris Stanley determined that a float of Dolcetto d'Alba was the perfect finish to the Cosmopolitan Delight.

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## Vinifying Cocktails

Christy Canterbury / March 2013

**At New Jersey's Catherine Lombardi restaurant, when it comes to selecting wines to enhance cocktails, the quality, style, and variety are just as important as when pairing wine with food.**

Why do people choose to adulterate fine wines, beers, and spirits? For variety's sake. It's the very spice of life." So concludes the opening paragraph of Gary Regan's *The Joy of Mixology*. It's also very likely that the world's first cocktails were rigged up from poor quality wine (and beer) and "improved," aka masked, with additives.

Throughout the centuries, wine has played an integral role in cocktail culture. Brandies like Cognac, Armagnac, and Pisco are derived from wine. Champagne adds finishing flourishes, and still table wines swim in punch bowls and float as garnishes. Fortified wines, like Port, Sherry, and Madeira, figure prominently, and to craft properly two of the world's most famous cocktails, the Martini and the

Manhattan, the aromatized wine vermouth is obligatory. Really, it's nothing new. Hippocrates may have been one of the first to make flavored wine, rather for medicine than tittle, as we know it.

Francis Schott, co-owner of Catherine Lombardi (a *Wine Spectator* Best of Award of Excellence recipient since 2005) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and his head bartender, Chris Stanley, are deeply familiar with the history of wine in cocktails. Schott begins by mentioning that Richard "Cicero" Cook's *Oxford Night Caps*, printed around 1827, notes that a Bishop cocktail, which uses red wine or ruby-style Port, appears in print as early as 1447 in the expense records of the institution that would become Oxford. Punches, which featured wine in the bowls of aristocrats in addition to the booze of sailors, became vogue in the 1600s. At the end of that century through 1860, American colonists popularized flips, in which they often used fortified wines. During this time the sangaree, which morphed into sangria in the 1960s, appeared in 1774. With a few centuries of such drinking traditions well established, the word "cocktail" first appeared in print in 1806, according to Dale DeGroff in *The Craft of the Cocktail*.

Today's booming cocktail culture pulls inspirations from old trends, many of which use wine. However, successfully using wine in cocktails isn't necessarily obvious or easy. First, there is the question of the wine's intended effect. Wine can stretch a cocktail, provide acid, pop aromatics, add sweetness, or do several of these things at once. Schott states that the biggest challenge is the body. Bubbly can finish a cocktail beautifully, and fortified wines stand up easily. However, spirits and bitters effortlessly overwhelm still table wine's texture and flavor. One method of overcoming this is to float a still wine on top of the cocktail.

"For wine to have integrity in cocktails, it has to be a cocktail where the wine matters," declared Schott. He went on to explain that good bartenders design recipes based on brands rather than wine or spirit categories: "Gin is not gin! Plymouth is Plymouth, and Beefeater is Beefeater. Plymouth is more elegant, floral, and pretty," Schott elaborated. "Beefeater is more foursquare, peppery, and structured. Dolcetto is red wine, and so is Nebbiolo. But, they are not interchangeable!"

This point was illustrated as the duo prepared two variations on a Regent's Punch to elucidate. Regent's Punch is finished with sparkling wine, an ingredient often haphazardly substituted. Alongside each version, a pony glass of the bubbly used was served. From color to texture to flavor, clear differences emerged between the drink topped with Doyard Champagne Vendémière Premier Cru Brut NV versus the other with Varichon & Clerc Privilège NV. Both are Blanc de Blancs, but the Champagne is 100 percent Chardonnay, while the crémant is a blend of Chardonnay with other varieties. The biggest dissimilarity is the different winemaking. The Champagne's primary fermentation occurs in oak *barriques* (rather than tanks), and the wine rests on its second fermentation lees for four years. These two wines add body and flavor, which surfaced in the cocktail. Each was tasty, but they clearly differed in style and price tag.

Still wines pose even more of a challenge. White wines in particular are tricky because, while those used in cocktails tend to be fragrant and lighter bodied, they can easily become lost in the fuller-bodied, spirit-driven whole of the prepared drink. Stanley mentioned that his European Holiday cocktail required tinkering with a whole line-up of Rieslings to perfectly blend in the white wine with the other flavors and to find just the right amount of balancing residual sugar and acidity.

When it comes to still red wine, the float is king. The feasibility of floating wine depends on the specific gravity of the rest of the drink. The wine must be lighter, to sit on top. (As an aside, Schott shared a great trick for floats. Rather than pouring the wine over the back of a bar spoon—the commonly taught way, slowly pour the liquid into the bowl of the spoon positioned on the surface of the drink. This “arrests the wine's vertical motion” and creates a “crisp line that allows the float to remain on top of the drink like the head of a well-drawn pint,” says Schott.)

In another wine-to-cocktail tailoring experiment, Schott and Stanley sampled five different reds floated on Cosmopolitan Delights, a concoction of Hennessy Cognac, Orange Curaçao, lemon juice, orgeat, and red wine. The Hilberg-Pasquero Vareij, a light aromatic blend of Brachetto and Barbera, popped the aromatics, but its tannins proved too wimpy to properly structure the drink. By contrast, a Barbaresco hammered the drink with tannins. A California Petite Sirah imparted heaviness and an unpleasant cherry Cold-Eeze flavor. A Veneto Merlot introduced capsicum aromas. At last, it was the Schiavenza Dolcetto d'Alba 2009 that provided the perfect combination of brightened aromatics, mild tannins, and acidic lift. All but the Barbaresco were drinkable, but only the Dolcetto was truly excellent.

Where wine and liquor really come together is in one of the oldest wine cocktails: the punch. In the early 1700s, when aristocrats copied the punch from sailors, they rendered them effete by adding wine. Weightier punches use fortified wines, as in Admiral Russell's Excess Punch. Lighter ones, like the Fourth Regent's Punch, use Champagne.

Punches are stable and designed to remain delicious as their ice melt incorporates. (An ice block resting in a punch keeps it cool as it is enjoyed.) Punches' alcohols vary, but they average 20 percent rather than most cocktails' 40 percent. Schott mentioned that many establishments new to punch don't immediately grasp that it must continue to taste good as it stands. “You can't just scale up any cocktail and put it in a punch bowl. It will either taste too strong at the outset or too weak 20 minutes later.” Schott also advises that, since Champagne punches do not retain their bubbles long, adding more bubbly refreshes them. “A great punch is a living, evolving thing!”

Several other cocktail categories incorporate wine. Resembling punches are cups. When they were invented, cups were an iced beverage resembling punch, using whatever wine was on hand (usually something produced nearby), and were served from a pitcher. There are also flips. Historically, these were warm drinks compounded with eggs, sugar, and spice. In modern parlance, the term is often applied to any drink shaken with a whole egg. There are also cobblers and tikis, which both use ice (always in cobblers and most of the time in tikis) and come in wildly imaginative variations.

Interestingly, cocktailians embrace wine, yet many wine imbibers—even adventurous ones

—approach spirits with caution. Schott suggested a few concoctions to encouraging cross-over imbibing. One of them, the Negroni Sbagliato, Schott called “a gateway cocktail for wine drinkers.” Translated as “Botched Negroni,” Prosecco replaces the gin typically mixed with red vermouth and Campari. The resulting alcohol is substantially lower, yet the intense aromatics remain.

Of course, a fine list of creative and delicious cocktails often doesn’t sell itself. In a restaurant, rather than a cocktail bar, the sales approach is especially important. Punches, served in beautiful decorative bowls placed on the diners’ table, are popular at Catherine Lombardi. Schott teaches his staff to quickly assess a table upon their first approach and to “utter in the first breath the suggestion of a punch bowl.” Like a magnum, delivering a punch bowl provides a show in the dining room. Performance effects aside, a punch bowl provides the first beverage or two to a table of four or six, quickly setting the table in a festive mood and relieving the server of frequent rechecks on drinks early on as the party settles into the evening. Better yet, if the bar is buzzing, a bartender’s drink-making and paperwork time for a few rounds has been reduced by at least half when a punch bowl goes out.

With a cocktail list as extensive as the one at Catherine Lombardi, training takes on even greater importance. Schott handles this by inviting his staff members to enjoy a drink at the bar each night after their shifts. Staff must change into street clothes, and they are welcome to stay for a second drink, offered at a discount. The critical point is that the beverages offered are exclusively from Catherine Lombardi’s specialty cocktail list. Effectively, Schott builds his cocktail lessons into this opportunity to enjoy the restaurant’s front-of-the-house experience as a guest.

While Stanley mentioned that wine cocktails receive little explicit demand per se because people often are not aware of their beverages’ components, Schott sees bartenders making more wine-driven cocktails to deliver great flavor without the elevated alcohol. Besides offering diversity, this strategy may allow a customer to enjoy an extra beverage, and it may allow a bartender to inconspicuously slow down an overly enthusiastic consumer or satisfy a guest who wants to enjoy cocktails while going easy on the alcohol.

Whether wine stretches, sweetens, acidifies, fragrances, or flourishes a cocktail, bartenders and imbibers can enjoy a seemingly infinite list of explorations. The key to success is taking the extra time—and the money—to tailor cocktails to the best wines.

Find the drinks recipes below: Fourth Regent’s Punch Cosmopolitan Delight Admiral Russell’s Excess Punch The Belfast Cocktail