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## FINANCIAL TIMES

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# Barcelona's new vermouth bars

By Paul Richardson

In trend-obsessed Barcelona, vermouth has taken over from gin and tonic as the tippie of the moment



Barrels of Casa Mariol's own vermouth inside the bar

Saturday morning in Barcelona: the summer sun is already heating up the pavements. In the musty cool of a barrel-lined cellar, I crave a glass of wine but what I'm offered is even better. A glass of vermouth with ice, fizzed up with soda from the siphon, arrives with a series of salty appetite-whetting snacks.

In other parts of Europe, vermouth seems a superannuated drink, its image a dodgy mixture of international glam (remember Martini, "the bright one, the right one?") and 1970s suburban drinks parties. On the international hipness scale, vermouth is down there with Kahlúa, Cointreau and sweet Cyprus sherry.

In trend-obsessed Barcelona, however, *vermut* (the Catalan word for vermouth) has taken over from gin and tonic as the tippie of the moment, moving from the back of the drinks cabinet to the forefront of fashion.

Here, at least, there is more to vermouth than a mere drink. "*Fer vermut*" ("doing vermouth") is a distinctive ritual with its own set of rules. Vermouth in Barcelona is taken at the end of the morning, or just possibly at the start of the evening. It is associated with snacks ranging from a plate of crunchy green olives and a basket of potato crisps to an anchovy cured in olive oil, a tin of mussels in spicy sauce or a bowl of crisp-fried *calamares*.

We're not talking tapas. Unlike the pan-Spanish "little dishes" that can transform nibbles into a meal, strictly speaking *fer vermut* is merely the prelude to the long, late Catalan lunch. "The ideal is a couple of drinks, no more," says a Barcelona friend. "Because later you've got lunch with your mother-in-law."

One o'clock on Sunday. In the square outside Gaudí's church of the Sagrada Família, tourists gawp at the façade of this still astonishing building. I head for Casa Mariol, a postmodern tavern (it has both funky decor *and* wooden barrels) that has become a reference point for the vermouth scene in Barcelona. Miquel Angel Vaquer, the handsome public face of Casa Mariol, serves me an aperitif with all the trimmings, which rise in an edible crescendo from crisps and almonds to bread-roll *clotxas* with salted herring, parmesan biscuits with *morcilla*, big fat green olives stuffed with a rolled-up slice of cured pork loin, and *banderillas* with gherkin, pickled pepper and fresh goat's cheese.

To drink, a glass of Casa Mariol's very own vermut, a spicy, aromatic drink that wipes the floor with Martini and, as of last summer, comes in bottles with a smart graphic-designer livery (very Barcelona). Vaquer tells me that it is now the default vermouth at many of the world's top-end Spanish restaurants, from Jaleo in Washington DC to London's Barrafinna and José Pizarro.



©Miquel Gonzalez

If vermouth is losing its fusty image, it is partly thanks to this man. Vermut, you might say, is in his blood. For generations the Vaquer family has had vineyards and a winery in the village of Batea, in the province of Tarragona. Thirteen years ago, they opened a bar in central Barcelona to sell their wines both from the barrel and in bottle. When Miquel Angel took over the bar he decided to promote his family's home-made vermouth, in effect creating one of the city's first dedicated *vermuterías*.

A glass of vermouth



Outside Casa Mariol

In the villages of southern Catalonia vermouth-taking is an irreplaceable element of social life. "Whenever you went to a bar with friends at midday, it was a vermut you'd have. The soda siphon was always there on the bar-top," remembers Vaquer. There was even a vermouth dance on Sundays after Mass. "In my house, the vermut was drunk while the paella was 'resting'," he adds. "My father busied himself with the olives and the snacks."

There are more than 25 brands of vermouth in Spain, the best known being Yzaguirre, Iris and Miró, all hailing from the town of Reus in Tarragona. Casa Mariol's vermut is an artisan version, made with a base of white wine from the Macabeo grape, darkened with green walnuts and flavoured with as many as 150 aromatics, prominent among which are rosemary, thyme, orange peel and green olives. The process involves macerating the herbs in alcohol, which is then strained off and mixed with the wine along with sugar.

Until a few years ago in Barcelona *fer vermut* was usually the preserve of cellars, which served elderly clients their vermouth straight from the barrel. The city's remaining taverns of this type are now seeing their client base widen drastically as the hipsters join the oldsters in the daily aperitif ritual. Meanwhile, specialist vermuterías are opening in their droves and Bodega 1900 (being created by Albert Adrià – younger brother of superstar chef Ferran Adrià – and due to open in September) will give the scene a dose of global hype.



Vermut is popping up in some unlikely places. At Sónar, the electronic music festival held in Barcelona in June, a vermouth stall did a brisk trade. And at a new wave of daytime fiestas in public spaces, the youth of Barcelona have taken to sipping the drink as an alternative to beer and spirits.

Late on Monday morning I make my way down the Avinguda Paral·lel towards Poble Sec, the increasingly desirable but still authentic Barcelona barrio running south towards the sea. The bar to conjure with around here is Quimet & Quimet, an antique bodega that I knew as a great place for vermouth in the 1990s, like the wonderful Xampanyet next to the Picasso museum.

But whereas Xampanyet clings to its blue-and-white-tiled soul and still sees the occasional Catalan punter, Quimet & Quimet has fallen to the grockles. I blame Woody Allen, whose film *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* brought the city to the attention of US visitors as never before. At one o'clock on the day I visit you can hardly get in the door for the gangs of young Americans charmed by what they probably think is a real old Barcelona lunch spot.

Further down the avenue I stop off for a chat with Albert Adrià. As a chef, Albert worked with his brother at El Bulli and now runs several Barcelona restaurants including Pakta, which offers Peruvian cuisine, and the hugely successful Tickets.

"I've been wanting to do this for ages," enthuses Adrià as we cross the street to his vermutería Bodega 1900, where builders are still raising dust. "There'll be vermouth on tap and a vermouth menu. There'll be *patatas bravas* and *mojama* and *croquetas* and *jamón ibérico*. I want to operate a closed-door policy on Sundays, just for the locals. In an economic crisis, you get to the end of the week and you say to yourself: 'I deserve this.'"

On Tuesday I trawl the cellars of Gràcia, an area given a new lease of life by a young clientele. The Bodega Marín, a creaky old tavern (run for the past quarter century by Antonio and Tere Tarragó) whose strip lights and blackened barrels proclaim its pedigree, has some of the juiciest anchovy fillets I'd ever tasted. That evening it is the turn of Sant Antoni – currently Barcelona's most happening neighbourhood – and Morro Fi. This hole-in-the-wall bar has become a destination vermutería thanks to the vision of its founders, whose food-and-drink blog "dels del morro fi" ("the fancy eaters") has helped kick-start a renaissance in Barcelona's aperitif culture.

By Wednesday I have almost had my fill but the last stop on my vermouth route turns out to be unmissable. I take the train to Vilassar de Mar, a little town half an hour along the coast where the Tapias family opened their fishermen's tavern, L'Espinaler, in 1896. The old bar is still here, and has become a place of pilgrimage for Barcelonans – notably on Christmas day, when it is packed. But the real action these days is an offshoot in the unlikely setting of a warehouse on the outskirts. It combines a huge delicatessen and a cavernous bar that, at weekends, attracts up to 500 people for vermut in a dozen varieties, draught beer, cava and edible specialities from Galicia.



Morro Fi in Barcelona's Sant Antoni neighbourhood



Inside Morro Fi

with something very like relief.

In straitened times, *fer vermut* is a rare example of maximum pleasure for minimum outlay.

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**Casa Mariol** c/Rosselló 442, tel: +34 93 436 7628, [www.casamariol.com](http://www.casamariol.com)

**Bodega 1900** c/Tamarit 91, no phone

**Quimet & Quimet** c/del Poeta Cabanyes 25, tel: +34 93 442 3142

**El Xampanyet** c/Montcada 22, tel: +34 93 319 7003

**Bodega Marín** c/Milà i Fontanals 72, tel: +34 93 213 3079

**Morro Fi** c/Consell de Cent 171 (corner c/Comte Borrell), no phone

**Taverna L’Espinaler** c/Camí Ral 1, Vilassar de Mar, tel: +34 93 759 1589, [www.espinaler.es](http://www.espinaler.es)

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