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Study Finds Italian Bars Have Become Part of the Travel Experience

Research presented in Milan said aperitivo customers now weigh food, hospitality, local identity and price more than drinks alone.

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Bars in Italy are playing a larger role in travel and local identity, and the country’s aperitivo ritual is changing with them. New research presented in Milan found that Italians now judge an aperitivo stop not only by its drinks, but also by its food,

hospitality and ties to the surrounding area. The study said the average customer spends 15.7 euros per person on an aperitivo, including food and beverages, at a time when price remains a major factor in consumer choices.

The findings come from “Bar e turismo 2026 - Ospitalità e cultura dell’aperitivo,” a study by Roberta Garibaldi, president of the Italian Food and Wine Tourism Association, known as Aite. The research was presented in connection with The World’s 50 Best Bars event in Milan, where the international rankings are being revealed based on votes from an academy of more than 800 bartenders, consultants and journalists who judge venues on visits made over the previous 18 months.

The study describes a broad shift in how bars are perceived in Italy. It says bars have moved beyond their traditional role as simple commercial businesses and have become part of the travel experience. In that setting, the bartender is no longer valued only for technical skill. More than half of respondents, 54%, said it is very important that a bartender make the venue feel welcoming and inclusive. The same share, 54%, said they expect recommendations tailored to their tastes. Another 52% said the use of local and seasonal ingredients matters, while 49% said quality nonalcoholic options are important.

Respondents also showed interest in a stronger connection between what they drink and where they are. The study found that 42% value explanations about ingredients, and another 42% appreciate cocktails that reflect the identity of a city. That places bartenders in a role that is partly cultural, linking the venue, the product and the territory around it. Garibaldi said the value of bars in tourism depends on the quality of hospitality and on the ability to tell the story of local products and identities.

For travelers, highly ranked bars can influence how a trip is planned. According to the research, 27% of respondents said an award-winning venue becomes a stop they want to book and visit, while 30% said it becomes a reason to return to a destination and something they would recommend to others. For some travelers, it can even help shape the choice of destination itself. The age group most responsive to acclaimed bars was 25 to 34. Among them, 36% said they visit these venues during a trip and 38% said they share the experience on social media.

Milan emerged as the Italian city most closely linked to aperitivo culture. In spontaneous responses, 61% named Milan as the city they most associate with aperitivo, ahead of Rome at 44% and Venice at 30%. The study said Milan has a particularly strong reputation tied to bars, cocktails and the aperitivo tradition. It found that 51% of respondents see the city as having a bar and cocktail scene of international level, and 48% consider it a leading destination for aperitivo.

Food plays a central role in that image. The research found that customers choose a venue for food and price before they choose it for drinks. Asked what best represents Lombardy's aperitivo tradition, 49% pointed to pairings with traditional dishes served in small portions. Lombard cured meats followed at 46%, cheeses at 44%, and mountain specialties at 41%. On the beverage side, regional wines and sparkling wines were cited by 36%, and craft beer by 30%.

Some local products are still underused in the aperitivo offer, according to the study. Lombard rice ranked among the top three choices for 25% of respondents, but herbs and botanicals from the region were named by only 16%, and fish from Lombardy's lakes by 14%. The research said those less obvious associations leave room for bartenders and operators to use aperitivo as a way to tell a broader story about place and local identity. In that context, 36% of respondents said bars can help communicate the products and identities of Lombardy's different territories, while 33% said there are place-based aperitivo experiences outside Milan that remain little known.

Price, however, remains a clear constraint. The study found that 57% of respondents usually spend less than 15 euros on an aperitivo, and 77% stay below 20 euros. When asked why they choose one venue over another, 53% put the quality and variety of the food offering among their top three reasons. Price came next at 51%. Drink quality and location were both cited by 36%, showing that the food menu now carries more weight than the bar program alone in many decisions.

The research also found that aperitivo is now a routine part of social life for much of the country. Nine out of 10 respondents said they had gone for an aperitivo at a bar or other venue in the previous three months, and 65% said they do so at least once a month. Among people ages 25 to 34, the average reached three aperitivi per month at

a bar, compared with 1.9 among those older than 65.

It is also overwhelmingly a shared activity. The study found that 97% of respondents have aperitivo in company, usually with friends, partners or family members. Asked what the ritual represents, 62% linked it to relaxation and the chance to disconnect from the day, while 60% linked it to socializing. Another 44% said aperitivo is a distinctly Italian ritual that is recognizable abroad, a figure that rose to 54% among respondents ages 25 to 34.