

Mathilde
Liqueur

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THE POUR

Refreshing New Sangrias to Chase Away Bad Memories



Brie Passano for The New York Times

From left, a glass of sangria compostela and a glass of sangria penedès at Barraca in the West Village.

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

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It was the stuff of cheap excitement and of headaches, of travel posters of beaches and bullfights, and of simpler times when Greenwich Village was a folk paradise and when Spanish food meant garlic and shrimp rather than laboratory gastronomy.



Brie Passano for The New York Times
Gonzalo Marín, the head bartender at Barraca, adds rosemary to a pitcher of sangria compostela.



Brie Passano for The New York Times
Mr. Marín slices a kiwi.

For wine lovers who have reached middle age, sangria, like Mateus or Boone’s Farm, dredges up memories not altogether pleasant. Kingsley Amis, the British writer who prized his drinking, apparently emerged unscarred, though. He once described sangria as “cheap, easy to make up and pretty harmless — so that you can drink a lot of it without falling down.”

But sangria, the wine punch that is consumed throughout Spain in the heat, and in the tourist spots year round, does not have to be oversweetened with sugar and cheap liqueur, or a repository for rotgut that is too stale to be served by the glass. It apparently doesn’t even have to conform to Spanish traditions. Many people think of it instead as a template, an invitation to experiment with fresh, fruity wines and other fine ingredients. Some restaurants even find in sangria a creative method for skirting the restrictions of wine-and-beer licenses, by making wine-based cocktails.

Lido, an Italian spot in Harlem, serves a sangria with wine, brandy and passion fruit. The sangria at Pig and Khao, a Filipino pub on the Lower East Side, is a red-wine punch made with green mango and papaya. Even the Benihana chain is getting in on the action,

offering what it calls a sparkling strawberry sangria. Who cares if its blend of strawberries, lemon vodka, orange liqueur, lemon juice and simple syrup is like the root beer martini of sangrias, exploiting the name while bearing little resemblance to the original?

Although sangria is related to wine punches served throughout Europe, its history extends for centuries in Spain, where vineyards were first planted by Romans more than 2,000 years ago. It was by most accounts introduced to the United States at the 1964 New York World's Fair, making it more modern than some of New York's older Spanish restaurants, which date from the end of the Spanish Civil War.

While the notion of sangria is malleable enough to accommodate many manifestations, all good ones must have one thing in common: they need to revive the spirit and awaken the senses.

"When you're in the middle of summer in Spain, you can't think of drinking red wine," said Gil Avital, the wine director at [Tertulia](#) in the West Village, which serves a vivacious, lightly sweet sangria on tap. "People ask for it, though it's not listed anywhere. It's a very decent wine cocktail."

After much tinkering, Rafael Mateo, the proprietor of [Pata Negra](#), a Spanish wine bar in the East Village, formulated a sangria that is winelike and very refreshing, with a keen balance of tart and fruity flavors. Even though he features Spanish wines and an excellent selection of sherries, he serves far more sangria than wine, Mr. Mateo said, going through an entire 12-liter container on a busy night, sometimes two in the summer.

"I want them to drink Spanish wine, I want them to drink sherry," he said of his customers. "I thought, if they're going to drink sangria, let me at least make it so I'd like to drink it, too."

Unlike many recipes, which specify Rioja made from the tempranillo grape — mostly, I think, because it is the Spanish red most familiar to Americans — Mr. Mateo prefers using garnacha from Campo de Borja in central Spain, which he said has backbone without being overly tannic. He lightens the blend by adding rosé, and sweetens it with orange liqueur and orange soda rather than with fruit purée, a common addition, which he dislikes because, he said, it gives the sangria a grainy texture. He experimented with orange juice rather than soda, but found it, too, changed the texture. Finally, he allows the punch to knit together overnight and adds cut fruit only at the end, as a garnish.

"People insist on the fruit," he said. "They like it and they eat it."

Mr. Mateo's sangria is simple to make in quantity and would flow copiously at any backyard party. But while sangria may be great for crowds, it also lends itself to painstaking individual preparations. Gonzalo Marín, the beverage director at [Barraca](#), a Spanish restaurant in the West Village, has devised five cocktail versions of sangria that do not resemble the typical punch. I particularly liked the fragrant, deliciously herbal sangria Compostela, made with albariño, sake, lemon grass and apple-rosemary purée, and the sangria Penedes, made with cava, peaches and lavender, a lively Spanish take on the Bellini. Both use non-Spanish ingredients, and neither is made with red wine.

"The idea was to do something playful, but to put sangria on the same level as cocktails," Mr. Marín said. "The essence of sangria is wine, and I wanted to create something with Spanish flavors."

Other delicious departures from basic sangria are more grounded in history. Alex Raij, a co-owner of three Spanish restaurants in New York, makes zurracapote, a red wine punch

often served in northern Spain, at [Txikito](#), her Basque restaurant in Chelsea. It is sweetened with syrup flavored with dried fruit, cinnamon and juniper berries, and fortified with orange liqueur and vodka. As with the cocktails, its preparation is more complicated than basic sangria, but it's refreshing and different, and would make a superb summer cooler.

"It's sweet and fortified, but you're not meant to drink it so strong," Ms. Raij said. "You're meant to drink it over ice, which dilutes it, making it easy and accessible."

For a more traditional red wine sangria, Ms. Raij suggests using apples and lemons, rather than the cornucopia that is sometimes tossed into the punch. "The bitterness of the lemons and the crisp freshness of the apples are good foils for the richness of the red wine," she said. "The pineapples and peaches, they're more cobbler-ish, more dessert." Made with care and good ingredients, even those with bruised memories won't have to fear the painful consequences.

RECIPE

Sangria Penedès

Adapted from Gonzalo Marín



Brie Passano for The New York Times

By ERIC ASIMOV

INGREDIENTS

10 ounces Mathilde or other peach liqueur

2 ounces fresh grapefruit juice

5 dashes Scrappy's lavender bitters (see note)

2 ounces simple syrup

1 bottle Cava

1 peach, diced into small cubes, for garnish

PREPARATION

1. In a pitcher or other container, combine peach liqueur, grapefruit juice, bitters and simple syrup.

2. To serve, pour 1 1/2 ounces of the mixture into a champagne flute and top with Cava.

Garnish with peach cubes.

YIELD

4 to 6 servings

NOTE

Lavender bitters are available from Kalustyan's, kalustyans.com, (800) 352-3451.

