

Limoncello

by Connie Taylor

I discovered limoncello in Italy in 2003. I can't remember the first time I tasted it. It may have been at the suggestion of one of my traveling partners, or a bartender, or of one of the friends I met on that trip. Once, after dinner in a restaurant in the sea front town of San Michele our waiter asked us if we would like a limoncello. With our nods, "si," he opened a glass-fronted refrigerator and took out an unlabeled bottle of cloudy, yellow liquid. He poured the liquor into unmatched aperitif glasses and returned to our table with them on a tray. He didn't charge us for the drinks—we learned that night that it is customary to offer a complimentary after-dinner drink in these neighborhood restaurants.

During that trip to Italy I enjoyed limoncello quite a few times. I didn't keep track—who would? Who could? I enjoyed it in the little neighborhood bars and after dinner in cozy, family style *ristorante*. Every time I sipped it I delighted in the combination of lemon-sour with sweet syrup. That distinctive tang of lemon comes from fruit grown in the sun, water and air of the lovely Mediterranean climate. The taste will always evoke the ambience of long, leisurely dinners by the sea.

I was traveling with my sister Roberta, and we spent part of our trip in Florence with our cousin Robby and Robby's wife Dulci. Dulci was living in Florence for 8 months, having decided the year before to learn Italian. She was studying at the Scuola Leonardo da Vinci in Florence, and spent her mornings in class and her afternoons studying and getting to know the city. Robby spent a few of those months with her, and they traveled throughout Italy and Europe on weekends. When Roberta and I arrived they were settled into their third floor apartment in a renovated monastery in central Florence.

As anyone who has visited Italy knows, the pace of evenings is very different from evenings at home. I easily slipped into the pattern of long dinners beginning about 9:00 followed by a relaxing walk through town. About midnight we usually stopped at a bar for a nightcap or dessert. Roberta would order a cognac or scotch, Robby a gelato or other sweet, and Dulci and I a limoncello. In one beautiful, ornate bar the bartender grasped the neck of one of several bottles that stuck out from recessed, refrigerated holes in the cold marble counter top. I don't know what the other bottles held, but it was a practical way to store the liquors.

I wasn't the only one enjoying limoncello. It was for sale in tourist shops, wine shops and food stores in an amazing variety of novelty bottles of different shapes and sizes, with miniature copies of local monuments and buildings full of liquor being the most popular. They were arranged in cloth lined baskets on steps outside open shop doors, or displayed on glass shelves in shop windows. I did not bring a bottle home as my luggage was getting heavier as the trip went on—a fact that was obvious every time I lugged my heavy bags up the steps of another train.

The day we left Venice we bought our last souvenirs of the trip. We entered one shop that stocked household linens, with neat rows of towels, sheets and handkerchiefs stacked behind glass-topped display cases. We asked to see several types, and the salesman retrieved them, placing them on top of the counter. In one of the piles was a stack of white linen towels with colorful sketches of Italy, and the regions mapped out that produce a particular product, like wine or cheese or pasta.

“The Wine Regions of Italy,” or “Cheeses of Italy,” on a 2’ x 3’ starched linen towels. Much to my surprise and delight I found one with drawings of yellow lemons, green leaves and the Italian recipe for limoncello. I was overjoyed to see that there was also the English translation of the recipe!

When I returned home I sorted my souvenirs and gave most away, but I saved the limoncello towel for myself. Months later I was in a shop in Flagstaff chatting with the owner who is an old friend. He mentioned that he had been to Italy recently, and he said that he, too, had become enamored with limoncello. Since returning he had made several batches, and even had some in the refrigerator. I couldn’t believe it when he excused himself, walked to the back room, and returned with a little bottle of chilled limoncello! I tasted a sip and he recited his recipe.

His version involved infusing the lemon peels with grain alcohol for a month, then letting this steep with the sugar-water mix for another month before bottling. His version conflicted with the instructions on my very authentic, Venetian towel. The recipe printed on it directs you to let the peels infuse in the alcohol for 4 days, then steep with the sugar water for 10 minutes before bottling and consuming. My quest for instant gratification leaned toward the latter recipe, but I let the lemon peels infuse for at least 10 days for more lemon flavor. I have seen different recipes, some calling for grain alcohol, and some for vodka. I think the flavor is better with grain alcohol, but not enough to make the higher alcohol content worthwhile. Here is my recipe.

Limoncello Recipe

1 liter Vodka
8-10 medium to large firm, organic lemons
1 liter pure water
6/10 kilo (3 cups) sugar

Peel the lemons, taking only the yellow peel. The white pith will make it bitter. Infuse the lemons in the vodka in a sealed bottle or jar for at least 10 days. Note: this is a great, inexpensive way to make citrus infused vodkas—try orange or lime as well.

After 10 days, pour the vodka and lemon peel through a strainer into a large bowl. Heat the water, add the sugar, and stir until sugar dissolves completely. Cool until just warm. Pour the sugar water over the peels, pressing the liquid out. Discard the peels. Pour the Limoncello into clean bottles. Store in the refrigerator or freezer.

I keep a small bottle in the freezer in a ½ liter Vin Santo bottle—wine I brought home from that trip to Italy. In Florence we dunked hard, almond cantuccini into juice glasses of Vin Santo, then sucked the wine from the biscuits as they softened. When the cantuccini were gone we drank the wine, cloudy and swirling with dregs...but that’s another story.

Salute!