Livio Morena puts the finishing touches on a Cinquième Arrondissement at Caffé Propaganda. Opposite: Martina Bertoni, a bartender and server at Mazzo.
ROMAN HOLIDAY
THE ETERNAL CITY BUILDS A DRINKS CULTURE FOR THE AGES

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PHOTOS BY DYLAN + JENI
Rome is a city that revels in her past—and you can hardly blame her. The city center’s cobblestone streets meander past crumbling ruins, huiling Renaissance villas and undulating church facades, reminders of eras when decadent Emperors and equally decadent Popes built marble and granite monuments intended to last an eternity. Time is measured differently in the Eternal City, so the sensual curves of the Trevi Fountain and the cascading staircase at the Spanish Steps—both from the 18th century—are relative newcomers, while Raphael and Michelangelo are considered modern artists.

With all its history, Rome might be mistaken for a stagnant living museum, resistant to change and suspicious of innovation. But while Rome’s vibrant contemporary culture belies this notion, it’s a reputation that a decade ago rang all too true for the city’s drinks scene. But recently, the pace of change has quickened, and today’s blossoming cocktail culture and thriving craft-beer scene are proof that Romans will embrace novelty and innovation, if it’s done well.

Cocktails and craft beer aren’t the first drinks that spring to mind when you think of Rome, nor should they be. The city is deep into its third millennium of wine drinking, and even coffee—a recent arrival by local standards—would rank above mixed drinks or beer in terms of the quantity consumed each day. But as Romans drink less wine with each passing year, a new approach to drinking has emerged, allowing proper cocktails and quality beer to find their places. The past few years, in particular, have seen a rapid shift in the variety and quality of drinks being poured in the city’s bars, and Rome has finally become a world-class drinking city befitting its reputation as a cultural capital.

**COCKTAILS COME TO CAPUT MUNDI**

Until about a decade ago, changes to Rome’s drinking culture moved at a glacial pace, stagnated and slowed by a downright corrupt system of alcohol distribution. The city’s beverage menus were dominated by industrial beers, massive liquor brands and conventional wines as monopolistic wholesalers pushed quantity over quality, and at a time when bartenders in America were discovering the bitter beauty of amari, boutique Italian liquors were practically absent from Roman shelves. A turning point came in 2009, when an unassuming cocktail bar opened in central Rome.

Like all ancient cities, Rome loves a good origin story, and The Jerry Thomas Project is the city’s Romulus of cocktails. Since its 2009 debut, this founding father of Roman watering holes has become a point of reference for local bartenders as well as cocktail professionals worldwide, and has championed an improved approach to drinks on both sides of the bar.

Of course, cocktails were served in Rome before 2009, but they tended to be prohibitively expensive and served primarily in luxury hotels. The average bar could pull off a drinkable spritz, but a good Negroni was out of the question. For Jerry Thomas co-founder Leonardo Leuci, there was a void in the city’s drinks culture that obviously needed filling. “It’s a myth that Romans didn’t value a good drink—they just didn’t have stellar choices, so they adapted to the mediocrity that was available,” Leuci says. “We didn’t do anything exceptional, really; we just believed people would be receptive to something new. And they were.”

Before opening the bar, Leuci and co-founders Roberto Artusio, Antonio Parlapiano and Alessandro Procoli each worked and traveled abroad. Eager to reproduce the flavors and experiences they had encountered at bars beyond Rome, they formulated a way to translate cocktail culture to a Roman audience, and the bar named for a pioneering 19th-century bartender was born.

The bar opens late, and guests must reserve in advance and arrive with a password in order to be admitted (a clue is published on the venue’s website). Upon entry, guests are ushered to a barstool or a threadbare vintage couch in the small and dimly lit space. The cocktail menu channels historic recipes, and proposes inspired creations like the Martini del Professore, made with gin, Vermouth del Professore (their own moscato-based aromatized wine, named for “Professor” Jerry Thomas), and bergamot bitters, and the Improved Aviation, made with lavender syrup, crème de violette and rosehip bitters.

Today, Jerry Thomas Project is one of many world-class cocktail destinations in Rome. Nearby at Barnum Café, owner Daniele Crescenzi and barman Federico Tomasselli mix Italian and American classics in a circus-themed room packed with mismatched furniture. The bar operates as a low-key café during the day, but in the evenings, cocktails flow, highlighting some of Italy’s

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Jerry Thomas Project bartenders and staff, clockwise from top left: Alessia Pivotta; Alessandro Procoli; Lea Pennacchi; Michele Garofalosapero; Antonio Parlapiano; Roberto Artusio (left) with Riccardo Marinelli.
favorite bitter flavors. The Ra-barbara matches the rhubarb-accented Rabarbaro Zucca with Strega and bitters, while the Cosa Nostra, Barnum's riff on an Old Fashioned, blends bourbon with Campari, Rabarbaro and Fernet-Branca.

Across the river in Prati, Banana Republic is another café by day and cocktail bar by night. It draws a young crowd of budget-conscious students attracted by the aperitivo (happy hour) food spread, but the cocktail list—a blend of originals and American classics—will impress seasoned cocktail drinkers. Bartenders prepare aperitifs such as Venedetta—made with Campari, sweet vermouth, Biancosarti (an herbal liqueur), raspberry, chocolate bitters and sparkling wine—as well as cocktails like Priscilla, with tequila, Campari, Cynar, mandarin soda and wild fennel.

While The Jerry Thomas Project has been instrumental in improving the local drinks scene, Patrick Pistolesi has been Rome's most outspoken cocktail evangelist. At 36, Pistolesi has spent more than half his life behind the bar, and he lists Barnum Café on his résumé, along with his first major solo project, the bar program at the Hotel Adriano. This bar, called The Gin Corner, claims the largest gin selection in Italy, with 100 labels and counting. As the name suggests, the bar specializes in gin cocktails—largely Gin & Tonics and Martinis, but also original drinks, such as the house cocktail, a blend of elderflower liqueur, egg white, lemon juice, and a red-wine float.

In early 2015, Pistolesi joined the team at three-year-old Caffè Propaganda, near the Colosseum. The place looks like a Keith McNally joint, with banquets and white subway tile-covered walls, and a long, zinc bar where Pistolesi mixes some of the finest drinks in town. His Bellissimo Aperitivo, inspired by the Expo 2015 in Milan, blends the Italian flavors of vermouth and Fernet-Branca with sherry and aromatic bitters.

Since cocktails and food aren't natural partners in Italy, few restaurants fold cocktails into their standard offerings—but there are notable exceptions. Roscioli, a place known for its extensive international wine list, luscious carbonara and exceptional selection of cheese and cured meats, has recently begun to tap into its vast spirits selection in the name of cocktail creativity. Barman Davide Fede draws from Roscioli's collection of prestigious spirits and obscure European liquors to prepare twists on classics, such as a Polugar Manhattan, which substitutes polugar—"bread wine," a grain-based, pot-distilled spirit from Russia—for whiskey.

At Metamorfosi, a one-Michelin-starred restaurant in the swanky Parioli district, Alessandro D'Andrea uses herbal infusions and garnishes to accentuate the exotic Asian and

RA-BARBARA
The flavors of Northern Italy meet those from the South in this pleasantly bitter and herbaceous aperitif.

1 ¼ oz. Rabarbaro Zucca
½ oz. Strega
1½ tsp. fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. simple syrup [1:1]
1 dash Peychaud's bitters

Tools: shaker, strainer, fine strainer
Glass: rocks
Garnish: orange slice

Combine ingredients in shaker and fill with ice. Shake, then double-strain into glass filled with a large ice cube; garnish.

Federico Tomasselli
Barnum Café
South American influences chef Roy Caceres blends into his contemporary Italian cuisine, resulting in drinks like the Aromatico, made with tequila, aloe and aromatic herbs. Across town in Trastevere, DOT Bistrot, which opened in 2014, serves a Sicilian-influenced menu in its dining room, while the adjacent bar serves classic cocktails like Manhattans and Negronis in a small lounge area decked out in vintage furnishings.

But perhaps the most carefully honed restaurant cocktail menu in town is at Mazzo in Centocelle. This 12-seat restaurant, which opened in 2013, is helmed by gin enthusiasts and chefs Francesca Barreca and Marco Baccanelli, a couple known as “The Fooders.” They got their start doing pop-ups and performance cooking, and international travel exposed them to northern European spirits culture.

Mazzo isn’t much larger than its single, communal table, so space constraints were a prime consideration when creating the drinks list. “We had limited space for things like bottles and glassware, plus we love gin above all other spirits,” says Barreca. “The solution was obvious: serve a small, simple selection of gin cocktails designed to complement our food.”

The Beginner—made with gin, tonic, juniper berries and lemon zest—pairs with the mixed fried vegetables starter, while the Rose Bundle—with gin, tonic, rose water and Sichuan pepper—goes well with their cured pork jowl and black-pepper pasta.

### NOVECENTO

Dedicated to the flavors of northern Italian spirits from the early 20th century ("Novecento" is Italian for "20th Century"), this drink blends Cognac and Campari with Jerry Thomas Project’s own “Vermouth del Professore”, which is inspired by historic recipes for turn-of-the-century fortified wines (you can sub in a Turin-style vermouth, such as Cocchi Vermouth di Torino).

1½ oz. Cognac  
1 oz. Cocchi Vermouth di Torino  
1 oz. Campari  
½ tsp. maraschino liqueur  
½ tsp. fresh lemon juice  
1 dash Angostura bitters  
1 dash Peychaud’s Bitters

Tools: barspoon, strainer  
Glass: coupe  
Garnish: lemon twist

Combine ingredients in mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir to chill. strain into a chilled glass, twist lemon peel over drink and use as garnish.

Leonardo Leuci  
The Jerry Thomas Project

### GRAIN & GRAPES

At about the same time The Jerry Thomas Project was pouring its first cocktails, craft beer was starting to hit the Roman mainstream. In 2009, brewers Baladin and Birra del Borgo joined forces to create Open Baladin, a gastropub dedicated to Italian craft brews. The large, industrial space sprawls over three floors in a Renaissance-era building; the main room is dominated by a backlit bar displaying large-format beer bottles, but most visitors opt for a glass from one of the 30-odd taps.

Open Baladin’s size and central location signaled the arrival of craft beer on Rome’s drinking landscape, but the road was also paved elsewhere at places like Mastro Titta in the Ostiense district, and Ma Che Siete Venuti a Fà (Macchè to regulars) in Trastevere, which had been actively preaching the craft-beer gospel for years.

It’s just a short stroll across the Tiber River from Open Baladin to Macchè, where publican Manuele Colonna and his team have been pouring rare and exceptional beers since 2001. The pub’s newly renovated wood-paneled interior gives it the feel of a grown-up dive bar, and the narrow rooms echo with rock music. It’s packed most nights, and drinkers fill the cobblestone street outside, sipping sour ales from Piedmont’s Loverbeer and Franconian lager in kegs brought in from Germany.

Also in Trastevere, the newly opened Luppolo Station offers Italian and international craft brews. Opened on a shoestring budget, the pub plays on the train station–themed décor of the restaurant that previously occupied the space. The menu of beers on tap resembles a train departures board, and lists beers from local brewers like Vento Forte and Birra del Borgo. As at all Roman craft-beer pubs, you’ll have to ask to see the bottle list, which is composed mainly of Belgian sour ales.

Nearby at the long-established Brasserie 4:20, the vintage bottled Lambic selection is the largest in town and accompanies an ample offering of beer on tap, including the house brews by...
Revelation Cat. In Trastevere's rapidly gentrifying southern outskirts, Stavio, which is owned by the eponymous brewery, fills three vaulted rooms originally built for storing grain near the Tiber River, and specializes in beers that blend brewing and wine-making techniques like the house beer Birrozzo.

While quality cocktails and craft beer have had to fight for a rightful place in contemporary Roman drinking culture, wine has been around for millennia. During the 20th century, Rome's wine wholesalers consolidated power and created a system that drove the city's wine choices into a rut—but slowly, the situation is shifting. "The vast majority of wine bars and restaurants purchase wines from a handful of wholesalers," says Hande Leimer, a wine educator and founder of the Vino Roma wine-tasting studio. "These companies build the city's wine lists, provide wine storage and delivery, and require customers to purchase specific wines. The whole process is so convenient, it's rare to find alternatives. That's what makes Rome's new wine bars so exciting."

The local wine culture has recently been enriched by a number of independent wine bars and bottle shops, which circumvent the well-established system and source directly from small producers in Italy, Slovenia and France. At places like Litro in Monteverde Vecchio, which opened in 2013, the wine list is completely unique, and constantly changing to reflect new arrivals from the staff's favorite vineyards.

Another wine bar, La Barrique, specializes in sparkling wines from northern Italy and France, as well as affordable bottles of still wine from sought-after artisan producers. And Les Vignerons in eastern Rome deals directly with producers, and the staff carefully curates the wine selection.

It's at places such as these that Rome's historic wine culture segues into today's vibrant drinks scene. At Les Vignerons' basement shop—on the gritty edge of the Pigneto and Centocelle districts, far from the historic center's Imperial and Papal buildings—owners Antonio Marino and Marisa Gabbianelli promote a new way of drinking wine, one that's influenced by Rome's rich history, but that's also unhindered by the past.

**Bellissimo Aperitivo**

Created for the recently inaugurated Expo in Milan—a food and beverage–oriented world's fair taking place through October—this cocktail balances the rich notes of vermouth alla vaniglia with dry fino sherry and the ornate bitterness of Fernet-Branca.

- 2 oz. Carpano Antica vermouth
- 1 ½ oz. fino sherry
- 2 tsp. Fernet-Branca
- 1 dash maraschino liqueur
- 1 dash Angostura bitters

**Tools:** barspoon, strainer  
**Glass:** cocktail  
**Garnish:** lemon twist

Combine ingredients in mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir to chill, strain into a chilled glass, twist lemon peel over drink and use as garnish.

**Patrick Pistolesi**  
**Caffè Propaganda**
COORDINATES

COCKTAILS

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Via Giovanni Bettolo 3
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BARNUM CAFÉ
Via del Pellegrino 87
barnumcafe.com

CAFFÈ PROPAGANDA
Via Claudia 15
caffepropaganda.it

DOT BISTROT
Via Natale del Grande 52
facebook.com/DOTbarbistrot

THE JERRY
THE Thomas Project
Vicolo Cellini 30
thejerrythomasproject.it

MAZZO
Via delle Rose 54
thefooders.it/mazzo/

ROSCIOLI
Via dei Giubbonari 21
salumeriaroscioli.com

WINE

LA BARRIQUE
Via del Boschetto 41b

LITRO
Via Fratelli Bonnet 5
vinerialitro.it

VINO ROMA
Via in Selci 84G
vinoroma.com

BEER

BRASSERIE 4:20
Via Portuense 82
brasseries420.com

LUPPOLO STATION
Via Giuseppe Parini 4
luppolostation.it

MA CHE SIETE VENUTI A FA
Via Benedetta 25
football-pub.com

OPEN BALADIN
Via degli Specchi 6
openbaladinroma.it

STAVIO
Via Antonio Pacinotti 83
stavio.it

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL CAMPO DE’ FIORI
Via del Biscione 6
hotelcampodefiori.com

HOTEL PONTE SISTO
Via dei Pettinari 64
hotelpontesisto.it

HOTEL SANTA CHIARA
Via di Santa Chiara 21
albergosantachiara.com

This page, from top: A row of liqueurs and a bartender chipping ice at Caffè Propaganda; an Americano at Litro. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Patrick Pistolesi at Caffè Propaganda; beers at Stavia; the gin menu at Mazzo; Litro owners Maurizio Bistocchi (left) and Alessio Ceccotti. Center: A beer at Macchè.