



The New York Times Style Magazine

Case Study | A Round With the Count

FOOD | By TOBY CECCHINI | APRIL 6, 2011, 9:00 AM



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Count Nicolò Branca di Romanico in California.

The Count was in town last week — that would be Count Nicolò Branca di Romanico.

If reincarnation turns out to be real, I believe I might want to return to this earthly fold as the Count Branca, the Italian nobleman who travels the world spreading the gospel of his family's well-loved (and perhaps equally reviled) 166-year-old elixir, Fernet Branca. Until last week I hadn't known that Fernet Branca had a Count, and if I had, I'd have bet you it was some P.R.-stunt actor. The eminence at the head of the Branca empire turns out to be quite real. He was just a smoking jacket shy of a cartoon caricature of an Italian count who owns one of the world's most storied spirits: trim, impeccably turned out in a blue herringbone suit and red striped button-down with French cuffs, with a slight gray tinge to his swept-back hair and tortoiseshell wire rims — an exceedingly gracious and gracefully aging cross between Arthur and Harry Potter. Showing no signs of the *fuso orario* of having just arrived from Italy, not to mention having been rushed about all morning by a cadre of all-business handlers like the drinking man's celeb he is, he was all dapper ebullience and open joviality when I sat down to a glass of the staunch stuff with him at the Fives Bar of the Peninsula Hotel.

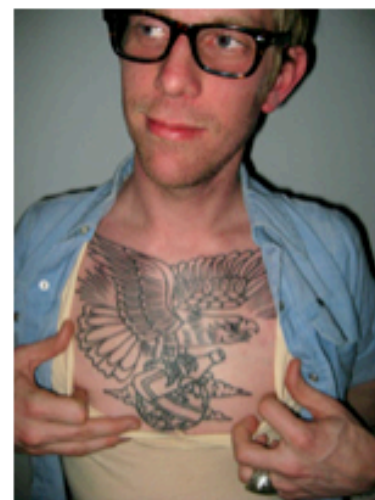
Routinely lumped in as an amaro, the Count's molasses-black spirit is technically in its own category of infusions known as fernet, a murky term that, he believes, may have its origins in the Milanese dialect as a reference to iron (fer) and clean (net). This means there are others, but hardly; Fernet Branca is far and away the alpha fernet, a famously difficult melange to embrace, even for lovers of amari, the larger category of Italian drinking bitters. Unrepentantly bitter, as a result of its secret formula comprising some 40 herbs, roots and other natural compounds, infused separately in neutral spirit, it gobsmacks the novice with unidentifiable waves of intense aromatics melding eucalyptus to spearmint, saffron and licorice, while conversely possessing an unusually soft mouth feel as a result of a year's rest in Slovenian oak casks. Although developed as a medicinal tonic, it makes a spectacular digestivo.



A bottle of Fernet Branca.

Count Branca admits readily, even laughingly, that his fernet is an extreme pick-you-up, and he makes no apology for it. The first time I had it, I was being squired about Naples circa 1983 by a Mafia-connected boxer whom a friend of mine had taken as an ill-advised boyfriend. He and his friends drove about endlessly all day, from early morning, stopping into obscure cafes to see to curious "business," taking a Fernet Branca at each one, until I felt the stuff was coming out of my pores. It took me the better part of two decades to form the deep attachment I now have for it; at the time I recall stating flatly I thought it might actually be distilled from railroad tar and spinach.

San Franciscans were arguably the drink's first and fiercest stateside fans. They have made the shot, with a side of ginger ale, into a specific call worldwide: "San Francisco Style." (In Argentina, where Branca maintains its only factory outside of Milan, it is blended with Coca-Cola in what is effectively the undisputed national drink.) Bartenders on both coasts in the current golden era of cocktaildom have adopted Fernet Branca as a sort of occupational mumbletypeg, downing shots of it to prove how serious/impervious one is. Damon Boelte, the head barman at **Prime Meats** in Brooklyn, has a large tattoo across his chest of the eagle that adorns the bottle's label. "Fernet," as it's simply known among drink slingers, could



Damon Boelte's chest is tattooed with the Fernet Branca eagle.

be said, despite its long history and phenomenal success, to be having something of a torrid minute in the sun these days.

Which is why I felt in the presence of luminous celebrity. It was an odd meeting, replete with insult and social gaffes; we spoke in Italian, he mellifluously and I jaggedly, but the count was enormously forbearing. First off I asked him point blank to tell me the secret recipe. Well, you never know, right? After he revealed himself to be the only person in the world with the whole formula, passed to him by his father, from the original created by his great-grandfather in 1840, I called him a tramp. That's right. His entire contingent reared up in horror, looking about like extras in a Marx Brothers movie, blinking and muttering about my lack of politesse. I suppose it doesn't help my case much that I was actually trying to call him a liar, to posit the theory that if he has a second factory in Argentina, there must be someone there who knows the formula. But I accidentally called him a "mendicante." Unflappable, he raised his eyebrows and laughed, citing that he doesn't very often get called that, then avowed that he in fact flies down to Argentina himself to administer the recipe. When I then confided that, off the record, I'd always detected a hint of marijuana in his fernet's aftertaste, he laughed — naturally — and said everything in the formula is legal, adding, in Amsterdam.

After a couple of hours chatting, I noticed he and I were the only people at the table who had drained our glasses. He signed a bottle and invited me to visit him in Milan at the Branca Distillery museum. Taking leave of the count and his crew, I mused that rappers can have all the Donald Trump and Bill Gates they want; I want to be the gangsta who lives behind a royal crest in a villa on Lago Maggiore and produces the challenging miracle that is Fernet Branca. He makes the most interesting man alive look like, well, a Dos Equis drinker.