



FRONT PAGE

LOCAL

NATIONAL

WORLD

WEATHER

EDITORIALS

OPINIONS-LETTERS

SPORTS

SCENE

LIFE

REAL ESTATE

CLASSIFIEDS

BUSINESS

ADVERTISING INFO

SPECIAL SECTIONS

ARCHIVES

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SITE INDEX

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## Life

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### Pucker up - Ventura Limoncello is showing up in specialty drinks, entrees and desserts

DAVE MASON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER  
September 11, 2008 12:05 PM

She's not a movie star or a rock icon, but Manuela Zaretti-Carling has her fans.

"I went to this museum show opening (in Ventura), and as I entered, a man with a mustache said, 'I want you to autograph this bottle for me,'" Mrs. Zaretti-Carling said.

It was a bottle of Ventura Limoncello, made from a recipe that has been in Mrs. Zaretti-Carling's Italian family now for three generations. The native of Rome was at a private Museum of Ventura County event on May 31 that featured her limoncello. She and her husband, James Carling, produce and distribute it exclusively.

It's Southern California's first locally produced limoncello. And it's a big hit among restaurants that have found their own ways of infusing the Ventura couple's lemon liqueur into new drinks, entrees and desserts:

The Lemon Meringue Pie Martini, featuring limoncello.

Mussels steamed in limoncello.

Lemon cream wontons with limoncello filling.

You can even pour it over ice cream!

Now wait just a minute. "What do you mean putting it in a martini?" Mrs. Zaretti-Carling, 40, said, grinning. "You're supposed to drink it straight!

"I'm Italian; I'm very, very traditional," she explained on a recent day.

Mrs. Zaretti-Carling admitted she was shocked when she first heard of the variations. But she came to like them, and even her husband experimented with the limoncello. Mr. Carling, 45, invented the Limosa, which combines their limoncello with sparkling wine; it's served at Wine Cask in Santa Barbara.

But the limoncello, which the couple started selling commercially in February, also stands on its own, according to Ventura and Santa Barbara restaurant owners and chefs. They say the couple's limoncello is better than the mass-produced brands from Italy.

The Ventura Limoncello is based on a recipe from Mrs. Zaretti-Carling's grandmother, Antonia Maria, a native of Civitanova Marche, Italy. Mrs. Zaretti-Carling received it from her mother, Rossana Zaretti, also born in Civitanova Marche, when she got married in 1994.

"The first time I made it was with my mom in Westlake Village in 1994," Mrs. Zaretti-Carling said.

When Mr. Carling tried the limoncello, it was love at first sip.

"We've been making it for our personal consumption for many, many years," Mrs. Zaretti-Carling said, inside the small Ventura business suite where the entire staff -- she and Mr. Carling -- makes the limoncello. They do it all by hand.

And that's why it's so good, the couple said.

They do everything, from picking up 2,000 lemons per batch from nearby Petty Ranch in Ventura or Limoneira Ranch in

Santa Paula, to washing them, to peeling them by hand, to infusing the 190-proof grain alcohol with the peels in large glass jars, to mixing the infused alcohol in a vat with sugar-water. They bottle their limoncello, attach the labels, write the batch number on each bottle and add a sticker noting that their brand won a gold medal during the 2008 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Sometimes Mrs. Zaretti-Carling's parents, Rossana and Pietro Zaretti of Oak Park, help out.

Peeling the lemons by hand means going deeper than the mass production used in commercial Italian limoncellos, and that means getting more of the oil that makes for a good limoncello, Mr. Carling said. He held up a thick peel.

Their business started after they saw the demand -- their friends couldn't get enough of their limoncello. And all the ingredients were there: the right lemons, the right climate, the right recipe.

For Mr. Carling, it was the right time.

"I had been in my career for 20 years. I was ready for a change," he said.

In 2007, Mr. Carling resigned from his position as vice president at The Territory Ahead, a Santa Barbara apparel company, and started applying for state and federal licenses from various



At top, Mrs. Zaretti-Carling peels the lemons at the Ventura Limoncello Co. plant in Ventura. The peels will go into glass containers with 190-proof grain alcohol for an infusion period lasting between three and 40 days. Mrs. Zaretti-Carling won't give away the exact infusion time -- that's part of her secret family recipe. Above, Mr. Carling examines the containers in which the lemon peels and 190-proof grain alcohol are infused. The liquid from this will be poured later into a sugar-water mix.



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DRINK OF THE WEEK:

agencies. In February of this year, Mr. Carling and Mrs. Zaretti-Carling, a graphic artist who helped run Il Salotto, her parents' Italian restaurant in Tarzana, from 1990-95, began to sell the Ventura Limoncello.

Limoncello is a mix of lemon zest, water, sugar and pure alcohol. Mr. Carling and Mrs. Zaretti-Carling said their limoncello has the right kind of lemons, the right number of lemons per liter of alcohol, the right infusion time (somewhere between three and 40 days) and the right sugar-water ratio to make a perfect limoncello.

When asked to be more specific about their recipe, the couple just laughed -- and rightly so.

They're keeping it a secret.

But Mr. Carling was willing to break the ice on how their after-dinner drink, best served icy cold straight from the freezer, differs from others.

"The lemon flavor comes out before the alcohol flavor," he said about their limoncello, which contains 29 percent alcohol by volume. "The Italian brand punches you with alcohol and finishes with lemon. Ours flips the taste."

Michael DePaola, owner of Emilio's Ristorante in Santa Barbara, likes that flip. He uses the brand in a Ventura Limoncello Lemon Drop. "The product is not overly alcoholic as I find some Italian limoncellos are. You taste the freshness of the lemon in it."

The Ventura lemons make the difference, said Didier Poirier, chef and owner of 71 Palm, a French country-American restaurant in Ventura. "The lemons are much better here (than in Italy)." He also serves a Ventura Limoncello Lemon Drop.

Mr. Carling and Mrs. Zaretti-Carling first sold their limoncello to Mini Mart on State Street in Santa Barbara and 71 Palm and Brooks restaurant in Ventura. Today, Ventura Limoncello is available at more than 70 restaurants and stores in Santa Barbara, Ventura and Los Angeles counties, and Mr. Carling delivers the cases himself. He and his wife produce 100 cases or 1,200 bottles a month. The bottles come in two sizes, 375 milliliter and 750 milliliter.

Actor Danny DeVito inadvertently helped the Ventura Limoncello Company by raising awareness of the liqueur, Mr. Carling said. The star was on ABC's "The View" in December 2006, talking about having one too many with George Clooney on the limoncello brand that Mr. DeVito produces.

"If you ask people if they know what limoncello is, nine times out of 10, the answer is no. One of our goals as a company is to educate the consumer about what limoncello is," Mr. Carling said.

His and his wife's limoncello has inspired area restaurants and residents to produce new drinks, desserts and entrees.

Epicure Catering in Ventura has used Ventura Limoncello as a sauce over ice cream.

The C-Street Restaurant at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Ventura served a special dinner on April 24 that featured Ventura Limoncello in champagne vinaigrette, mimosas, lemon sorbet and creme brulee.

At Brooks restaurant in Ventura, chef-owner Andy Brooks steams mussels in Ventura Limoncello.

Epiphany in Santa Barbara uses the limoncello in its Ginger Lemon Cream Wontons.

Opal Restaurant & Bar in Santa Barbara serves its Bluecoat Lemonade, which blends Ventura Limoncello with Bluecoat gin, sweetened lemon juice, mint and a splash of soda.

Bartender Ian Johnson at The Watermark in Ventura said customers love the Lemon Meringue Martini, which fellow bartender Janelle Sutton created several weeks ago. Watermark general manager Shanon Rice wanted a special limoncello drink to mark the restaurant's recent grand opening.

"They say, 'This is delicious. It tastes like pie.' They like the graham cracker crust (rim)," Mr. Johnson said as he mixed one.

Added Ms. Sutton: "I'm a fan of replicating foods in cocktails."

At The Sidecar Restaurant in Ventura, a Ventura Limoncello cream sauce is used in a dish of sea bass and sea urchin ravioli. The limoncello is also blended with a house-infused meyer lemon vodka, simple syrup and mint for a lemonade limoncello.

Tim Kilcoyne, executive chef at the Sidecar, explained the limoncello phenomenon.

"In cooking, we look at a balance of flavors on the plate," he said. "People will add salt or pepper to a meal, but if they squeeze lemon juice or vinegar, it actually heightens the dish a lot more. Because lemons are one of the main ingredients (in limoncello), it helps with the dishes. A splash of acidity heightens the flavor."

With the popularity of their limoncello, Mr. Carling said he hopes his and his wife's company grows and that they will eventually have a distributor. In October, the two plan to launch their second limoncello brand, a limoncello crema, which will use whole milk. "It's more creamy and has a taste that's smoother than pure alcohol," Mr. Carling said.

Who knows what the restaurants and bars will make of that?

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#### WHERE TO FIND IT

The suggested retail price for Ventura Limoncello is \$24.99 for the 750 milliliter bottle and \$14.99 for the 375 milliliter bottle.

Santa Barbara stores selling the brand are: Mini Mart, 439 State St., 966-5118; De la Vina Liquor, 2735 De La Vina St., 687-7676, and Hi Time Liquor, 4010 Calle Real, 687-8018. Ventura Limoncello also is sold at The Bottle Shop, 1200 Coast Village Road, Montecito, 969-4466.

Ventura stores selling the brand are: The Wine Castle, 4711-5 Telephone Road, 642-0264; Village Wine & Spirits, 1449 S. Victoria, Suite B, 644-9463; Valley Liquor & Fine Wine Deli, 2973 Loma Vista Road, 653-6921; H & H Liquor, 1839 E. Main St., 648-2771; Red Barn Liquor, 1285 N Ventura Ave., 643-8473; Solaris Liquors, 2036 E. Thompson Blvd., 643-3747; Sam's Satcoy Liquor, 1500 Los Angeles Ave., 647-1979; Mandell's Liquor & Wine Shop, 3915 Telegraph Road, 642-1148.

Santa Barbara restaurants serving Ventura Limoncello are: Epiphany, 21 W. Victoria St., 564-7100; Emilio's Ristorante, 324 W. Cabrillo Blvd., 966-4426; Opal Restaurant & Bar, 1325 State St., 966-9676; Four Seasons Resort-The Biltmore, 1260 Channel Drive, 969-2261; Fess Parker's DoubleTree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd., 564-4333; Wine Cask, 813 Anacapa St., 966-9643.

Ventura restaurants serving the brand are: 71 Palm, 71 Palm St., 653-7222; Brooks, 545 E. Thompson Blvd., 652-7070; The Greek at the Harbor, 1583 Spinnaker Drive, 650-5350; Jonathans & J's Tapas, 204 E. Main St., 648-4853; the C-Street Restaurant at Crowne Plaza Hotel, 450 E Harbor Blvd., 648-2100; The Sidecar Restaurant, 3029 E. Main St., Ventura, 653-7433; Margarita Villa, 1567 Spinnaker Dr., No. 200, 654-7906; My Florist Café & Bakery, 76 S Oak St., 653-0011; The Watermark, 598 E. Main St.,



At top, James Carling stirs the sugar-water mix with the alcohol at Ventura Limoncello Co. Above, Mr. Carling pours a measured amount of pure grain alcohol, which is used in making the limoncello, into a jar. STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS



PHOTO COURTESY OF DINA PIELAET A graham cracker garnish is added to the Lemon Meringue Martini at the Watermark restaurant in Ventura. Customers say the drink tastes just like he pie.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BROOKS RESTAURANT Brooks restaurant in Ventura steams mussels in Ventura Limoncello.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EPIPHANY Epiphany in Santa Barbara serves Ginger Lemon Cream Wontons, which uses Ventura Limoncello.

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643-6800; and the Pierpont Inn, 550 San Jon Road, Ventura, 643-6144.

For more information and recipes, go to [www.venturalimoncello.com](http://www.venturalimoncello.com).

**LEMON MERINGUE MARTINI**

2 ounces vanilla Stolli vodka

2 ounces citrus Skyy vodka

2 ounces Ventura Limoncello

1 ounce Daily's Divine's Cocktails (non-alcoholic) cheesecake mix, which is available at supermarkets

Twist of lemon

Graham crackers, crushed

Combine all but graham crackers. Shake. Rim martini glass with crushed graham crackers.

Yield: 1 drink

Source: *The Watermark in Ventura*

**LIMONCELLO MUSSELS**

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 teaspoon chopped garlic

1 teaspoon chopped shallots

1 pound Prince Edwards Island mussels

2 to 3 oven-dried tomatoes or sun-dried tomatoes

2 to 3 sprigs lemon-thyme

1 tablespoon salt

1/4 cup Ventura Limoncello

1 cup heavy cream

1 baguette or French bread

Heat olive oil in hot sauté pan. Add garlic and shallots, cook slightly. Add mussels, tomatoes, lemon-thyme and season to taste with salt. Stir to coat mussels with hot mixture. Add limoncello and heavy cream.

Cover and simmer 3 to 5 minutes until all mussels open. Uncover and taste, adjust with salt as needed. Pour into serving bowl and serve with toasted baguette or French bread.

Yield: 1 serving

Source: *Brooks restaurant in Ventura*

**GINGER LEMON CREAM WONTONS**

1 cup cream cheese

1/4 cup sugar

Zest of 1 lemon

1 teaspoon Ventura Limoncello

1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger

20 wonton sheets

1/4 cup water, in small bowl

5 cups oil, for frying

Combine all ingredients except wonton sheets, water and oil in food processor until smooth. Transfer mixture into a pastry bag. Preheat oil in a heavy bottomed pan to 350 degrees. Separate and lay out five wonton sheets at a time. Make sure to lay them out on a clean, dry surface.

Pipe a small amount of cream cheese mixture into the center of each wonton. Using your finger, wet the edge of the wonton sheet and fold in half to make a triangle. Repeat this until you are out of mixture or wonton sheets.

Fry wontons in batches of five, making sure to flip them when one side is golden. Dry on paper towels.

Yield: about 20 wontons

Source: *Epiphany in Santa Barbara*

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