

A Grappa Convert

BY JACK BETTRIDGE

Years ago in Venice I had a post-prandial tasting of a half-dozen grappas foisted on me by an overly exuberant waiter. I politely tasted each sample of the grape pomace distillate, but—spoiler alert—it didn't go well. From one glass to the next, it was a fire-breathing affair punctuated by acrid fusel-oil notes that reminded me of bad moonshine. If nuance was there, I didn't find it. I wrote off the episode to experience.

A few months ago in Manhattan, I encountered grappa again when the maker of Nonino, a high-end purveyor of the traditionally rustic spirit, treated me to a tasting. My trepidation soon turned to delight as I worked through a list of grappas that were at once delicate and redolent of the grapes they came from, showing off fruity, floral and even spicy notes on the palate. The grappas that accosted me in Venice might as well have been poured into jelly jars, but these were worthy of the tulip-shaped tasting glasses they came in. I put each glass to my nose and out rushed a distilled testament to grape.

For me, grappa's blossoming seems like the stuff of fairy tales—the ugly duckling that turns into a swan—but didn't happen overnight. Quality has been rising for years, and if you haven't noticed, it may be that, like me, you avoided it after a bad experience.

John Wight, the wine steward and buyer at San Francisco's Bar 888, recognizes the complex well. While he works at one of this country's foremost purveyors of grappa, with a selection of 125 to 150, customers still have to be coaxed into trying it. "Most of them have a preconception of firewater," he says. "Then they try it and say, 'Oh, my god, I can taste it.' They become entranced."

According to legend, grappa was first developed in the northern Italian town of Bassano del Grappa. The word for the spirit originates not from that name, however, but from a local dialectic term for "grape stalk." Grappa is made by distilling fermented pomace, which is the byproduct of grape pressing—the skins, seeds and sometimes stems. Production began as a way for peasants in Italy's Alpine regions to stretch leftovers into something potable, potent and possibly palliative, known as a digestive.

Grappa lifted itself with methods common to other spirits revivals, but tailored to the category. Better raw material—fresher, destemmed pomace from great vineyards—was the first step. Grappa's answer to single-malt and -barrel whiskies was spirit made from a single grape variety. Using steam-fed discontinuous stills specific to grappa-making also improved quality. And now makers are embarking on the go-to refinement of distillers everywhere: aging. Purists may argue against adulterating the essence in casks, but modernists are treating grappa in wood previously used for other spirits, and even using woods other than oak.



High-end grappa is made in a discontinuous still.



Refined glassware augments the tasting experience.

Especially fascinating to Wight is grappa's flavor range from manufacturer to manufacturer. "They all have specific ways to distill, and *terroir* plays a part," he notes. "They all taste completely different." As a wine lover, he appreciates the way the grapes are reflected in the taste. "You can actually recognize it's coming from this grape."

While grappa production has spread as far south as Sicily, and neighboring countries are making similar products under other names, it was a relatively recent phenomenon that virtuosity was introduced. One watershed moment came in 1973 from Nonino, a family producer now in its sixth generation.

"In the 1960s, my mother, Giannola, was upset by the rough quality of grappa," says Antonella Nonino. "She decided to make something really nice." A decade later they had a single-grape expression made from Picolit, a variety commonly used in dessert wines. Now the company makes several single expressions such as Chardonnay, Merlot and Moscato.

Other producers got hip to the possibilities of high-end grappa, especially in the American market, and now we have a full-fledged trend. Nardini, with its 240 years of heritage, now counts the five-year-old *Riserva*, which can be likened to a fine brandy, among its offerings. Jacopo Poli grappa was born of a great-grandfather's illegal still and now creates delicate spirits packaged in stunning bottles. Luigi Francoli makes soft, round grappas, and his son, now president of the eponymous family firm, wrote a college thesis on aging techniques. Grappa newcomer Paolo Marolo (his first release was in 1977) sources some of the pomace for his Brunello di Montalcino grappa from Giancarlo Pacenti's vineyard.

Grappa makers no longer rely on serendipity. Nonino explains that it is key to contract with vineyards to obtain the best pomace and ferment immediately. Left for too long, pomace develops methanol and its attendant off tastes. As with most spirits, what separates great grappa from white lightning is using only the center of a still run.

Still, grappa is not a hyperregulated category, and nuances exist by the choice of the producers, not by governmental force. When Antonella's sister Elisabetta says "rules do not exist," she is only slightly overstating the situation.

One sign that a spirit has arrived is its use in mixology. Wight reports that cocktails with grappa are important to introducing drinkers to its charms. That may mean making a classic, like a Manhattan, with aged grappa replacing the whiskey, or a drink invented for grappa, such as the Dogzilla, with Aperol, Cointreau, grapefruit and blood orange. He doesn't mind the departure from custom, if it will bring more grappa appreciation. "I'm looking forward to the day people don't say, 'I don't like grappa,'" he relates, "but instead, 'I want to try that.'"

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