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FEATURE ARTICLE

Grappa, the Misunderstood Elixir

Just because it's made from discarded grape parts and burns the throat, doesn't make it a bad thing.

By Kevin Lynch

Some years ago, following a harrowing emergency landing, a Portuguese airline pilot reputedly explained to the anxious passengers he had saved, that without that glass of grappa prior to takeoff, he never would have been able to keep calm during the crisis. Other tall tales extolling the virtues of grappa, the notorious Italian digestif, include: it can be used to fuel tractors, strip paint, bleach teeth, and flush out intestinal parasites. More plausibly, some claim that a glass of grappa on a cold morning will keep away the chills. But, for many who have tried it once and loathed it, grappa is hot, smelly, and painful.

For those unfamiliar with grappa, it is a distillate made from pomace – the seeds and skins of crushed wine grapes. In the days of old Italy (as in: serf times), landless peasants and the laborers who broke their backs bringing in the harvest with the leftover pomace had used to make nice wine for himself. As peasant life was one of never letting anything go to waste, stills – brought to the Friuli region by the Burgundians in the fifth century – were used to heat the pressings or pomace. The condensation would gather at the top of the still and be collected.

After a few other clever steps and some aging, the liquid was bottled in common earthen jugs, and eventually used by forgetful farmers to fill gas tanks or serve as a midday hour banquet the rest of the world calls lunch.

The unpolished grappas of old took their name from *rapus*, the Middle Latin word for raven and were harsh drinks that singed palates and burnt gullets. This changed in the 17th century when Italian cuisine, cooking, and winemaking came into vogue, resulting in a new class of improved grappa. Just as the mass-produced plonk that came in raffia-wrapped bottles improved or was outclassed by wines that called themselves “Super Tuscans,”

Today's grappas are elegant elixirs that come in pretty bottles and teem with nuance, that is, if something nuanced can teem. But they are not for everyone. Most are for the discerning palate, and some still possess an abrasiveness or grittiness many find difficult to swallow.



Grappa converts, called *tifosi di grappa*, which literally means “feverish” (as i rave about the drink. One enthusiast, Chef Donato Scotti of Palo Alto’s **La St** jokes that he was “baptized with the stuff.” The Bergamo-born Scotti is so pas drink that when he travels home to Italy, the only thing he brings back is grap junket, he was given a 1992 Jacopo Poli Barrique Grappa, an extremely rare d blended and aged. Another was a grappa of sangiovese made in Roncola by a Unfortunately, the friend has no bottling facility; the liquid is held in reused, p bottles.)

Another misperception about grappa is that it is a peasant drink or a “poor ma this may have been the case 30 or 40 years ago, quality grappa is the norm ratl exception. Production methods have become exact to the degree that the comp maximum moisture content of the pomace has been established and is regulate makers go for quality, not quantity, allowing the first and last portions of their condensation to run down the drain. (The first part of the pomace that cooks o impurities and makes the booze painful to drink. The weakest elements of the the end of the distillation, and a seasoned grappa expert knows when to turn o to work on the good stuff.) By the time the aging is done, one can see good gr. It is identifiable by the “crown,” or the ring of bubbles where the rim of the sp glass.

A good entry-level grappa might be one made from a single varietal like mosc gewurtztraminer, or Riesling grapes. These tend to maintain the sweetness of t possess pleasant floral aromas. As one develops a taste for the drink, they may to the firmer, hotter grappas made from the big red grapes. In these grappas, t subtle and the aromas delicate, yet the impact on the palate is, shall we say, pr this contradiction that causes many first-time grappa drinkers to think that all t pure alcohol.

The norm in Italy is to have a grappa following a meal to aid in ridding the stc can’t-believe-I-ate-the-whole-thing feeling. Commonly, people order a *cafe cc* with a side of grappa. Old-timers winkingly ask for a *cafe fredo*, literally a chi is espresso and grappa mixed. Or they’ll ask for a *resentin*, which means they coffee, then rinse their demitasse with a shot of grappa.

Whichever way one chooses to get better acquainted with grappa, it is advisab to flying a plane. Unless, of course, you are Portuguese.

WHERE TO DRINK GRAPPA

Café Pro Bono

2437 Birch St, Palo Alto

(650) 326-1626

www.cafeprobonorestaurant.com

Chantilly Restaurant French & Italian Cuisine

3001 El Camino Real Redwood City

(650) 321-4080

Il Fornaio

302 S. Market St., San Jose

(408) 271-3366

www.ilfornaio.com

La Strada Ristorante

335 University Ave., Palo Alto

(650) 324-8300

www.lastrada.com

Paolo's Restaurant

333 W. San Carlos St. #150, San Jose

(408) 294-2558

www.paolosrestaurant.com

Spiedo Ristorante

151 W. Santa Clara St., San Jose

(408) 971-6096

www.spiedo.com

Zucca Ristorante

186 Castro St. Mountain View

(650) 864-9940

www.zuccaristorante.com

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