

## 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, stems, and skins of crushed wine grapes. In the days of old Italy (as in: serf times), land owners rewarded the laborers who broke their backs bringing in the harvest with the leftover pressings the duke 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 built to heat the pressings or pomace. The condensation would gather at the top of the still, then drip out.

After a few other clever steps and some aging, the liquid was bottled in common glass or rustic earthen jugs, and eventually used by forgetful farmers to fill gas tanks or served after that three-hour banquet the rest of the world calls lunch.

The unpolished grappas of old took their name from *rapus*, the Middle Latin word for grape, and were harsh drams that singed palates and burnt gullets. This changed in the 1960s and '70s, when Italian cuisine, cooking, and winemaking came into vogue, resulting in a radical improvement in quality. Just as the mass-produced plonk that came in raffia-wrapped bottles improved or was outclassed by wines that called themselves “Super Tuscans,” so did grappa.

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

Grappa converts, called *tifosi di grappa*, which literally means “feverish” (as in typhoid fever),

rave about the drink. One enthusiast, Chef Donato Scotti of Palo Alto's **La Strada Ristorante**, jokes that he was "baptized with the stuff." The Bergamo-born Scotti is so passionate about the drink that when he travels home to Italy, the only thing he brings back is grappa. (On his latest junket, he was given a 1992 Jacopo Poli Barrique Grappa, an extremely rare distillate – uniquely blended and aged. Another was a grappa of sangiovese made in Roncola by a friend. Unfortunately, the friend has no bottling facility; the liquid is held in reused, plastic water bottles.)

Another misperception about grappa is that it is a peasant drink or a "poor man's brandy." While this may have been the case 30 or 40 years ago, quality grappa is the norm rather than the exception. Production methods have become exact to the degree that the composition and the maximum moisture content of the pomace has been established and is regulated. Today, grappa makers go for quality, not quantity, allowing the first and last portions of their pomace condensation to run down the drain. (The first part of the pomace that cooks off is mostly full of impurities and makes the booze painful to drink. The weakest elements of the pomace rise near the end of the distillation, and a seasoned grappa expert knows when to turn off the heat and get to work on the good stuff.) By the time the aging is done, one can see good grappa in the glass: It is identifiable by the "crown," or the ring of bubbles where the rim of the spirit meets the glass.

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

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

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