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Food: The Way We Eat

The Grapes of Wrath



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By ALEKSANDRA CRAPANZANO

Correction Appended

It was mid-July, 10 days into a heat wave so unrelenting that it had penetrated the thick stone walls of my parents' Umbrian farmhouse, and there was no relief to be found, indoors or out. There was also a big fresh Mediterranean fish waiting in the fridge — its name, in Italian, is *ombrina*. But not one of us felt like eating, let alone going anywhere near a stove. By the time the sun finally set that night, it was nearly 9:30; we jumped into the pool, cooled off and suddenly realized we were famished. Improvising with what was at hand, my mother, a superb cook, braised the *ombrina* in a quick sauce of tomatoes, garlic and saffron, and then, reaching for the nearest bottle, splashed some grappa into the pan — and so a favorite family recipe was born.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times. Food stylist: Jill Santopietro.

It was the grappa that transformed that rather simple sauce into a potent remedy for the day's heat-induced stupor. Grappa is a fiery drink, not for the mild of heart or palate. Or as the Italian writer Italo Calvino memorably described it: "suitable only for defrocked priests, unemployed bookkeepers and husbands who have been cuckolded." A cheap grappa, often at upward of 80 proof, is little more than a burning liquid flame that sears your throat and wakens your spirit before knocking you flat. A great grappa, on the other hand, is smooth and complex and leaves a long, blossoming finish.

As temperatures started to drop this winter, I couldn't help remembering our improvised summer meal. So I decided to call my favorite chefs and ask what cold-weather dishes I might make with grappa. To my surprise, the ideas poured in. While tasting one of the better grappas — like [.] Jacopo Poli's Vespaiolo — is certainly a revelation, cooking with it reveals its character without the hangover. It is a surprisingly versatile ingredient, equally effective in savory and sweet dishes. For Andrew Carmellini, the chef of A Voce, grappa gives that important note of acidity that rounds out the flavors in his roast pork with plums. The grappa cuts the richness of the meat and counters the sweetness of the plums, turning what might otherwise be too sweet a sauce into a sophisticated dialogue of flavors. I tried substituting prunes for the plums and found the resulting dish even silkier and more nuanced. Carmellini's Italian grandmother lived 35 miles from [.], so grappa flows in his blood. And polished though his cooking at A Voce is, he confessed to me that at home he likes to splash his favorite all-American butter pecan ice cream with grappa for a quick lift.

The beauty of cooking with grappa, I discovered, is to be found in its split personality. Straight from the bottle, it adds vibrancy, but cooked down, the alcohol evaporates, leaving an elegant, lingering complexity. Fabio Trabocchi, the chef of Fiamma in SoHo, took his first job in the Veneto region of Italy,

where at around 10 every morning, the men in his village would gather for a caffè corretto — coffee spiked with grappa. Perhaps it's the memory (or trauma) of this head-banging custom that persuaded Trabocchi to cook his brandy down until not a trace of alcohol remains. His delicate pear risotto glows with merely a subtle hint of grappa — like the trailing vapor of vermouth in a fine martini.

But grappa needn't be limited to Italian cooking. Chef Saul Bolton of Saul in Brooklyn uses Clear Creek's muscat grappa — an American grappa from Oregon — to add a floral note to his perfect cured salmon, giving it a faintly sweet undertone, a welcome change from the usual gin- or vodka-cured gravlax. Perhaps the best American grappa producer, Clear Creek, has grown so popular of late that Stephen McCarthy, the owner, doubled the size of his distillery 18 months ago yet says he still can't keep up with demand.

I have nothing against Clear Creek, but when I think of grappa, I never think of Oregon. I think of Umbria. I think of the sun. I think of my mother's delicious *ombrina*. I think of our plates practically licked clean, and the bottle of grappa sitting half empty on the table. And I remember the storm that blew in that night, lifting the heat and leaving a cool dew on the grass by morning. If there is one drink certain to start a storm, it's grappa. A talisman of sorts that I won't forget next summer when the sun begins to bake us dry.

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Pork Arrosto With Prunes and Grappa

1 center-cut pork loin roast, 4 to 5 bones (between 3 and 5 pounds)

For the brine (optional):

1 1/2 cups kosher salt

1 1/3 cups sugar

For the spice rub:

2 cloves garlic, peeled and thinly sliced

1 1/2 teaspoons fennel seeds

1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

1 tablespoon fresh rosemary

10 sage leaves

2 tablespoons kosher salt

1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons olive oil

For the prunes:

1 3/4 cups prunes

1/2 cup sugar

Juice of 2 lemons

2 bay leaves

Pinch of crushed

black pepper

1/4 cup grappa

Salt.

1. If you choose, brine the meat. In a large pot, bring the salt, sugar and 2 quarts of water to a boil and stir until the solids dissolve. Transfer to a heatproof container and cool completely. Cover pork with the brine and refrigerate for 45 minutes. (The brine will make the pork very tender, so it's worth doing, but if you don't have time, you can skip this step.) Pat pork dry with paper towels.

Aleksandra Crapanzano is a screenwriter who lives in Brooklyn.

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2. Set the oven rack in the center position and preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Make the spice rub. On a cutting board, mix together the garlic, fennel seeds, thyme, rosemary, sage, salt and pepper and finely chop using a chef's knife. Pour the olive oil over the mixture. With your fingers pressing on

the flat side of the knife, grind the herbs and spices by rocking the knife back and forth and pulling the mixture across the board holding the knife at a slight angle. Be careful not to cut yourself; the mixture is slippery.

Alternatively, grind in a mortar and pestle. Grind until the mixture has the consistency of wet sand.

3. Rub the pork all over with the spice mixture and set in a roasting pan. Cook in the oven until the internal temperature registers 140 degrees, for medium, between 60 to 90 minutes, depending on its size. Let rest for 15 minutes.

4. Meanwhile, prepare the prunes. In a nonreactive medium saucepan, combine the prunes, 1 ½ cups water, sugar, lemon juice, bay leaves and black pepper. Simmer until the prunes just start to break apart, about 20 minutes. Add the grappa and simmer for 5 minutes more. Season to taste with salt.

5. Slice the pork into chops. Serve each topped with the prune sauce. *Serves 4 to 5. Adapted from the forthcoming "Urban Italian" (Bloomsbury).*

Ombrina in Grappa

2 large cloves garlic, minced

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 (14-ounce) can Italian plum tomatoes, chopped, with juices

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1/2 teaspoon saffron threads

1 2-pound *ombrina* or 1-pound tail-end fillet of striped bass

1/4 cup grappa

Finely chopped parsley, to garnish.

In a large saucepan, heat the garlic in the oil until fragrant. Add the tomatoes and their juices and a pinch each of salt and pepper and cook for 5 to 10 minutes to reduce. Add the saffron and 1 ¼ cups of water, mix well and cook for 5 minutes more. Slip the fish into the pan and simmer, covered, until the fish is opaque, 5 to 8 minutes. Add the grappa and let the alcohol burn off. Sprinkle in the parsley and serve immediately. *Serves 2. Adapted from Jane Kramer, the author's mother.* NOTE: The recipe can easily be double or tripled.

Grappa-Cured Salmon

2 pounds center-cut salmon fillet, boned

2 tablespoons fennel seeds

2 tablespoons coriander seeds

2 tablespoons whole black peppercorns

2/3 cup kosher salt

1/3 cup light-brown sugar

1/3 cup sugar

1/2 cup grappa

Toasts (optional).

1. The day before, prepare the salmon. Place the fillet, horizontally and skin-side up, on a cutting board. Using a sharp knife, cut 1-inch-long, very shallow incisions that just break the skin across the length of the salmon, about 1 inch apart.

2. In a skillet over low heat, toast the fennel, coriander and peppercorns until fragrant. Place in a coffee grinder with 3 tablespoons of the salt and pulse until fine. Combine the spice mixture with the remaining salt and the sugars.

3. On the counter top, lay overlapping strips of plastic wrap large enough to envelop the salmon fillet. Eyeball what the footprint of the salmon would be on the plastic and sprinkle half of the spice mix over the footprint. Drizzle half of the grappa over the spice mix and then place the salmon on it. Cover the other side of the salmon with the remainder of the spice mix and then the grappa. Tightly wrap first in the plastic and then in aluminum foil. Put on a plate and set a weight on top. Refrigerate for 16 to 20 hours. Halfway through the curing, flip the wrapped salmon over so the juices get equal time on both sides of the fish.

4. Unwrap the fish and gently brush off the spices. Rewrap until ready to use. Serve thinly sliced with, if you choose, toasts or a shaved fennel salad. *Serves 8. Adapted from Saul in Brooklyn.*

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Risotto With Grappa, Pears and Taleggio Cheese

9 cups chicken stock

12 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 shallot, minced

3 cups carnaroli rice

Salt

2 1/2 cups dry white wine

3 medium pears (like Forelles), peeled and diced

1/4 cup grappa

1/2 pound taleggio cheese, rind removed and diced

1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Freshly ground white pepper.

1. In a saucepan over medium heat, bring the chicken stock to a simmer. Keep warm over low heat.

2. In a separate saucepan, melt 4 tablespoons of the butter over medium heat. When it sizzles, add the shallot, stir with a wooden spoon and cook gently until soft and translucent, about 3 minutes. Add the rice and a large pinch of salt and mix for about 2 minutes more, cooking the rice until the grains are translucent.

3. Add the wine and stir until it has completely evaporated. Begin to incorporate the hot stock, one ladle at a time, adding the next when the stock is almost completely absorbed. Stir continuously. Cook for a total of 16 to 21 minutes. Add the pears and cook for 2 minutes more. Remove from the heat.

4. In a small saucepan, heat the grappa to a simmer to let the alcohol evaporate. Add the hot grappa to the risotto, along with the remaining 8 tablespoons butter and the cheeses. Continue stirring until the risotto reaches a smooth, creamy consistency, adding more stock if needed. Season with salt and white pepper to taste and serve immediately. *Serves 6. Adapted from Fiamma in Manhattan.*

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