



Jacopo Poli

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SPIRIT OF THE GRAPE

Reach for the Grappa !

"To distil good grappa is easy. You only need fresh grape pomace and one hundred years of experience"

Grappa ! The word itself is splendidly evocative. So first and foremost what is it ? The world's greatest expert on the subject today Jacopo Poli insists that we should say GRAPPAS and not GRAPPA as there is an infinite variety of them and every one is different and distinct. All grappa does not taste and smell the same simply because it is white ! It is a quintessentially Italian distillate, since by European law it can ONLY be produced in Italy. It is the product of the distillation of wine pomace - the very freshest pomace possible. Note that it comes from WINE ! It has been made for centuries and is part of both the heritage and the history of Italy. It had, surprisingly, already been codified in 1636, but only really became popular in the 19th century, thanks in large part to an 1876 novel by Vittorio Imbriani. In the mind of Jacopo, grappa is superfluous and unnecessary as are paintings, sculptures, music and works of art, BUT they give pleasure, arouse emotions, bring joy and are balm to the soul ! Who would ever be without them ?

Marc or Vinaccia or Pomace (depending upon which language you favour) is the solid residue of skins, pips and sometimes stalks, which remains after the grapes have been pressed. Since 1951, law reserves the use of the term GRAPPA strictly for the distillate or Acqua Vitae of pomace.

Grappa, wine and oil form the basis of the Mediterranean diet - the oldest, the most natural and the healthiest.

Jacopo Poli

Jacopo can trace his family roots back to circa 1390. His great grandfather started the family business, with a still on a handcart, in 1898 (POLI GRAPPAIOLI). His father distilled with a steam engine. Today Jacopo distils with a traditional copper discontinuous still. He is the President of the Poli Distillery, has a Masters degree in the Science of Grappa from the Agricultural Institute of San Michelle al'Adige. He is national advisor and teacher to the Associazione Nazionale Assaggiatori Grappa & Acqueviti and a founding member of the Vicenza Artisan Distillers. The company has its offices in SCHIAVON and owns a wonderful grappa museum in nearby Bassano Del Grappa, which is open all year round to visitors without appointment. I recommend a visit here to all who might wish to learn more about this ancient and divine product of the vine. As we shall see there are those who specialise in Grappa and produce only that. These people have their own major brand or brands and are often known worldwide. At the same time many of them make Grappa for other people and companies. Often they take the wine from a wine producer, distil it into Grappa and send it back to the producer to market under his own name. Famous Grappa producers include Nonino, the wonderful company run by three sisters who bottle their Grappa in fabulous collector-item bottles and carafes of all shapes and sizes. There are also Berta, Sibona, Nardini, Stock, Mangilli and Luigi Francoli. These are just a few and the many not mentioned will excuse their omission. There is an "I Grappisti" movement in London, which now holds Grappa competitions and this is run by Ricerca, Romer, Bonello and Lunelli. Rovero is both a Grappa maker and a winemaker as is Castelleri Bergaglio. Finally, Poli makes the Grappa for two of the most famous vineyard owners in Italy – Sassicaia and Frescobaldi (about whom we wrote a profile in our summer 2007 issue). A full list of Grappa Producers can be obtained by contacting the Istituto Nazionale Grappa. www.istitutograppa.org

Production

The distillation is done, in a still, by putting the pomace into a copper (today not always copper but classically it always was) cauldron and heating it with steam. This is known as the "cotta". The ethyl alcohol it contains evaporates at 78.4°C, which allows it to be separated from the water and the other volatile elements. It is channelled into a tube immersed in a cooling chamber and condenses. The liquid obtained is now grappa. The first and last portions of this distillation contain impurities and must be eliminated. They are known as the "heads and tails". In the perfect "cutting" or separating of these heads and tails, to obtain a fine and pure wine spirit, lies the skill and experience of a fine grappa maker. He knows how to extract the "essence". The still that is used for fine grappa is known as a "discontinuous" still, unlike many other spirits, because the cauldron of pomace has to be emptied and refilled after each distillation process. One distillation takes some 2-3 hours. Cheap, commercial grappa can be made in a continuous still, but is of strictly inferior quality. A continuous still, in use since the 1950s, can handle some 300,000 kilos of pomace per day, handled by just one person. Unfortunately this form of distilling represents some 82% of all grappa made today, although it is much more neutral. The "discontinuous" system produces the finest grappa at the rate of some 10,000-20,000 kilos of pomace per day with 400 kilos of pomace producing some 30 litres of grappa at 43° alcohol and requiring 4 operators. As the continuous still is fed continuously rather than being emptied and refilled, therefore all the heads and tails (impurities) are continuously entering the rectifying column. Scientifically, today, 300 components have been identified in pomace and the art and skill of the great grappa producer is to separate the pleasant, aromatic and fine tasting ones from the unpleasant ones (methyl, alcohol, vinegar, etc). This has to be done



with the utmost precision. A truly skilled grappa distiller requires a considerable knowledge of physics to understand the behaviour of these 300 components and to be able to cut out the less good ones (flemme in Italian) at EXACTLY the right moment. He also needs an extremely sensitive nose as they put it “to keep the heart and cut out the heads and tails”. Each element vaporises at a slightly different temperature.

One of the ways to achieve this is to heat the pomace as gradually and uniformly as possible so that the evaporating vapour has time to enrich itself with both alcohol and the maximum amount of fine aromas. This way the grappa will be smooth and fragrant. Much slower and more costly, but much finer !

Classification

Classification is according to age. The different categories are :

- 1. Young or white grappa :** Bottled immediately or soon after distillation without any flavouring. It is colourless.
- 2. Reserve or Vintage grappa :** Bottled after at least 24 months in OAK casks. Colour pale straw to rich amber.
- 3. Aromatic grappa :** Obtained from aromatic grapes - Muscat, Traminer, etc.
- 4. Flavoured grappa :** Obtained with the addition of roots, herbs or fruit, which give particular and individual aromas and fragrances - liquorice, rue, sage, mint, thyme, rosemary, juniper, resin, fresh grass, vine shoots, tea, hay, tobacco, honey, blueberries, red fruits, exotic fruits, citrus fruits, etc.

Some grappas are made from single grape varieties, some from blends. Single varieties are not necessarily better, as blends can frequently have more complexity.

Evolution

Originally, going back in time, grappa was truly a drink to warm up the body in the morning and provide a source of calories and energy for those whose work consisted of hard physical labour. Today the calorific input, just like wine, is no longer or very rarely needed. The function of grappas is hedonistic - to give pleasure. For this reason it is even more essential that it should be refined and pure and no longer rustic.

Production

The main producing regions of grappa are Veneto 40% of the production, Friuli 8% , Trentino 4% , Lombardy 4%, Piedmont 17%, South Tyrol 1% and last but not least the rest of Italy with 26% of the production.

There are 135 grappa distilleries in Italy with 600 bottlers and 1,000 wineries. There are over 6,000 different labels. European law says that it is the last person in the chain who performs an operation on a grappa before bottling who may legally put on the label “produced and bottled by”. Thus, today, more and more wineries are selling grappas made for them by a distiller from their own wine. Either that or they buy grappa from another distiller and put their name on it. For fiscal reasons grappa cannot be made on the same premises as wine. The law is very strict about alcohol in Italy, as indeed it is in France and most European countries. The authorities say, quite naturally, that it is for the protection of our



health, but more cynical people in the wine and spirit business understand that it is because governments make the most enormous amount of money from the colossal taxes on spirits and do not want to run the risk of losing the revenue from even a drop. For this reason any premises that hold a license to distil are under close vigilance by the authorities and cannot enter or exit a drop of distillate without first lodging the paperwork so that the authorities can know at any time exactly how much stock any distiller holds, right down to the last litre. If the spirits were to be housed in the same premises as a winery they could never be sure that spirits were not being mixed with wine or wine being distilled without a license etc. Thus wineries and distilleries or premises housing un-bottled spirits must be entirely separate with no connection by passageway or tunnel. In theory therefore no spirit can enter a winery without being logged in by the authorities.

Quality

The quality of a grappa depends upon a variety of factors, each of which is of vital importance :

The vine and the vineyards and of course the vintage (this influences the quality of grapes and thus the pomace). Then comes the quality of the pomace (see above). The freshness of the pomace is vital, (it should be in perfect condition, still dripping with wine). Other essential factors are the style of the distiller and of course the type of still (discontinuous or continuous, copper or other). Finally comes the all important factor of ageing or not.

What to look for In a fine grappa

There are four main things to look for when one tastes and enjoys a fine Grappa. As there is still a huge production of rustic, country grappa it becomes important to distinguish them from the finer and smoother ones. Firstly look for elegance. Then make sure of the purity of the product. Look and see and appreciate the intensity of the bouquet and flavour and finally inhale the delicate and exotic fragrance.

Tasting

For preference use a clean, thin, tulip shaped glass with a relatively narrow mouth and an out-turned lip. Taste or drink in tiny sips so that the grappa can be diluted by the saliva. The flavours then linger on the palate while the aromas are released into the nasal passages and remain after the grappa has been swallowed. Drink it at room temperature or slightly chilled but never warm or hot. For fine appreciation, the grappas should go onto the tip of the tongue where the sweetness is tasted. There is no need to rotate it in the mouth as you would a wine.

Here is a typical tasting note of a fine grappa

“Nose fine and very pure. Elegantly refined and aromatic. Perfumed fragrance of red fruit and flowers. Very gentle and smooth on the palate. It has quiet strength without brutality or any rough edges. Long in the mouth with tones of butterscotch and green tea. Quite fat and round. The aftertaste lingers long and has herbs and honey notes. Extremely satisfying and stimulating.”

Grappas are far from just being “digestives”. They are like fine Cognac, Armagnac, and Whisky, nectars for connoisseurs with an infinite variety of flavours, aromas and textures. Next time you feel like a fine spirit to round off your meal, don’t just ask for grappa; ask to see the list. Then choose one that suits your mood and palate, or ask your sommelier to help with your selection. Salute !