

Get Wasted

After winemakers press grapes, distillers turn the skins and seeds into grappa, a potent Italian brandy and the ultimate recycled spirit.

By Joshua M. Bernstein

My friend Batt's father, Bernard, hates wasting food. The Frenchman will dig through Dumpsters to source mushy strawberries, which he'll turn into jam. Then he'll trade jam for empty wine bottles, later used to store the wine he makes from bruised grapes. And instead of ditching the pomace—the pulp, skins, and seeds left after pressing grapes—he'll distill the waste matter into grappa, an Italian brandy that's most certainly an acquired taste.

"Drink, drink!" Bernard urged. We'd just finished an hours-long feast and our bellies were globes. I clinked his glass and knocked back the spirit. It felt like lighter fluid flaming down my throat and into my belly, where a most marvelous sensation occurred: The grappa soothed my overstuffed stomach, making me think that maybe, just maybe, I should have another wedge of cheese. "Grappa!" Bernard exclaimed, proclaiming the power of this centuries-old Italian brandy.

Since the Middle Ages, grappa has been a constant of the lower rungs of Italian life. The well-off citizenry drank wine, while grappa was the working class's favored hooch. It remained

the everyman's elixir until around the middle of the twentieth century, when grappa gradually lost its rocket-fuel reputation and was welcomed into refined society. Today, grappa is an around-the-clock companion to Italians' daily routine.

After dinner, grappa is downed as a digestif to aid digestion. Come morning and afternoon, you'll find folks dashing into bars for an espresso and a grappa.

"My wife and I have been in cheap hotels in Italy, and when we get up in the morning to have an espresso, there are guys knocking back a double grappa on their way to work," says Stephen McCarthy, the owner and distiller of Portland, Oregon's Clear Creek Distillery, which makes a range of excellent grappas.

While rise-and-shine drinking may never be socially acceptable in America (save for tailgating, that is), grappa has, over the past several decades, found a home in the American bar. That's partly due to the rising quality of imported Italian grappas that reached the States were distilled from a jumble of pomaces. That's sort of like tossing random leftovers into a pot and serving them for dinner. As you'd expect, earlier grappas were

rough, strong, spicy, and a close cousin to kerosene. It's no wonder Ernest Hemingway had characters in his Italy-set classic, *A Farewell to Arms*, slug grappa before combat on the battlefield—and in the bedroom.

These days, finer grappas, both from Italy and America, are made from the pomace of a single or several carefully selected grape varietals, be they fruity Merlot or sweet floral Muscats. But don't be scared off. "I'm not sure if there's something in the word that makes people think that grappa is sweet," says Clear Creek's McCarthy, but "grappa is not a drink for the faint of heart."



Great Grappas to Try

Clear Creek Distillery Grappa Moscato

The Oregon distillery's most popular grappa is made with locally sourced pomace.

Moscato is smooth and intensely aromatic, with a floral nose and a finish as spicy as the day is long.

Jacopo Poli Sarpa di Poli Grappa

Founded in 1898 by the Poli family, the northern-Italian distillery is currently run by Jacopo Poli and his siblings. This sleek young grappa, made with a blend of Cabernet and Merlot pomace, is equally crisp and herbaceous.

Nardini Grappa Bianco

The pride of Italy's oldest distillery, this grappa tips the scales at a strapping 100 proof. As you'd expect from the boozy heft, Bianco is initially intense, before revealing flavors of cinnamon, jasmine tea, and citrus zest.

Marolo Grappa di Moscato

Inspired by dinner at American steakhouses, Paolo Marolo's complex Italian grappa spends five years aging in French oak, resulting in a full-bodied, assertive grappa that's ideal after a rich, decadent meal.

Lorenzo Inga Grappa di Dolcetto

Since 1832, Italy's Inga clan has specialized in producing grappa. This sublime release pairs a fruity, fragrant aroma with a flavor that's by turns buttery, berrylike, and lightly bitter. **A+**

POLI
1898

Penthouse
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