



The Grappa of Jacopo Poli: Comments and Tasting Notes

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1 post • Page 1 of 1



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by Daniel Rogov on Sat Nov 29, 2008 1:55 pm

Jacopo Poli is a fourth-generation *grappaio* - one of the dedicated band of the 159 licensed distilleries in Italy that produce grappa. Located in the Veneto area, the Poli family can easily be thought of as an artisinal producer and their versions of grappa are often considered among the very best in the world.

Until some twenty years ago, most people considered grappa to be little more than a coarse, peasants' beverage that would burn in the mouth, burn in the throat and burn in the stomach and those that drank it would usually take their first glass early in the morning, ideally with or in their first espresso coffee of the day. During the heyday of such beverages there were more than 2,000 stills in Italy producing grappa, most of those, like the moonshiners of Kentucky and Tennessee doing it quite illegally. Like moonshine whiskey, grappa was cheap to produce, cheap to sell and could be consumed the minute it came out of the still.

For those not in the know, peasants made grappa largely in order to save money and what they used then as today were not the grapes but the pomace (the skins, seeds and pulp left over after the winemaking process. Many continue to enjoy all but the most coarse of grappas (the present critic included), but the last twenty years has seen a revolution in which grappa has attained a true gentleman's status, for although it can be produced from red or white grapes, single varieties or blends, the best grappas today show no less sophistication and complexity than fine brandies, those including Armagnac, Cognac and Calvados. Although most grappa remains as crystal clear as mineral water, some grappas are oak aged for up to 15 years and, as they age take on colors that can range from pale golden to deep amber and levels of depth that amaze newcomers to the beverage.

For those more into technical details, following is a definition of grappa that may be of use.

"a pomace brandy produced by direct distillation of the skins of pressed grapes... To keep its taste as unmistakable as its name, every aspect grappa's production prescribed by statute: the composition of the pomace (the skins, seeds, and so on left after the grapes are crushed for wine), the distillation method, and the maximum alcohol content (86 percent by volume/172 proof) of the fresh distillate." Even the maximum moisture content of the pomace has been fixed. Distillates from whole fermented grapes, though similar in taste, cannot be called grappa."

On Monday 24 November I had the pleasure of meeting with Signore Poli not once but twice. The first meeting, scheduled for 10 a.m. at the upstairs bar of Tel Aviv's Piccola Pasta, was a one-on-one meeting at which I took on a tasting of six Poli grappas and two brandies. What might have been a meeting of a single hour went on for almost two and a half hours as the two of us got into prolonged discussions about what might well one day be thought of as "the philosophy of grappa" and how it impacts on our lives. Truth be told, Poli is a charming and intelligent man, his enthusiasm is contagious and I have had very few meeting more pleasant over the course of my long career.

That the meeting was pleasant had nothing at all to do with the quantity of grappa that I sampled. It is true that unlike wine, to truly evaluate grappa, one must swallow at least a bit but that bit, even from 8 glasses came to far less than a usual snifter would bear. More than that, grappa tasting is considerably different than wine tasting, for in order to clean the palate between tastings and to help in preventing intoxication, the ideal method is to drink between half and a quarter glass of fresh cold milk.

Our second meeting was that evening when I joined a group of people who had come to Chloely's restaurant there to match food with grappa. Signore Poli introduced the dinner by telling all present that this was indeed "an experiment" in seeing whether a full meal of six courses could be matched with different grappas. Truth be told, I was skeptical on arrival and convinced of my skepticism on finishing the meal because even though I dutifully tried each match offered and even though the grappas were lovely and the food excellent, grappa remains for me a morning beverage, a late-afternoon beverage or an after-dinner beverage and I matched my dishes with various wines offered by the restaurant's sommelier. No matter though - the experiment may have failed but the good company and atmosphere around the table and Victor Gluger's superb dishes (the bouillabaisse and the lamb ossobuco stand out as special in my mind) came together in ways that could not help but please.

There is more to tell but I will hold that for a long article for HaAretz. In the meanwhile, following are my tasting notes for the grappas sampled. I feel perfectly comfortable writing such tasting notes but do not feel a great enough expertise to award scores as I do with wines so we'll let those go in this case and let the notes speak entirely for themselves.

The Poli grappas are imported by The Doosh and can be ordered by telephoning 054 7538377 or by email to the.info@thedoosh.com Prices may look high at first glance but they are much in line with prices in the USA and one should keep in mind that unlike a bottle of wine, one of grappa can last a long time indeed.

Best
Rogov

Poli, Grappa, Torcolato: A young unoaked grappa made from the pomace of Vespaiolo and Tocai grapes that were left to dry until the sugar content reached 30-40% and the grapes were attacked by botrytis cinerea (the noble rot sought after in the making of dessert wines). Taken from the residue of grapes used to make Fausto Maculan's famous dessert wine, and showing tropical fruits, raisins and dried apricots, a soft, easy to sip grappa a generous bite on the palate. 500 ml. bottles NIS 685.

Poli, Grappa, Vespaiolo: Made entirely from the pomace of Vespaiolo grapes, that distilled in an antique copper steam boiler. A young, unoaked grappa showing a delicate nose of spring flowers and flavors of figs and honey. On the palate figs, dates and notes of honey all coming together in ways that are both delicate and complex. 500 ml. bottles, NIS 685.

Poli, Grappa, Elegante, Po': Made from the pomace of Pinot Noir grapes, a soft, round grappa with aromas and flavors of spring flowers, a damp forest floor, juniper berries, wild berries intense notes or orange peel. Easy to sip and a good candidate for serving on two ice cubes. 700 ml. bottles, NIS 395

Poli, Grappa, Sarpa Riserva: Sarpa translates from Italian to pomace, making one think that this might be a rather simple grappa. Anything could be further from reality. Made from the pomace of 60% Merlot and 40% Cabernet Sauvignon grapes and aged in oak for four years, this deeply fruity grappa shows an almost erotic display of blueberries, lemon peel, vanilla, Jalapeno peppers and licorice, all lingering long and generously on the palate. Elegance personified. (Not yet available in Israel)

Poli, Grappa, Barrique, 1994: Dark burnished gold towards bronze in color, a single vintage grappa, that made from red grape varieties and aged for 6 months in 225 liter barriques, 30 months in 500 liter oak casks and then 10 years longer in large Slovenian oak casks. With its whopping 55% alcohol content, catches the breath at first whiff, but that yields quickly revealing aromas and flavors of toasted rye bread, vanilla, mocha and cocoa. Given a moment to sit on the palate also reveals hints of what at one moment seems to be black fruits and at another of minted chocolate. Long, complex and elegant. 700 ml. bottles, NIS 780.

Poli, Grappa di Sassicaia: Made from the pomace of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc grapes that were used in making the fabulous Sassicaia wine of Bolgheri in Tuscany, aged in oak casks for five years. Showing burnished gold towards medium amber in color. A hedonistic grappa, showing generous candied fruits, those complemented nicely by notes of espresso coffee and minted bitter-sweet chocolate, and, from mid-palate on notes of eucalyptus and honey, all coming together and lingering seemingly without end on the palate. Call this one majestic if you like and I would not disagree with you. 500 ml. bottles, NIS 790.

And Two Grape Brandies

Poli, Moscato, Grape Brandy: Made from the White Muscat grapes of the Veneto region, a deeply aromatic brandy, showing rose petal, magnolia and freshly cut grass on the nose and, on the palate notes of grapefruit and citrus peel. Long and generous, finishing with touches of honey and earthy minerals. 500 ml. bottles, NIS 685.

Poli, Arzente, Wine Brandy: Made entirely from local Trebbiano grapes, a full-bodied brandy, developed for 10 years in oak casks and showing generous nutty overtones along with notes of black tea and dried summer fruits. Lacking on the mid-palate but picks up at the end with notes of honeyed apricots. 500 ml. bottles, NIS 685.