

Spirits

There's Pleasure in the Grip of Grappa

By Jason Wilson

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

You're afraid of grappa, right? Maybe you once had a bad sip of the stuff after dinner in an Italian restaurant, or maybe, if you're of Italian descent, you had a homemade snootful at an old relative's house. Don't worry: I'm not going to tell you that my first experience with grappa was exquisite or transcendent. When I was an exchange student in Italy nearly 20 years ago, many of the men in the village where I lived enjoyed a daily *caffè corretto*, meaning they "corrected" their morning espressos with a shot of grappa. Those guys were always keen to pour me a little, too, and much of it was of the "white lightning" variety and burned the esophagus like kerosene.



Apertivo Frutta e Grappa (Julia Ewan - The Washington Post)

THIS STORY

Spirits: [There's Pleasure in the Grip of Grappa](#)

Recipe: [Apertivo Frutta e Grappa](#)

But while traveling in Italy recently, I tasted some wonderful grappas and paid a visit to a couple of distilleries operating in and around Bassano del Grappa, a charming city at the foothills of the Alps on the Brenta River in the Veneto, and grappa's spiritual home.

"Many people once had that same harsh, aggressive experience, and you'll remember that experience your whole life," says Jacopo Poli, fourth-generation distiller of another of Italy's finest grappas, Poli. "But the grappas we are distilling now are at least 10 times better than the grappa we drank 20 years ago."

Grappa faces the same predicament that has plagued tequila. Most people's early experiences with tequila were with poor-quality mixtos that left a mean hangover. Good, premium grappa, however, can be a lovely and complex spirit, just like premium tequila. Yet, as with tequila, it will be an uphill climb to convince people of that.

That's why grappa distillers in Italy went ballistic last summer when senators in the right-wing Lega Nord party proposed legalizing homemade grappa. "It's nonsense," Poli said. "It's taken decades to get rid of the image of the clandestine still, of moonshine, of lowbrow grappa. And now they want to go back to the past?" So far, the legislation has not passed.

For a brief time, from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, grappa experienced a minor trendiness in the United States when Italian restaurants began offering a selection of grappas, many in showy, silly glass-blown bottles. But that small wave of popularity might have created an even larger long-term problem for premium grappa.

Around that time, some of Italy's big-name wine makers, such as Antinori, Michele Chiarlo, Banfi and others, jumped onto the grappa bandwagon, and a whole category of winery-

branded grappas took off. A few are of decent quality, but many are not. Often they were created as a value add-on to restaurant wine orders (buy 10 cases of our wine, and we'll give you a free case of grappa) and also as brand reinforcement on their after-dinner menu; in other words, as a marketing gimmick.

"Just because the pomace came from a good winery doesn't mean it's going to make a good grappa," Poli said. Grappa is not a brandy, as is often reported, and it's not made with wine, but rather with grape pomace: the skins, seeds and pulp of grapes after the juice has been extracted for winemaking. The pomace must be stored in an airtight container to stop the fermentation process, and it must be kept fresh, moist and free of mold.

"Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of making a good grappa is knowing how to handle the pomace properly," said Antonio Guarda Nardini, whose family runs the Nardini Distillery, Italy's largest producer of premium grappa. The Nardini family has been handling pomace and making grappa since 1779.

Most wineries, on the other hand, use a contract distiller who puts their label on a grappa, often with mixed results. Sometimes it's even unclear whether the wineries' own pomace is used. Yet if you go to a liquor store today, grappas by wineries often crowd out the premium, artisan distillers.

In the glass, what separates a bad grappa from a good one? First, a bad grappa often has what could be described as a "pet shop" aroma. At a dinner on my trip, we tasted a very poor grappa, and my tablemate said, "I feel like I can hear puppies barking when I sip this." That is often the telltale sign that moldy or stale pomace has been used.

To check quality, Nardini suggests a simple test: When a grappa is served, dip your finger in it and rub the back of your hand. When you smell your hand, the aroma should be instantly fresh and at least hint at grapes. Just as important, the grappa shouldn't feel oily. There is always some oil in the pomace because of the crushed grape seeds, but good producers filter and distill in a way that diminishes it. Poorly made grappa contains a high percentage of oil. "The oil is what makes it hard to digest and gives you a headache," Guarda Nardini says. "That's the grappa that makes you say, 'Ugh, I could feel that grappa going up and down my system for three days.'" Nardini avoids problems by filtering and triple distilling, and the result is cleaner, lighter and smoother than what you'd ever imagine from a 100-proof spirit.

Nardini and Poli make excellent grappas, though each comes at the spirit from different angles. Nardini has long been considered the gold standard in Italy, and its bianco is a great place to start if you're looking for a traditional grappa. Poli, on the other hand, considers himself more of an artisan and innovator. He has added grappas with fruit infusions, plus grappa made from single-grape pomace such as Moscato or Merlot, and he experiments with different methods of barrel aging. When I visited, Poli was about to roll out grappas that had been aged in port and sherry barrels.

I'm glad I've revisited grappa, but I'll stick to the distilleries that are committed to grappa as their main spirit and not as a sideline. The next time I'm in an Italian restaurant and the waiter comes around during coffee with little glasses of grappa, I'm checking to see. If it's Poli or Nardini, or an artisan producer such as Nonino or Capovilla, I know what I'll say to my dining companions: Have no fear.

Jason Wilson can be reached at jason@tablematters.com or food@washpost.com.