

Taste Italia

APRIL 2010 £3.70

Your Italian Easter

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weekend
dishes

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for all the family

14 speedy suppers
for spring

Best Italian regional dolci

The highs of Dolomites cuisine

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GOES BACK
TO ITALIAN
BASICS



GORDON
RAMSAY'S
AMARETTO
CHOCOLATE
TORTE



55
DELICIOUS
SPRING
RECIPES



Lamb on a
spring vegetable

INSPIRATIONAL RECIPES



❖ Mackerel, tomato
and olive bake



❖ Stuffed red mullet
with roasted potatoes



❖ Vegetable bake with
passata topping



❖ Abruzzo's mini
chocolate almond pies



APRIL
PRICE



Poli

Sally FitzGerald is forced to face her fears of the fiery Italian spirit when she is invited to visit a Grappa-making factory in the north-east of Italy.

First I must tell you a secret: I hate Grappa. To be honest, it's not really that much of a secret as I can often be overheard likening the spirit to paint stripper whenever I'm asked my opinion of it. So you can imagine my delight when on a recent trip to Italy, I noticed that a visit to a Grappa factory was on the itinerary.

The company in question was Poli, a traditional Grappa-maker located in the small, picturesque town of Bassano del Grappa in the heart of the Vicenza province in north-east Italy. Bassano del Grappa, sitting at the foot of Monte Grappa, is renowned for its production of the spirit – in fact, it's often regarded as the Grappa capital of Italy – so I decided that if I ever had to try the spirit again in my lifetime, this would be the only place to do it. Not wanting to share the fact that I hated the product of his lifetime's work with him, I set off to meet Jacopo Poli, one of the company's owners, determined to enter the factory with an open mind, even if my stomach was betraying my resolution by churning at the mere mention of the word Grappa.

FROM HAT SPECIALIST TO GRAPPA-MAKER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Poli was founded by Jacopo's great-grandfather GioBatta, a producer of straw hats by trade, but a

man with a great passion for Grappa. At the time, Grappa was usually produced in and around small mountain towns where the climate was very cold and so the inhabitants supped the fiery spirit as a way of keeping warm. As an added bonus, Grappa was cheap to produce and in plentiful supply as it is created from the leftover pomace (grape skins and seeds) of the wine-making process.

One day, GioBatta decided to take his love of Grappa one step further than merely consuming the drink, so moved away from his straw hat business, and instead went on a one-man mission to produce Grappa. He first created a small metal still, which could be used to distil the Grappa, then attached it to a horse-drawn cart and worked his way around different farms. He would ask for their leftover pomace, then create bottles of Grappa on the spot, giving the farmers a percentage of the finished product as a means of payment for the raw materials.

GioBatta continued to work in this way, until he was approached by a friend who had some spare unused train parts, which could be put together to create an engine to replace the horse and cart. This made transportation a little easier at least. GioBatta's son Giovanni also became involved in the business and wanted to make it as successful as possible, finally convincing his father



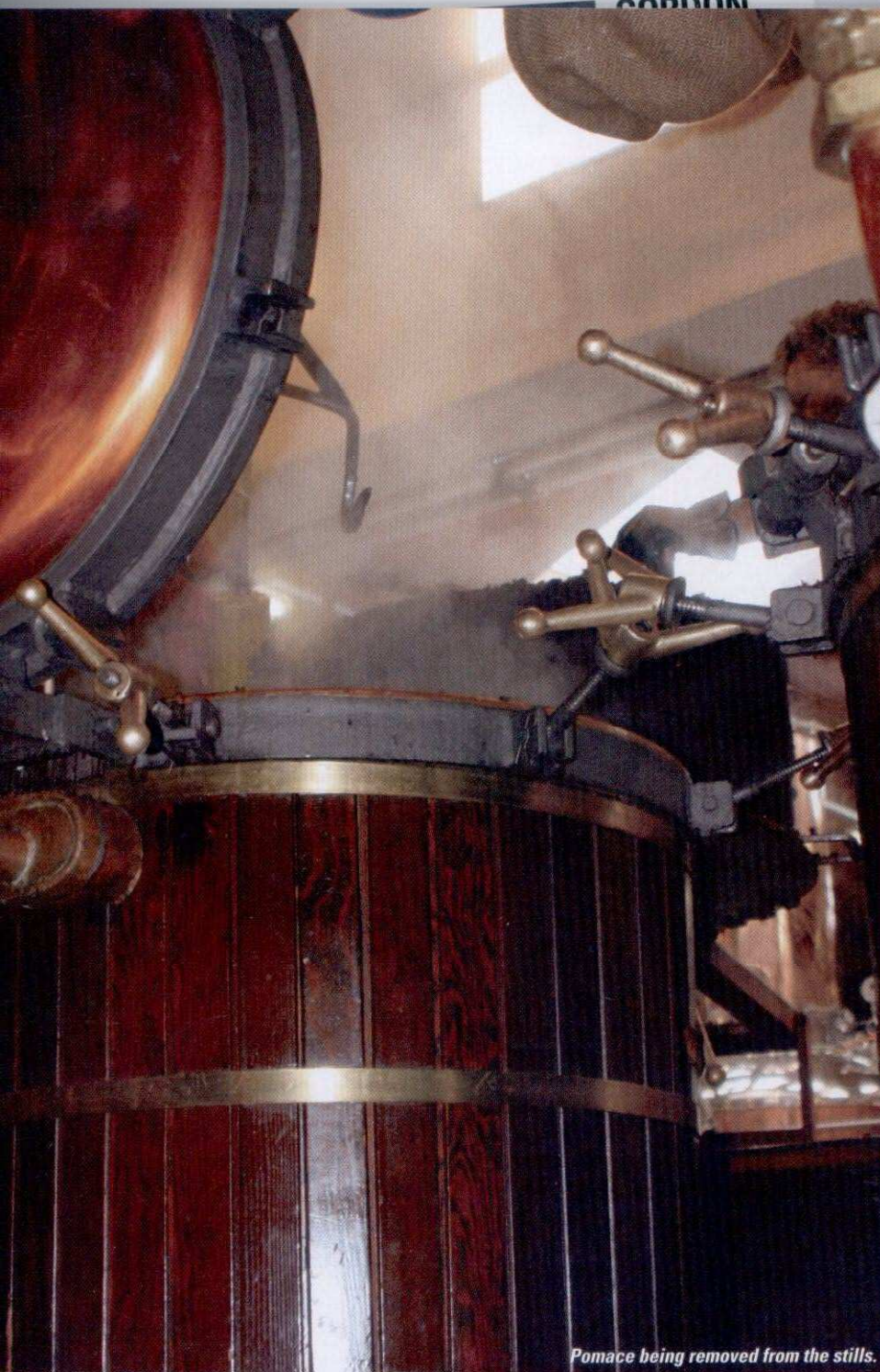
Wooden casks for ageing the Grappa.



Jacopo explains all about the raw ingredients.



Poli's classic Grappa.



Pomace being removed from the stills.



Traditional pressing equipment

In essence Grappa is all about the quality of the ingredients. If it was born good, it remains good.



to register Poli as an official company in 1898. A few years later, a new tax law was introduced to Italy, which meant that Poli had to have a fixed site for the Grappa still, so it bought a small property in Bassano del Grappa and have remained in the same factory to this day.

Throughout the decades, the company has been passed down through four generations of the Poli family, and during the two World Wars, while the male members of the family were forced to leave the business and their homes to join the fighting, the female contingent took responsibility for keeping Poli's Grappa heritage alive.

REFINING THE PROCESS

While Poli continues to use the still that GioBatta originally created (it's just one of many now), the Grappa-making process has had to change slightly over the years. Italians no longer need the spirit as a form of warmth or nourishment – now it is consumed purely for enjoyment, to savour the flavour and aroma.

Jacopo explained that there isn't really one defining characteristic of Grappa anymore, rather each variety has its own identity. The flavour of the Grappa depends upon the type of pomace used, so the skins of Moscato grapes, for example, will produce a different taste to that of the Pinot grape. But most importantly, whichever variety you choose, in essence it is all about the quality of the ingredients, Jacopo stressed. "If it was born good, it remains good. If it was born bad, then it remains bad too." I started to think that maybe the ones I had tried before had actually been born rotten.

As Jacopo led us around the factory I was surprised to find that I was actually quite entranced by the Grappa-making process. At Poli, the artisan method of production is still in use, so my first →

Steel vats in which the Grappa is flavoured.





Poli's extensive range of Grappas.

Instead of emanating burnt alcohol fumes, the white-washed room actually smelt a little like bubble gum.



A lantern depicting a Grappa maker.

The stills used to produce the spirit.

→ sight was that of an imposing row of large wooden casks complete with shining copper lids. While I watched steam billowing out the sides of the lids, to my left I noticed two men lifting a huge mass of what looked like dark compost from the wooden casing of the farthest still. I soon discovered that this wasn't actually compost, it was in fact the pomace.

The method for creating Grappa is fairly simple; pomace is put into the cauldron, heated up to a temperature of around 78°C, then the alcohol is distilled by applying steam to the still for around 3 hours. The evaporated alcohol is then filtered out through large tubes and condensed to obtain Grappa. After the 3 hours of heating, the used pomace is removed from the vats and replaced by a new batch, perhaps of a different grape variety to produce a different flavoured Grappa.

The resulting liquid from this process is then either stored in large silver vats for around 1 year to produce young Grappa, or transferred to wooden casks for around 13 years to create a more rich, mature flavour, in a similar way to the wine or whisky-making process. While the Grappa is in the vats or barrels, spring water is also added to the mix to reduce the alcohol level to the legal requirement of around 40-45 per cent, rather than the original pure level, which can be up to a more intoxicating 70 per cent.

But as I mentioned before, modern tastes have changed the way Italians consume Grappa, and so as Jacopo led us through to the second room in the factory, he introduced us to the idea of Poli's flavoured Grappa. As the door slid open, I got my second surprise of the day. Instead of emanating strong fumes of burnt alcohol, the white-washed room smelt of bubble gum. Sweet, fragrant, and very comforting, Jacopo reached up to head-height, carefully lifted the lid of a heavy

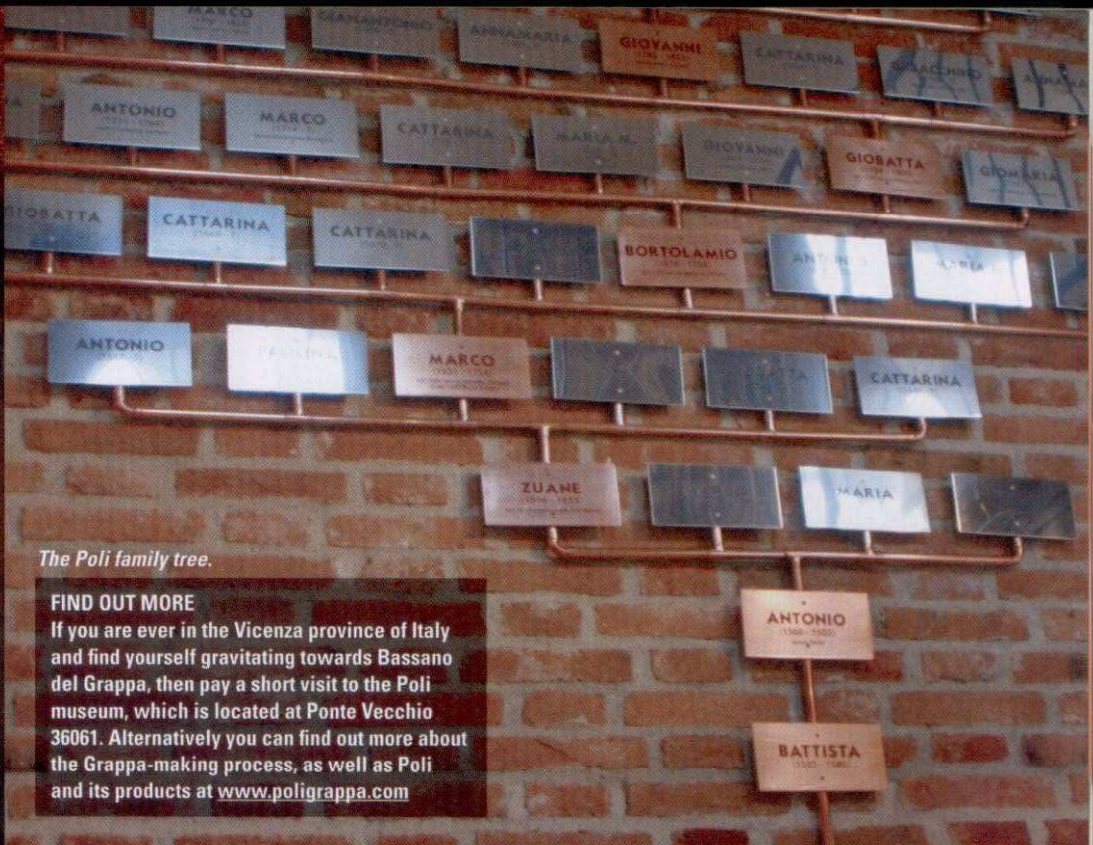




Time for a tasting of the honey and plum flavoured Grappa.



The pomace must be heated to just the right temperature.



The Poli family tree.

FIND OUT MORE

If you are ever in the Vicenza province of Italy and find yourself gravitating towards Bassano del Grappa, then pay a short visit to the Poli museum, which is located at Ponte Vecchio 36061. Alternatively you can find out more about the Grappa-making process, as well as Poli and its products at www.poligrappa.com

steel container and invited us to stand on tip toes and breath inside. Licorice. The next container smelt of honey, another raspberry, strawberry, and on it went. Some were more unusual than others – there was even a variety called *Taiadea*, which contained half Grappa, half quinine. Jacopo revealed that in this room, as the Grappa matures in the vats, fresh ingredients such as acacia honey and licorice sticks are added to the liquid in order to infuse the alcohol with a different flavour. Altogether, Poli has 12 different flavours of Grappa on offer. I couldn't believe that something which had previously repulsed me so much could smell so good. My day was starting to look up.

THE TRUTH IS IN THE TASTING

As we left the flavouring room and walked past the bottling room, a little sigh emerged from my lips – I knew what was coming next. It was time for the tasting. At the bottom of a short set of winding stone steps we arrived at the entrance to a long arched corridor lit only by a series of eerie orange glows coming from behind regularly-spaced copper lanterns. It was like something from *The Shining*. Heavy wooden doors interrupted the monotony of the corridor, and as I peered through a small barred section three-quarters of the way up one door, I could see stacks of large wooden barrels – this was the home of the aged Grappa.

At the end of the corridor was our final destination – a small circular room with barrels dotted around and a different coloured Grappa bottle perched on top of each.

"Who would like to try our original Grappa?" Jacopo offered first.

Thankfully my fellow traveller Shaun stepped forward. He had never tried Grappa before, and despite my numerous warnings, was intrigued. I watched as he gulped rather than sipped the clear

liquid from the glass and felt a small smile form as his face began to contort. I didn't need a camera – I will remember that look of horror for the rest of my life. "My throat, I think I've burnt it," he yelled as his face went a bright shade of crimson. They were right about the warming effects.

Turning down a sip of the same spirit, Jacopo promised he would find me a Grappa I would love. I was dubious, but couldn't resist the challenge. He presented me with a small shot of honey Grappa. My third surprise of the day – it wasn't that bad. The smooth, sweet nature of the honey took the edge off the pure alcohol burn and left a delicious aftertaste. It was still strong and warming, but that initial breathtaking hit was softened. Convinced that this was a fluke, I moved on to the plum Grappa, which had a more fruity flavour and aroma, and slightly less syrupy texture.

"Now this you will really love", Jacopo enticed as he passed me a glass of thick velvety brown liquid. The aroma of cocoa filled my nose as I lifted the glass up to drink, and then my mouth was consumed by the taste of intensely bitter chocolate and just the merest hint of alcohol. I sipped it again, and again. Delicious, but perhaps a little too easy to drink. This was one of the new Grappa liqueurs, a range which Poli is developing and I can see why. Just one sip had the ability to completely redefine my impression of the spirit.

I left Poli that day indebted to Jacopo and his team for not only educating me on a wonderful Italian tradition, but for showing me exactly why the popular spirit is so cherished in Italy – something I completely failed to comprehend before. Now don't get me wrong, you won't find me ordering a measure of Grappa as a *digestivo* in my local Italian restaurant anytime soon, but offer me a sip of honey-flavoured or chocolate liqueur Grappa and I might just surprise you. **T**