

# THE CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO WORLDWIDE SPIRITS



Selecting and Savoring Whiskey, Vodka,  
Scotch, Rum, Tequila . . . and Everything Else

RICHARD CARLETON HACKER

**“POUR” RICHARD’S ALMANAC:  
OBSERVATIONS BY THE AUTHOR**

If there were no cocktail hour, we would have to invent one.

An evening without a cocktail is like an evening without a cocktail.

One toast to *many* is better than one toast *too* many.

The secret to an enjoyable life is not only being able to survive,  
but being able to survive in style. Therefore, even if you don’t drink much, drink only the best.

One of the saddest refrains in the English language is “Last Call.”

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# PREFACE

In spite of its title, this is not a book about drinking. That's the easy part, and if practice makes perfect, chances are you're already perfect at it. Just open your lips, bring up the glass, and swallow.

Nor is this a book about imbibing to excess; that experience never seems worth it, and besides, moderation is the mantra, although, as the late Dean Martin observed, "You're not drunk if you can lie on the floor without holding on."

No, this is a book about how to drink, and also about what to drink, because you will discover, in going through the chapters, which describe practically every distilled spirit in the world, that there will be some you like more than others. And some that you may not like at all. That's one of the reasons I wrote this book—to let you know what is out there in the spiritual world.

This is also a book that will help you appreciate what you're drinking by explaining the differences of these spirits, including how they're made, how they taste, and even how to taste them. It will also clear up a lot of ongoing confusion that exists in the drinking world, such as the distinction between single malts and blended scotch, why a Tennessee whiskey is not a bourbon, and even how to stock a home bar.

It will also make you a more stimulating conversationalist when it comes to discussing distilled spirits with friends and business associates and may—just may—get them to buy you a drink at the next social gathering, in awestruck recognition of your newfound drinking knowledge.

So set 'em up, and let's start delving into one of life's most pleasurable pastimes. After all, as Frank Sinatra once said, "I feel sorry for people who don't drink. When they wake up in the morning, that's as good as they're going to feel all day."



Photo credit François Goizé

Cheers, Slange Var, À Votre Santé, Salud, Kampai, Prost, Skaal!

—RCH



# Chapter 23

## Grappa—The Italian Digestif

Justified or not, certain spirits evoke stereotypical images. Grappa, for example, often conjures up visions of an ultrapotent Italian liquor possessing the abilities to make old men feel young and young men feel old. Part of the impetus behind this is the fact that grappa is a double-distilled grape brandy made from *pomace*, the leftover skins, seeds, and pulp from grapes that have been pressed for winemaking. Grappa, in fact, was originally created to utilize these leftovers. Thus, it was an eco-friendly, sustainable spirit long before those attributes were in vogue. But the results of those earliest grappas were often highly alcoholic and harsh-tasting potables.

That unflattering perception began to change in the 1960s, in large part because of Bonito and Giannola Nonino, the husband and wife third generation representing the family-owned Nonino Distilleries. They began refining their methods of production while adhering to the techniques created by Orazio Nonino in 1897, when he established his distillery in Ronchi di Percoto in northeastern Italy. While most grappa producers were using whatever pomace was available after the pressings, Giannola Nonino reasoned that, just as Italian winemakers were selective in choosing grapes for their vintages, she could obtain specific pomace varietals to produce a more refined and consistent grappa.

The Noninos also began aging their pot-distilled grappas in a variety of smaller barrels composed of various woods, including French, Italian, and Spanish oak. It was a unique technique at the time. Then, in 1973, Nonino pioneered the single varietal grappa, starting with the delicately sweet Picolit grape. Today this popular single grape varietal style of grappa is known as “monovitigno,” a term originated by Giannola Nonino. By 1984, Nonino was distilling grappas from single and multiple varietals, including Merlot, Chardonnay, and Moscato, as well as from fruits such as cherries, peaches, and apricots, in addition to grappas made from traditional pomace.

Now with five distilleries, one of the Nonino family's newest grappas, and one that exemplifies their innovative style, is their Antica Cuvée Riserva, a blend distilled from Merlot, Cabernet



These are Nonino pot stills, into which the pomace is dumped for distillation of their artisan grappa. Photo credit: Nonino



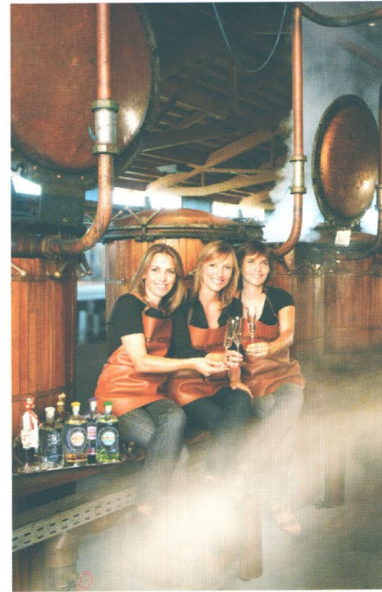
Franc, and Refosco pomace, then aged from five to twenty years in European oak barrels, and finally blended. This blend is then aged for a minimum of eighteen months. At 86 proof and with its smooth, vanilla-soaked oat and candied red berry flavors, it gently coats the tongue with a finish worthy of the finest *eau-de-vie*.

Meanwhile, Villa de Varda, which has been making grappa since 1678 in the village of Mezzolombardo at the foot of the Italian Alps, had also evolved into monovitigno and barrel-aged grappas. Today this family-owned producer distills their artisanal grappas six times to achieve award-winning smoothness. In addition, Dr. Luigi Dolzan, the father of fourth generation Villa de Varda distiller Michele, is known for his "de Varda Method," which has since been adopted by other high-quality grappa producers. Basically it consists of carefully selecting the pomace from the highest quality grapes and subjecting them to immediate fermentation, then slow distillation, and finally resting the liquid in stainless-steel tanks a minimum of six months before aging them in oak barrels. Their single varietal Amarone Riserva is aged for a minimum of five years in French Barriques and was a Double Gold Medal winner at the 2016 San Francisco Word Spirits Competition.

Like cognac, tequila, and port, grappa enjoys geographic protection. That is, it can't legally be called grappa unless it is made in Italy or in the Italian region of Switzerland. Traditionally, grappas are seen in the cafés along the Via Veneto, either being sipped or enjoyed as a *caffè corretto* or *ammazzacaffè* with espresso, and often in the rustic company of a dry rolled Toscano cigar. However, in the United States grappa is more of an acquired taste, unless

you come from a really tight-knit, traditional Italian family. I first encountered grappa many years ago in the small northern Italian town of Aviano. It was ten o'clock in the morning and I was sitting at a bar (I know what you're thinking, but they also served breakfast) as I watched a grizzled old man shuffle up to the counter and order a shot of grappa, which he quickly downed. He then turned and walked out with a newfound spring in his step. Intrigued, I ordered a shot of the same grappa, but I never got past the rim of the glass. After one sniff, I decided to stick with my double espresso.

My next encounter with grappa was many years later, in the town of Cucciago, which is just outside of Milan, and it was a



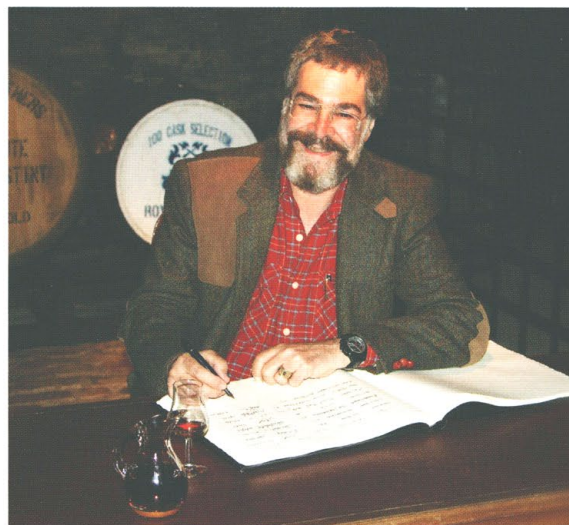
Nonino's five distilleries, which are family owned and operated by Giannola and Benito Nonino, along with their daughters (shown l. to r.) Cristina, Antonella, and Elisabetta, produce traditional unaged white grappas, aged grappas, and vintage grappas. Note the steam along the floor emanating from the stills. Photo credit: Nonino



Family-owned Villa de Varda Amarone Riserva is distilled six times and aged a minimum of five years in French barriques, resulting in an award-winning grappa that is as rich in taste as it is in color.

decidedly more enjoyable experience. I was having dinner with Silvana Ascori and her husband, Roberto, one of the best briar pipe makers in Italy. Roberto's brother, Piero, had joined us, and we decided to celebrate with a round of grappa, which Roberto selected.

Proving the adage that who you drink with is as important as what you drink, this time the grappa, which was served chilled, in an apéritif glass, was crisp and refreshing. So much so that we all ordered another round. I must have waxed eloquently about it after the third glass, because Roberto ended up buying an entire bottle, which he, Silvana, and Piero signed and presented to me as a memento of the evening. Sadly, Piero passed away at all too young an age, but I still have that bottle, and it is one that I probably will never open, knowing the "spirit" of friendship that is sealed inside.



RICHARD CARLETON HACKER is an international writer and photographer specializing in spirits, wines, cigars, gourmet cuisine, and related luxury lifestyles. He is a longtime contributing editor for numerous national magazines, including *Robb Report*, *Somm Journal*, and the *Tasting Panel*. A lifetime member of the Scotch whisky industry's exclusive Keepers of the Quaich honorary society (in which he is one of the few people in the world to hold the coveted title of Master of the Quaich), he has also been inducted into the Ordre des Coteaux de Champagne, has been elected as a Cavaleiro by the Confraria do Vinho do Porto, and was knighted in Germany. He lives in Sherman Oaks, California.



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“Richard Carleton Hacker . . . is back with a definitive new book on the wide world of spirits. . . . Come along for the ride as this experienced taster and longtime spirits expert guides you through products known and unknown—from liquor store staples to obscure spirits and everything in-between. This book will be a classic reference on spirits for decades to come.”

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—CHARLIE WHITFIELD, The Macallan, manager of brand education and prestige whiskies

“*The Connoisseur’s Guide to Worldwide Spirits* is a fantastic read and an educational treasure! Hacker has dedicated his career to sharing his passion and discovery of the world’s finest spirits. This book takes its readers on an exciting and insightful journey into the world of distilled spirits through his distinguished and experienced palette.”

—CARL NOLET, JR., CEO and president, Nolet Spirits USA



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