

## WINE TALK

### Let's Lift a Glass To the Grapes of '97

By FRANK J. PRIAL

THIS was a fascinating year in the wine business. And not just because the grape harvest was so good in so many places. It was a year of consolidation and new directions, a year that may even lead to cheaper prices. It was a year of silver anniversaries, too; a lot of people decided to become winemakers in 1972.

A good harvest means good wine, of course, and it also sets the tone for the year. It fosters optimism in a business that really can't do without it.

In 1997, the grape crop was particularly good in Burgundy, Champagne, northern Italy and Germany. In California, unpredictable weather spoiled some grapes, but a huge crop made up for that. It marked the end of almost seven years of grape shortages and maybe — just maybe — the easing of what are outrageous wine prices.

The large harvest was the result of hundreds of acres of new vines coming into maturity. They were planted during the last decade, partly in response to increased demand for wine, partly as replacements for hundreds of vineyards destroyed in the 1980's by the resurgence of phylloxera, a vine-killing insect.

Bordeaux wine producers were guardedly optimistic despite an unusually rainy and chilly spring and summer that took their toll at many estates. Excellent weather during the harvest raised the hopes of some top chateaus, even prompting their owners to predict a great year — for their own wine.

This was also a year when the business community began to take wine seriously. A year ago, analysts were still cautious about stock of the Robert Mondavi Win-

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## Grappa, Fiery Friend of Peasants, Now Glows With a Quieter Flame

A drink of smoky guile, distilled from the debris of the wine grape.

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

THROUGH uncounted decades, grappa was little more than a cheap, portable form of central heating for peasants in northern Italy.

A shot (or two, or three) after dinner helped ward off the damp, misty cold that often settles over the Alpine foothills and the flatlands just beneath them. And a shot in the breakfast espresso — yielding a "corretto," or corrected coffee — got the motor started in the morning gloom.

Grappa is made by distilling debris left in the

press after grapes have yielded up their precious juice. The debris is called pomace and consists of skins, seeds and dry pulp. A fiery, rustic, usually colorless alcohol, grappa (the name derives from the Italian word for grape stalk) has an oily, earthy taste with something of the barnyard about it, and a marked alcoholic kick.

Even at its best, grappa is not subtle. The French writer J. K. Huysmans said, with some justice, that if Cognac's music resembled a violin's and gin and whisky "raised the roof of the mouth with the blare of their cornets and trombones," grappa's "deafening din" suggested the growl of the tuba.

But properly distilled and served cool (not cold), it has a beguilingly smoky taste, with hints

of stone fruits like cherry and plum. Especially if made from the pomace of dessert wines, it can display a slight sweetness.

Grappa used to be made mostly by traveling distillers or by big industrial outfits like Stock, the Trieste brandy manufacturer. Too often it was a cheap, ill-made product, an Italian version of white lightning.

Fancier Italians, and most foreigners, disdained it.

But that was before the Noninos of Percoto came to prominence. Here in their native town, a furniture-making center about 75 miles northeast of Venice and only 10 miles from the Slovenian border, they tamed grappa, taught it table manners and gave it mass appeal, not only in Italy but overseas, too.

The United States has become the second-largest export market, trailing only Germany. At Felidia in New York, Obelisk in Washington, Spiaggia in Chicago, Valentino in Los Angeles and

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**SHIMMERING ELEGANCE** Individually blown flasks with silver-plated caps show off some of the grappas made at the Nonino distillery in Percoto, Italy.



Gianluca Businello

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Ruth Reichl travels 107 floors for the short ribs.



Matthew Klein for The New York Times

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## At a Secret Chefs' Dinner in France, A Tiny Songbird Lands on the Plate

By MARIAN BURROS

IN a darkened room one evening this month in Bordeaux, many of the world's most famous chefs and restaurateurs sat with napkins over their heads and faces. The crunching sounds from under the napkins was unmistakable: the guests were eating.

Sworn to secrecy, they were chewing the skin, flesh, bones and entrails of one of France's greatest delicacies, the ortolan, a tiny songbird whose declining numbers led the French Government to forbid its sale anywhere in the country. The napkins are part of the ritual: it is held by its head and devoured in a single bite.

The secret did not keep. Though the chef who served the birds denies he served it, five of that evening's 120 diners, some of whom had eaten ortolan before, acknowledged that they had it on this occasion and described in detail the thrill of the gustatory experience — an experience that, come autumn each year, some French find irresistible.

"You know the French," said Maguy Le Coze, a Frenchwoman who owns Le Bernardin in New York and was at the dinner in Bordeaux. "French people like to break the law."

The meal had been arranged at the St.-James in Bouliac, a restaurant with one Michelin star, for members of Relais Gourmands. Part of Relais and Châteaux, an international association of top hotels and restaurants, Relais Gourmands is reserved for the most outstanding restaurants in the larger group. Chefs at the recent dinner

included the stars of French cuisine, Michel Guérard, Marc Men- eau, Michel Rostang and Roger Vergé, as well as some top American chefs and restaurateurs.

The theme of this year's dinner — one segment of the association's annual meeting, which cost about \$3,000 a person — was forbidden food, in this case forbidden birds. It also included bécasse or woodcock (a bird that, although also protected by law, doesn't arouse the emotions the ortolan does) and perhaps other protected species. Several guests said they received no menu, although days after the event, when the chef, Jean-Marie Amat, was asked to supply one, he faxed a menu that included no ortolan or woodcock.

In denying any illegality, Mr. Amat, who owns the St.-James, said: "This dinner you're thinking about: it was a theme dinner on forbidden foods. But none of these forbidden foods were on the menu. We just debated the topic — things that cannot be offered in a restaurant in France, but that one can easily find in Spain."

While one guest interviewed for this article also denied that ortolan was on the menu, several were eager to talk about the rare delicacy that they said was served. For Thomas Keller, the chef and owner of the French Laundry in the Napa Valley in California, a new inductee this year, "it was an incredible experience because of the mystique."

Part of the mystique is the use of the napkin, which, according to Larousse Gastronomique, was initiated by a priest who was a friend of the 19th-century French epicure



Hans Reinhard/Okapia/Photo Researchers

**PROTECTED SPECIES** The delicate ortolan delights some epicures, while others refuse to eat it.

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# Grappa, Fiery Friend of Peasants, Shows a Quieter Flame

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dozens of other fine restaurants across the country, grappas are prominently displayed and eagerly consumed after dinner instead of Cognac or some other digestif. Tony May, the owner of San Domenico in Manhattan, said he had sold \$50,000 worth this year, not to Italian visitors, but to Americans "who come to Italian restaurants determined to laugh like Italians, eat like Italians and drink like Italians."

**Y**OU might say, with a bit of poetic license, that grappa runs in Benito Nonino's veins. For several generations, stretching back into the 19th century, his family has been distilling in Friuli, the northeastern corner of Italy. A questing, hawk-nosed man, he and his handsome, extroverted wife, Giannola, longed, as he often says, "to turn grappa from a Cinderella into a queen."

Together, the two of them did it. Instead of a single still, they installed a whole battery of discontinuous copper stills, which allowed them to interrupt the process in the middle of the run, when the spirit was at its peak, and discard the rest — a process known as "topping and tailing." The pomace could thus be processed faster, while it was fresher, which muted the barnyard taste. While continuous stills are cheaper, they boil the pomace nonstop.

Unlike Cognac and Armagnac, which are made by distilling acidic wines few would care to drink, the best grappa is a byproduct of the best wines. The Noninos contracted for pomace from the stars of Friulan wine-making, including Mario Schiopetto, Josko Gravner, Livio Felluga and Gianfranco Gallo.

But raw ingredients and technique would not have been enough. The Noninos had another idea: instead of lumping all the pomace together, the residue of common grapes mixed with that from the more noble varieties, they would distill each separately, starting with picolit, a variety that produces a sweet, delicate dessert wine. The result was a delicious, highly perfumed grappa.

The Noninos made their first batch in 1973 and bottled it in individually blown flasks with silver-plated caps. The labels, handwritten by Giannola, a budding marketing genius, were tied onto the bottles with red yarn.

If the idea was to call attention to the product and to themselves, it worked. Others soon copied them, but the Noninos demonstrated a rare gift for self-promotion. In their ads, they used a sunny family photograph of Benito, now 63, Giannola, 59, and their three stunning daughters — Cristina, 34, Antonella, 31, and Elisabetta, 29 — which soon became familiar all over Italy. They commissioned special bottles from great glassmakers like Baccarat, Riedel and Venini, and even established an annual literary prize. Most important, they worked tirelessly to insure that the best Italian restaurants stocked their products.

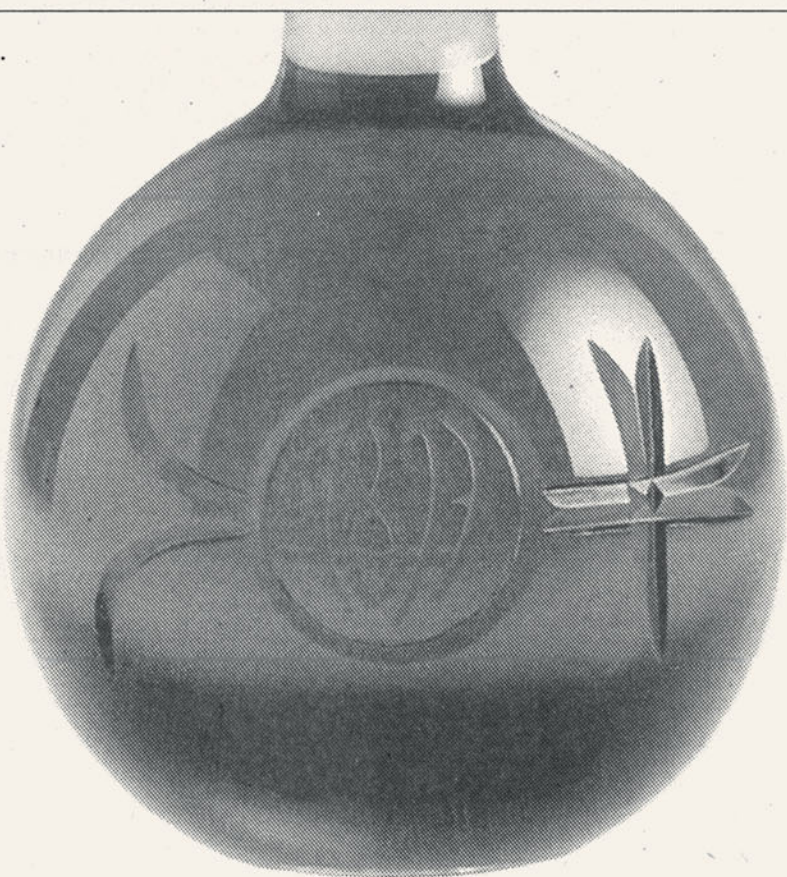
"The picolit is still our best grappa," Mr. Nonino said with an eloquent shrug. "I know it, the customers know it. I'm satisfied. You



**ROYAL SPIRIT**  
La Riserva dei Cent'anni, a 10-year-old picolit grappa made by Nonino.

## On the Scent of an Elusive Bottle

**A** WIDE variety of grappas are available at larger liquor stores in the New York area, although it might take a few phone calls to find a specific one. For example, five out of six stores called at random carried the grappas of Jacopo Poli, but only two, Crossroads, at (212) 924-3060, and Sherry-Lehmann, at (212) 838-7500, had the Amoroso di Torcolato. Grappas by Nardini, Nonino and Ceretto can also be found fairly easily, although the importer of Nonino's picolit has been out of stock for four months, which means that only the occasional bottle can be found on retail shelves. Prices for Italian grappas begin at about \$25 and can reach \$80 for Jacopo Poli's half-bottles in blown glass.



can ask for one miracle in life and get it, but to ask for two is ridiculous."

Nardini, a big semi-industrial concern based in Bassano del Grappa, northwest of

Venice, was the first to begin commercial production, in the 18th century. Now, more than 1,000 Italian vintners, including many of the very best, like Bruno Ceretto in Pied-

mont, Silvio Jermann in Friuli and Antonio Mastroberardino near Naples, either produce their own grappa or have a distiller produce it from their pomace and then send it to market under their own labels.

Although their products do not quite fill the mouth in the same way as the best of the Italian grappas do, American distillers like Clear Creek in Oregon and Germain-Robin in California have leaped aboard the grappa express, as have winemakers like Araujo in the Napa Valley. The French make a grappalike drink that they call marc, with special success in the Burgundy and Champagne regions, and the Spanish also produce a version of their own, called aguardiente.

But Nonino remains the marquee name, and this year, the Noninos will sell almost 1.3 million bottles of grappa. Giannola and Benito Nonino retain a remarkable zest for life and for work. One evening last fall, when my wife, Betsey, and I were visiting Percoto, he said his farewells after a long day at the office, jumped onto his bike and pedaled away, whistling "Sentimental Journey."

**W**ITH the exception of a few grappas that are aged in wood, giving them an amber hue, one looks just like another. So how do I distinguish my colorless liquid from yours? Like vodka distillers, grappa makers quickly found an answer in packaging. In addition to Nonino's flasks, you now find grappa in colored bottles and hand-painted bottles, in containers shaped like a bunch of grapes or a perfume flagon, even in bottles topped with miniature Alpine fedoras.

Some people think that things have got out of hand, like George Lang, the New York author and restaurateur, who remarked tartly not long ago, "I'm afraid that grappa-making has turned into glass blowing."

But it would be a mistake to conclude that clever packaging is always a ruse to conceal an inferior product. A case in point is Jacopo Poli, who makes grappas with finesse and packages them in elegant, long-necked bottles. I especially like his Amoroso di Torcolato, which has an appealing floral bouquet. Should you ever find yourself in Bassano, you can taste it at his little grappa museum, filled with portraits of Louis Pasteur and Leonardo da Vinci and Catherine de' Medici, shelves of ancient tomes on distilling technique and old alembics, or stills.

"Distillation, daughter of alchemy, was born in remote antiquity," a placard announces gravely.

Bassano itself is a pretty, welcoming place, tucked beneath a pre-Alp called Monte Grappa. Some of the fiercest battles of World War I took place there, and it is now crowned with an ossuary holding the remains of 25,000 Italian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers. The neighborhood is dotted with Palladian villas, including Maser, where Veronese painted a delightful set of frescoes, and Palladio is also said to have designed the often-rebuilt covered wooden bridge that crosses the sparkling little River Brenta in the center of Bassano.

The Nardini company operates a smoky, atmospheric grappa bar at one end of the bridge, and one of the best artisan distillers

in Italy, Vittorio Capovilla, a muscular man with an evangelical spirit, can be found at the end of a dusty lane just outside the village of Rosa, a half-hour's drive from Bassano. Armed with the latest in German technology, he makes not only grappa but also uva, which is distilled from the grapes themselves rather than from pomace, and which he considers much easier to digest. The seeds in the pomace used for grappa, he told me, contain essential oils that "stun the gastric juices," causing trouble.

Mr. Capovilla's masterpieces, however, are distillates made from cultivated fruits like Gravenstein apples and Saturno pears, as well as rare wild fruits like sour mountain cherries and honey pears that he finds on his hikes in the hills. His products bear comparison to the best in Europe, but they are all but impossible to find; he has yet to master the ropes of commerce.

**A**ND then there is Romano Levi, the one and only, the living national treasure, the uncrowned king of Piedmontese distilling. A minute, Hobbitlike figure in a Greek sailor's cap, he works in a ramshackle old structure in the village of Neive, tending a Rube Goldberg assemblage of antique copper boilers and tubes. It is the size of a one-car garage, this world-famous grappa factory, and every bit as cluttered.

But it works. The grappa is superb, if a bit aggressive.

Mr. Levi is a recycler. To fire his still this year, he uses bricks pressed from the residue of last year's distillation. After they have burned, he returns the ashes to the wine producer who originally supplied the pomace, to use as fertilizer in the vineyard. He calls this the Piedmont life cycle.

He is also an inspired improviser. He offers visitors tastes of his products not by pouring them into glasses from bottles or from a pipette, but by lowering a medicine jar on a string through the bunghole into a Slovenian oak cask, hauling some grappa out and handing it over. You drink from the jar.

"You have to go back to the Etruscans to find anything this rudimentary," said Burton Anderson, the wine writer, who was with us when we visited the operation. Black eyebrows arched, Mr. Levi professed not to understand how his gear operated; indeed, he told us, "I know nothing at all about grappa."

Maybe not, but he has the soul of a poet and an artist. Asked how long he had been in business, he replied that he used only one match a year, to fire up his alembic when it was time to begin distilling, and had used 53 matches so far. He makes 6,000 to 10,000 liters a year, using pomace from Angelo Gaja and other Piedmontese wine makers, and he writes all the labels himself — in colored inks on torn pieces of paper, or directly on the bottles with paint.

I am currently working on a bottle produced in 1988, decorated with pictures of flame-red hibiscus flowers. The label specifies that the liquid inside is 48 percent alcohol, and as ever there is a line of enigmatic verse.

"In a dream," it says, "I dreamt."

# At Secret Chefs' Dinner, Tiny Songbird Lands on the Plate

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Brillat-Savarin. Several reasons are advanced for this ritual. One is that by placing the napkin over the head and face, one can better appreciate the fragrances from the tiny casserole in which the birds are cooked.

Gérard Pangaud, who won two Michelin stars as a chef in France and now owns Gérard's Place in Washington, went a step further. "You smell the ortolan," he said. "You salivate, and that protects your mouth from getting burned, because you must take it in your mouth while it is very, very hot."

Then because it is very hot, diners may have to hold their mouths open part of the time while they chew, and others may not want to watch.

At the Bordeaux dinner, experienced ortolan eaters were at each table to lead the novices through their paces, according to one who was there. To Mr. Keller there were many sensations over the 10 or 15 minutes in which he ate the bird and drank two glasses of wine, a Barsac and a Sauternes: "In one part there are melting qualities with rich, fatty flavor; in another part there is breast meat and bone underneath, and it's like cartilage. There are different textures and different flavors. The breast is very succulent, very refined.

"While you are eating it you really want to be thinking about what you are tasting.



Jean-Luce Huré for The New York Times

**MAGUY LE COZE** of Le Bernardin in New York: "Whenever I could have them I would. It's an incredible taste."

The flavor is good, but the amazing thing was leaving the whole bird in your mouth and as a cook knowing what I was eating. It was cerebral and sensual. Around the tail it was extremely sensual, and there was like crackling duck skin which encased fat. It is not something you would like to eat often. It should be left for very special occasions. I could live without the experience for a year or two."

But then Mr. Keller paused. "There's the moral issue," he said. "If it was a live bird I'd say let the damn thing go, but someone



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

**DANIEL BOULUD** of Daniel in New York: "It's almost like adultery, and everyone knows they shouldn't be doing it."

presented me with a dead ortolan."

Ms. Le Coze expressed only enthusiasm. The Bordeaux dinner was only the third time she had eaten ortolan. "Whenever I could have them I would," she said from her father's home in Brittany. "It's an incredible taste: a little sweet outside, crispy with butter, and inside a little bitter taste."

What makes ortolans so succulent is the same thing that makes foie gras so buttery and silky. The birds, which are also called buntings and weigh about an ounce and a quarter, are caught and held in captivity 12 to 28 days. They are kept in darkened cages, where they eat millet around the clock. Some are fed until they are killed; for others, the feeding stops two days before.

Some birds are killed by drowning in a glass of Armagnac; others are fed a drop of Armagnac, also fatal. Their tiny feathers must be plucked very carefully to avoid leaving holes through which the roasted fat could drain out. Then they are prized at high heat for five to seven minutes.

Daniel Boulud, another Frenchman, who is the chef and owner of Restaurant Daniel in New York, vacillated over talking about ortolan. He said he had never tasted one and did not eat the one served to him at the Relais Gourmands dinner. "I felt uncomfortable," he said, "because it's almost like adultery, and everyone knows they shouldn't be doing it."

The comment brought peals of laughter from Ms. Le Coze when it was repeated. "Adultery!" she said. "It has been in France forever. The husband does it; the wife does it. Everyone knows it and does it." Just like ortolan.

Gérard Ferry, a Frenchman who owns L'Orangerie in Los Angeles, was in complete denial. "I don't believe anyone had ortolan," he said. "No one told us not to tell. This is not what happened. I think they are pushing your leg."



Fred Mertz for The New York Times

**THOMAS KELLER** of the French Laundry in the Napa Valley: "It was an incredible experience because of the mystique."

Although officially the bird is not considered endangered or threatened, by the late 1970's its numbers were dropping so fast the Government moved to protect it. Since 1979, hunting, selling or eating ortolans has been illegal in France, subjecting the violator to a fine of \$85 to \$1,695, depending, at least in part, on the number of ortolans involved. So no one eats the tiny birds in public.

But wait. There is an exception to the law: ortolans can be hunted and eaten, though not sold, in the Landes region of Gascony south of Bordeaux. In Landes the culinary tradition of the ortolan is centuries old. The permission applies only to those who hunted ortolans before the law took effect.

Regardless of the law, the people of Gascony will eat ortolans as long as they exist, according to Ariane Daguin, an owner of D'Artagnan, the meat and game purveyor in New York. And must anyone try to stop them, she said, "there would be a riot."

Mr. Guérard, who has a three-star restaurant in Eugénie-les-Bains, said that only the threat of jail has kept him from organizing a day when he and his fellow chefs would defy the law and serve ortolans.

"I am revolted by these sterilized rules established by these same people that let this mad-cow disease spread in Europe," he said. "This is a huge hypocrisy. I have never heard of a politician who refused an ortolan, and I myself have served them to pretty famous ones."

Because of the law, thousands of Frenchmen, including expatriates, eat ortolans privately, hunting the birds when they stop in France during the annual migration from Scandinavia to North Africa. Even President François Mitterrand had ortolan shortly before he died.

Ms. Daguin has ortolan in the United States once a year. Where? She would not say. But she did talk ecstatically about why it is so highly prized. "The last time I had



Pierre Hussé/ATOR

**JEAN-MARIE AMAT**, the dinner's host: "None of these forbidden foods were on the menu. We just debated the topic."

ortolan you could see the people salivating at the next table when the door to the kitchen opened and you could smell them," she said. "It's like foie gras, only better."

Jean-Louis Palladin, whose restaurant in Gascony held two Michelin stars before he moved to the United States, has ortolans shipped to him every year. "I got two dozen last week," he said from his restaurant in the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas. In France they cost about \$30 each; here they are \$50. But his greatest triumph, he said, was in 1982, when he sneaked 400 out of France to the United States in his daughter's diapers.

The French chef Alain Ducasse caused an uproar among animal rights advocates in the United States in 1995 when he served ortolan and bécasse at a lunch at Le Cirque in New York. Mr. Ducasse said that after he returned to France, representatives of the American Government questioned Le Cirque and the French Foreign Affairs Ministry about him.

"I thought I might be in trouble," he said, "and I knew Pamela Harriman, who had come to my restaurant." (Mrs. Harriman was then the American Ambassador to France.) "She helped me clear up my explanation that it was not a lunch to make money but to help Americans understand our culture. There is no law that is going to keep us from enjoying our culture."

At the Bordeaux dinner this month, not every American was so glad to learn about French culture. Mary Beth Liccioni, who with her husband, Roland, owns Le Français in Wheeling, Ill., just outside Chicago, did not want to talk about her experience at all. But she did say she was "upset by it" because she goes out of her way to attract songbirds to her garden. "I don't want to repeat the story," she said. Others reported that she left the room. She blames her departure on cigar smoke.

"She almost fainted," Ms. Le Coze said.



La Chasse

**PROTECTED** Though not officially endangered, the ortolan cannot be sold in France.