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AN EYE ON
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MODERN GRAPPA

FIREWATER NO MORE

By Lesley Jacobs Solmonson



For centuries, enterprising folks the world over have found ways to use the waste products of crops. Pomace brandy, from the skins and seeds of pressed grapes, is found everywhere wine is made. In France, it is known as marc, in Spain as orujo, and in Greece as tsipuro. Italy's well known version is grappa, which acquired a negative reputation due to outmoded production methods of years past. Today, however, the grappa renaissance is upon us with more styles, from young to aged, single varietal to aromatized, than ever before. The spirit that Americans often thought of as "fire water" has blossomed into a seriously sexy beast.

Grappa's development occurred side by side with the modernization of Italy's wine production in the 1970s. While wine making in Italy dates back to ancient times (Grappa has been made since roughly the 14th century A.D.), vineyard management and technique was relatively stagnant into the 20th century. When winemakers started focusing on quality to a greater degree, everyone benefited, especially grappa.

While grappa is produced all over Italy, its spiritual home is in Northern Italian, where different regions produce different styles. The quality is dependent on the method of distillation and the quality of the vinaccia, the Italian word for grape pomace.

In 1779, Bortolo Nardini founded Italy's first distillery in Bassano del Grappa. Today, the distillery is still in the family, run by the seventh generation of Nardinis. Among the grappas they produce are the aged grappas of their Grappa Riserva line, and grappa infusions that use rue or gentian.

The watershed in grappa production occurred in 1973 when Giannola Nonino, the wife of grappa distiller Benito Nonino (whose family founded the distillery in 1897), suggested that her husband try distilling grappa from the pomace of single varietals, rather than mixing various varieties together. The result, using the Picolit grape, was nothing short of ground breaking and other grappa producers, like Nardini and Poli, took notice. Suddenly, a spirit that was often approached with trepidation even by Italians had taken on an elegance and complexity never tasted before.



Poli, which has existed since 1898, is another leader in grappa production. The modern J. Poli Barrique bottling, bottled under the aegis of Jacopo Poli, was inspired by the musings of patriarch Toni Poli. In 1989, Toni had a vision of a full-proof grappa, made from a combination of pomaces and aged in oak. The children thought he was nuts, but they acceded to his wishes. Only nine barriques are produced each year producing a single vintage grappa aged for 13 years in oak barrels. The style has become an industry touchstone.

Today, grappa has emerged from its checkered past and shrugged off its negative image as Italian firewater. Now, it is best consumed solo in the tulip-shaped glass made expressly for the distillate. Grappa is also making appearances in cocktails these days. You can even find grappa-based liqueurs such as Marolo's Milla, which is flavored with chamomile. If the prospect of this strong spirit is still daunting, try it in one of its most famous incarnations as a Caff  Corretto, an espresso with a spot of grappa. Whether sipped after dinner as a digestif or in the morning as a "hair of the dog" beverage, it's sure to fill your soul with thoughts of Italy and the country's spirited way of life.