

"Elizabeth Minchilli unlocks the secret door to reveal a thrilling world of Roman food—not just the best places to go but also why Italians adore them. I loved reading this deeply charming book, and I can't wait to make the recipes!" —INA GARTEN

# EATING ROME

**LIVING  
THE GOOD LIFE**  
— IN THE —  
**ETERNAL  
CITY**

**ELIZABETH MINCHILLI**

## learning to love grappa

I love having people over for dinner. I adore the entire process of shopping, cooking, and setting the table, and then enjoying the meal. But I get really excited at the end of the meal, when we get to the after-dinner drinks. “Anyone want a grappa?” And sure enough, at least one (if not most) of my guests says, “No, I hate grappa.” So I bring out the bottles of amaro, limoncello (yuck!), and even cognac. But I also bring out at least three bottles of grappa. But not just any grappa. It’s Nonino grappa and, since the bottles are so distinctive (much classier and elegant than anything else on the table), they are the first things that get my guests’ attention.

“Well, OK... I guess I’ll try some.” And usually, all it takes is one sip and they are grappa converts. As it turns out, the grappa they’ve tried up until now has almost nothing to do with what I serve.

I can understand their hesitation. Even though much has changed in the world of grappa in the last decade or so, most of the grappa out there is still dreck. That there is even any attempt at producing artisanally crafted grappas and aquavits in Italy is almost entirely due to the Nonino family, whom I had the pleasure of getting to know about twelve years ago when I wrote a feature about them. I have been a huge supporter (and, I admit it, drinker) ever since.



A bit of background: Traditionally, grappa was a working man's drink, made by farmers with the leftover pomace (stems and skins) after wine making. The musty-smelling pile was fermented and then distilled into an extremely strong, highly alcoholic drink that provided much-needed calories during the winter.

By the 1960s the Nonino family, who started out with a portable still that they brought to farms, was producing a high-quality grappa. They had upgraded to a more advanced method in their plant, but their grappa was still made using the winery's leftovers. Enter Giannola, who married Benito Nonino and decided to completely flip the grappa-making process on its head.

Rather than use mixed-up, old leftovers, she had the bold idea to pick up the freshly pressed pomace within hours of its pressing, and distill single varietals using a discontinuous still, which would preserve (she hoped) the aroma of the original grapes. Her husband, Benito, is the mastermind who devised the method, but it was Giannola's vision and passion that resulted in the first single-grape grappa using the Picolit wine grape. Most people thought they were crazy, but once they tasted the brew they were smitten. The Noninos had done what no one had done before: produce a grappa that retained the perfumes and essence of the original grape.

Over the last three decades the revolution that the Noninos started has changed

the way the world thinks of grappa. Their stylish bottles are widely imitated, as are their smooth-as-silk grappas and aquavits.

## amari

Sharing space in my beloved liquor cabinet is my collection of amari. Like their bitter relatives Campari and Aperol, which are imbibed before a meal, amari are full of herbs and spices that are meant to help that digestive process on its way at the end of the meal. And I have to admit, it's much easier to convince my guests to try some weird and wonderful amari than it is grappa. While grappa is a distilled spirit and has nothing more to soften its bang, amari usually have a "healthy" dose of sugar to soften the edges of those bitter herbs.

The first time I was offered an amaro I wasn't sure I was understanding correctly. It was at the end of a long lunch in Florence. My friend Marietta and I had just worked our way through antipasto, primo, secondo, and dolce. As the waiter finally laid down the bill, along with a complimentary plateful of biscotti, he asked, "*Voi qualcosa per digerere?*" ("Would you like something to help you digest?")

How completely strange, I thought, that this waiter, who had actually been flirting with us both over the course of our three-hour lunch, was now asking if we wanted an Alka-Seltzer, or maybe a laxative? I could understand how he might be concerned

after the amount of food and wine Marietta and I had put away, but going so far as to offer a remedy before it was asked for? And while we were still at the table, nibbling on the cookies he had practically forced upon us?

While I gave him a raised eyebrow, Marietta instead responded right away. "*Un Averna per favore.*" Since she seemed to know what she was doing, and the waiter was standing there looking at me expectantly, the only thing I could say was "*Anche'io.*" ("Me, too.")

The waiter didn't have far to go, turning to a small cart that I really hadn't noticed before. About a dozen bottles contained dark syrupy liquid, which only served to make the brightly colored labels all the more garish. The waiter reached in the back, pulled out a bottle with an old-fashioned yellow label, and poured us each a thimble-size glass.

When Marietta told the waiter she would have an Averna, she was referring to the brand of amaro that she wanted. Like anything else having to do with food and drink in Italy, amari change from region to region, and everyone has their preferred brand. Some are on the sweet side and others are shiver-inducingly bitter. Averna, made in Sicily, is one of the most popular since it's right in the middle between bitter and sweet.

Although all amari look pretty much alike—dark brown to almost black—the flavor profiles couldn't be more different.

This is because they are always made from a mixture of dozens of wild herbs, which change from region to region. There are hundreds of amari produced all over Italy, from Sicily to the Alps, and each has a secretly guarded formula.

## when in rome . . . amari and grappa

- Often at the end of a meal the restaurant will offer you an after-dinner drink. Be brave, be bold, and ask for an amaro or grappa and leave the limoncello to the tourists.
- Bring home a bottle. Many amari are never exported, so if you find one you like, buy a bottle to take home. There is usually a surprisingly good selection in most Italian supermarkets.
- Not sure whether to end a meal with a coffee or a shot of grappa? Do both. Have a *caffè corretto* and pour a shot of grappa directly into your coffee.

## where to buy amari and grappa in rome

### Chirra

Via Torino 132

A place I know almost too well. I usually head here for otherwise difficult-to-find-in-Rome imported bottles of the hard stuff like Maker's Mark when I want an



old-fashioned or something other than supermarket vodka for a martini. But I always end up falling into a trance in front of the huge selection of amari. I just love the names and the designs of Kapriol, Casauria, and Florio. The friendly staff is helpful, and you can actually try some of the amari, since half the shop is a bar.

### Angelini Enoteca

*Via del Viminale 62*

A slightly weirder place. Its dusty windows are stacked with a huge collection of bottles; some empty, some just old and dusty, all interesting. Looking for a bottle of nameless red wine with a label featuring Mussolini or the Pope? This is the

place to go. Angelini has been in business since 1880, as the current owner, Enrico, is more than happy to explain. It was his grandfather who opened the shop, when the building was built, and they have been here ever since. Luckily, if you are in the mood for discontinued and hard-to-find regional amari, some of the stock has also been on the shelves for decades. Several dusty bottles of Amaro Kambusa must be among the only left around. They were sitting next to an even dustier bottle of Braulio Riserva (who knew amari even had *riservas*?) Angelini, with their more than 40 amari, seems to cover all the regions—including some that I have a feeling are no longer even part of Italy.



## recipes

In my efforts to convert my friends to the ways of grappa, I sneakily rope them in through grappa cocktails. I've created quite a few over the years, making use of both the true grappas (made from the lees of wine) as well as the distillates.

UE Fragolino Cru is one of my favorites to play around with. It is made from the extremely rare Fragolino grape from Friuli, and is a full grape distillate. This may be the most aromatic of all the UEs (grape distillates) with hints of blueberry and wild strawberries.

### fragolino cocktail

**Serves 1**

- 2 ounces Grappa Cru Fragolino
- 1 ounce pomegranate juice
- 1 teaspoon pomegranate molasses
- Ice

Place all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice, shake until chilled, then pour into a chilled martini glass.

### grappa fruit salad

- Fresh seasonal fruit
- Granulated sugar
- Grappa

Make your favorite fresh seasonal fruit salad. It's nice if you have a mix of colors

and textures. About an hour before serving, toss with 1 tablespoon of sugar per 2 cups fruit. Add about 2 tablespoons of grappa for each tablespoon of sugar (I used the Carasus, which I happened to have on hand, but you could use Moscato di Nonino Grappa, Grappa Cru Fragolino, or Grappa Cru Picolit). Toss and let sit for an hour.

**Note:** Storing grappa: After years of thinking I must be drinking grappa in my sleep, I realized that the high alcohol content (from 38 to 45 percent) meant that my precious grappa was evaporating away. Now I always store opened bottles with a small sheet of plastic wrap between the bottle neck and cork.

### red currant and grappa cocktail

**Serves 1**

Most people, when confronted with freshly made fruit juices at the farmers' market, would think "healthy breakfast drink." Me? My mind immediately turns to cocktails.

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup fresh red currant juice
- 2 ounces good-quality grappa
- 1 teaspoon fresh Meyer lemon juice
- Ice

Place all the ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake until well chilled and strain into a glass.