Dining In

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1997

The New York Times

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-

Continued on Page 6

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.

PERCOTO, Italy

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

Continued on Page 4

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

INSIDE

THE MINIMALIST 3
Pasta and a chestnut sauce.

BY THE BOOK 6
A vegetarian potpourri.

THE CHEF 5
For Vongerichten, even burnt bread can shine.

RESTAURANTS 7
Ruth Reichl travels 107 floors for the short ribs.

Matthew Klein for The New York Times

Meet the sturdy cockle, tastier than a littleneck, page 5.

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, as is the method of eating the bird: 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 Meneau, 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

Continued on Page 4

Hans Reinhard/Okapia/Photo Researchers

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