

Capital

DRINKING WELL

Italian grappa is in the club of the noblest distillates in the world. But only some brands are high quality. A great expert explains how to recognize them and understand the differences in the price.

Cesare Pillon

Grappa, the secret is in the still

44 years have passed from December 1st 1973, when from the still of a quite little known distillery in Friuli, the Nonino of Percoto, gushed the Picolit Grappa that inaugurated the age of single varietal Grappas. It was a little-big revolution, which made the Italian distillate enter the club of the noblest distillates and opened for it the roads of the world, where until then it had been snobbed, and allowed it to face the evolution of food habits, the greater and greater health needs and even the economic crisis of the latest years without suffering too high losses.

However, as it almost always happens to revolutions, also this one had been betrayed. The extraordinary opportunities it opened have not been exploited. Why? To supply believable guarantees of quality Grappa should have compulsorily communicated in the label all the information necessary to inform about what there really is in the bottle, but a law that imposes this elementary measure of transparency has never been issued: the divisions of the producers and the reluctant commitment of the ministry have prevented from making it come true, so far.

As a consequence Grappa has not been able to communicate to the consumer that the decisive factor of its quality is the freshness of the pomace from which it is born, pomace that must be distilled as soon as fermentation finishes, and to distil it, it is vital to use batch stills, the one that has to be loaded and unloaded at each batch. With this equipment the process is slow, it lasts about two hours, but thanks to this slowness the master distiller can eliminate, cutting heads and tails, only the unpleasant elements, so conveying into Grappa all the fragrances and all the aromas, even the slightest and most delicate.

Most Grappas, on the contrary, are obtained from pomace stored (even for long time) in steel or concrete silos, or in plastic containers, and are distilled using continuous industrial plants, which draw automatically the pomace from outside and automatically expel it after distillation, when it is

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exhausted. Working uninterruptedly, they can distil in 24 hours, according to the kind of equipment, from 1,200 to 2,000 quintals of pomace, against the 4 or 5 quintals that the batch still can distil at any batch.

The difference of production costs is clear, but the difference of quality of the distillate obtained is as clear: the automation of the continuous plant requires deciding in advance when to cut heads and tails, and as the characteristics of the huge mass of pomace it can distil cannot certainly be homogeneous, not to run risks they cut with a higher security margin, depriving Grappa of very noble aromas and giving it quite neutral characteristics. It is the very nature of the two kinds of equipment, besides, that generates very different results: the still was born to distil perfumes, whereas the continuous equipment was invented to distil petrol.

Even if the name is just one, therefore, the souls of Grappa are at least two, and the lack of information that cannot be filled is the price of their difficult coexistence. But if it is not possible to give an official identity to artisanal Grappa, which is more bound to the agricultural world, thanks to which Italian pomace aquavita has gained the prestige it has today in the world, there is the risk of making it shipwreck in the sea of industrial Grappa. With the same generic indications in the label, in fact, on the shelves there are Grappas that have a deeply different quality level, causing a leveling on the lower level that makes the differences of price incomprehensible for the normal consumer. Not only: it allows also dishonest people to make prices that do not correspond to the real value of the product.

The unresolved problem is to make people understand the quality of the product through the label. It is a real pity because Grappa has qualities that make it exceptional. It is the only distillate, among the most valuable in the world, which has no need to gain taste staying in wood casks as Cognac, Rum and Whisky, and neither to be flavored as Gin. And as it can be obtained in every region from any grape variety grown in Italy, there is no other distillate that is proposed in a range of types as much numerous and varied.

It is an extraordinary richness for those who can choose the type they consider the best, but it can become a handicap if the label, instead of informing, confuses who should use it. And as it is the law that states what must be, what can be and what it is forbidden to write in the label, this is a problem that should be resolved by the rules. However it is not easy: the two variables that should immediately highlight a superior quality, namely the freshness of the pomace and the distillation with batch method, written in the label are not perceived as such by the consumer, unless he is particularly prepared on the matter.

Labeling rules allow (but do not impose) declaring the distillation method and the kind of still adopted, but almost nobody has written in the label "Grappa distilled with batch method": almost everyone has preferred to translate it into more immediately understandable terms "distilled with artisanal method". Artisanal, however, is a winning but generic adjective, which can easily be abused (and in fact it is shrewdly used also by many producers that are not craftsmen): if would be very

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effective if the declaration of the distillation method were compulsory, but this is obviously impossible, as it would rise the rebellion of the distilleries of larger size, about twenty, which produce two thirds of Grappa. No producers can accept to write on their labels “Grappa distilled with continuous method”, knowing it means “distilled with industrial method”, because this, even if it is true, would irreparably compromise their image. It is indisputable to ask for transparency, not for self-damaging.

How to get out of this entangled situation, then? The safest and most effective solution continues to be the simplest: supplying the consumer with the information and the cultural instruments to find his way in the jungle of the bottles he is offered. And this is a task that isn't up to the law but to Grappa producers.