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HOW'S YOUR DRINK?

Not Grandpapa's Grappa

 By **ERIC FELTEN**
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Grappa, an Italian brandy made from the detritus of winemaking -- grape skins, seeds and, once upon a time, stems, too -- long had a reputation as awful liquid offal, a peasant staple cobbled together from leftover bits that nobody wanted. But no more. Grappa makers began reinventing the whole concept of the spirit in the early 1970s, turning it into a rare, artisanal luxury. The trend was neither phony nor fleeting, and the boutique grappas available in the U.S. merit their premium prices.

Typical of the comments grappa provoked in the mid-20th century are Jane Nickerson's in the *New York Times*. In a roundup of brandies available in the city in 1955, she declared that grappa "is thriftily distilled" from "the residue in wine vats." The stuff sold at Gimbels, she wrote, "is coarse, earthy, a man's drink if ever there was one."




Dylan Cross

Not only a man's drink, but if Ernest Hemingway is to be believed, a seedy man's drink. Papa suggests that at its best, grappa is a rustic, martial spirit -- stuff to drink just before battle. But in the 1923 short story "Out of Season," grappa makes a telling appearance as a cheap buzz. A young couple visiting Italy go fishing, only to find that the guide provided by their hotel, a man called Peduzzi, is the town drunk.

Before showing up for an afternoon with rod and reel, Peduzzi had already managed to drink all the grappa that could be bought with the four lire he had earned that morning tilling the frosty soil of the hotel's garden. With the prospect of getting paid for an afternoon's trout-fishing, Peduzzi manages to get the local cantina to advance him three grappas more.

But he's still thirsty. Leading the couple through town on the way to a brackish stream, "Peduzzi stopped in front of a store with the window full of bottles and brought his empty grappa bottle from an inside pocket of his old military coat. 'A little to drink, some marsala for the Signora, something, something to drink.' " The young lady is sullen, appalled by the spectacle; the young gentleman is distracted, wondering "what in hell makes him say marsala? That's what Max Beerbohm drinks." (And, indeed, when Hemingway had visited Beerbohm the year he wrote the story, that's what the caricaturist had served.) But Hemingway's point about marsala is that even Peduzzi wouldn't think of pushing grappa on his society clients.

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GRAPPA

- **Very Good/Delicious**

Marolo Moscato

\$34.99

Soft, caramel-rich feel in the mouth combined with bright, clean taste of fruit. Exuberant and delightful.

Marolo Brunello

\$34.99

Round and grapey with a hint of port. Flavorful and complex.

- **Very Good**

Sarpa di Poli

\$44.99

Light and limpid with an elusive sweetness.

Inga Barolo

\$28.99

Clean and vodka-like.

Nonino Picolit

\$104

The one that started grappa on its ascent. Elegant, but austere.

- **Good**

Nardini

\$26.99

A fine choice for Caffè Corretto.

What a remarkable transformation grappa has undergone. Not only is the good stuff extremely good, but at least in the U.S. it has managed to crowd out the bad. Most good liquor stores make room for some pretty sketchy spirits. Even those with excellent selections of single malt Scotches provide plastic liters of generic whisky; the parade of pricey vodkas marches alongside Popov. Not so grappa -- if the stores I visited are any indication, it is now almost exclusively a luxury good.

None of the grappas I bought were coarse, and several were truly fine. One of the first I tasted was from the Nardini distillery, one of Italy's oldest. You're more likely to find its almond-flavored brandy called Mandorla on shelves, but its plain Aquavite is a good baseline for well-made and straightforward grappa in the traditional style. It wasn't harsh, but it was hot on the palate, with the alcohol burn eclipsing the taste of the grapes. If you were looking for grappa to add to

your espresso -- a drink that Italians call Caffè Corretto -- the Nardini would be an excellent choice.

If for no other reason than that it is so darn expensive, don't waste Nonino grappa on coffee. In 1973, fourth-generation distiller Benito Nonino and his wife Giannola created what has since become the standard in luxury grappas -- a spirit made not from any and all the grapes at hand, but from an individual variety. The Noninos' first effort was with an obscure regional grape called picolit. It was such a sensation when it first appeared that now most first-rate grappa distillers focus on single-variety expressions -- and produce a staggering variety of those.

The picolit remains one of the Noninos' signature grappas, and it comes in their impossibly delicate bottle -- a small sphere with a slender cylindrical neck. I was sure it was going to shatter in my hands as I worked to coax out the obdurate cork. The grappa inside is every bit as refined as the bottle -- though perhaps too refined. The Nonino is elegant to the point of austerity, ascetic in the extreme.

Similarly subtle were grappas made by Inga from barolo grapes, and the Sarpa di Poli from merlot. Vodka drinkers looking to branch out should give them a try. The Poli was particularly ingratiating, light and limpid, with an elusive sweetness. It was also the best value of the tasting.

But far and away, my favorites among the grappas I tried were those from the Marolo distillery. From the first moment of opening the bottles, a fresh, bold scent signaled that these grappas were in a style entirely different from that of their reserved cousins. I couldn't decide which I liked more, the Marolo made from moscato grapes, with its soft, caramel-rich feel in the mouth combined with the bright, clean taste of the fruit, or the brunello variety, round and grapey with a hint of port. These are exuberant grappas, flavorful, complex and delightful.

These are not the sort of grappa with which poor old Peduzzi would have refilled his empty bottle

in "Out of Season." It's worth noting, by the way, that Hemingway wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925 that the fiasco of a fishing trip had actually happened to his wife, Hadley, and himself. Hemingway wrote the story "right off on the typewriter without punctuation" and meant for it to be "tragic." He'd reported his drunken guide to the hotel owner, Hemingway confessed to Fitzgerald; fired, the man "hanged himself in the stable." That last bit the author left out of his short story.

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