

Tame Fiery Italian Brandy by Adding Flavor

An Italian chef tells how to infuse grappa
with fruit, herbs, and even honey

BY LIDIA BASTIANICH

As your eyes admire, the flavor matures. While your infused grappa is improving with age, it can create a rustic and beautiful display.



Grappa is a favorite Italian drink. It's distilled from grape pomace—the skins, seeds, and stems that are left after the juice is drawn off for winemaking. Grappa has been drunk in Italy since the Dark Ages, when feudal lords gave pomace to the serfs who worked their land. What the drink lacked in elegance, it made up for in strength. Although grappa's origins are humble, today it is gaining popularity as a sophisticated drink. It's available in many varietal types, and it can even be found in collectors'-quality glass bottles.

Infusing grappa with fruit and herbs has always been a favorite way to savor the potent beverage, and with my method you can easily make a wide variety of flavored grappas at home.

Grappa distillation was pioneered in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, a region of Northern Italy, but the drink is popular all over the country. I witnessed grappa-making during my childhood in Busoler, a suburb of Pola on the Istrian Peninsula, in what is now Croatia. Good grappa is made immediately after the grapes have been crushed, when the pomace is still fresh and juicy. The result is a drink of intense flavor and no trace of mustiness, with a pungent bite.

In Friuli, grappa was infused with raisins, *nuta* (a bitter digestive herb), and juniper berries. Today, grappas infused with fruits such as cherries, blueberries, and figs are becoming popular.

You can also use grappa to flavor cakes and cookies by moistening them just before serving. Grappa makes an excellent companion to espresso. You can drink a glass of grappa while sipping espresso, or you can add grappa directly to espresso at a ratio of one tablespoon per cup. This is called *caffè corretto*, or "corrected coffee."

SAVORING A GOOD GLASS OF GRAPPA

Whether you're going to drink infused grappa or use it as a flavoring agent, start off with a grappa you like all by itself. Good grappa is not cheap; prices begin at \$35 to \$40 for a 750ml bottle, and price is usually a fair indicator of quality. If you have a favorite wine, select a grappa made from the same grape varietal. Check the label to find what kind of grape produced the grappa. Many of the grapes are Italian in origin, such as verduzzo, picolit, and moscato; other grapes include merlot and chardonnay.

There are two ways to appreciate grappa's flavor subtleties. Some enjoy drinking it at room temperature, but many people also enjoy drinking grappa after storing the bottle in the freezer, like vodka. In either case, use the appropriate glass. I prefer a tulip-shaped glass so the alcohol can softly carry a con-

centrated essence to the nose and palate.

When drinking a grappa, first enjoy its vibrant scent, redolent of its grape varietal. Then take a sip and let it coat your mouth. Swallow. When the grappa is ingested, partially open your mouth, take a slow breath, and you will feel the flavors come alive. The alcohol's pristine quality and the intense, momentary palate stimulation creates grappa-drinking pleasure.

INFUSING GRAPPA WITH FLAVORS

Conventionally served as an after-dinner drink, grappa is also a wonderful aperitif. Either way, you can increase your enjoyment by infusing the liquid with fruits and herbs because the flavors temper the harshness and bite in grappa. In turn, the fruit is preserved by the alcohol.

Infusing grappa is a simple process. The ingredients are few—grappa, the flavoring elements, and perhaps a little sugar. Quart-size glass canning jars, with hinged or screw-top lids lined with a rubber seal, are good containers. Cheese-cloth and a bowl are the only other necessary equipment. The most important element is time.

The actual process is no more than a simple mixing of flavorings and grappa. Measurements are relatively unimportant when you make an infused grappa. You can make it in any quantity, with as many or few flavoring agents as you like. When using fruit, I like to fill the jar and pour in enough grappa to cover, which produces a very flavorful drink. Other proportions also give good results.

The use of sugar is a matter of taste.

I strongly recommend using sugar with very tart fruits like cherries and raspberries. I like all my infusions sweet, even the herbal ones, so I use one or two tablespoons of sugar, depending on the fruit's sweetness, for every cup of grappa. However, grape-infused grappas require less sugar or none at all, and dried fig grappas never need additional sweetening.

The grappa steeps with the flavorings for anywhere between eight days and four months. Depending on the recipe, this happens in either a well-lit place or a dark place that is warm or at room temperature. By Mediterranean standards, "room temperature" is between 55° and 60°F. Sunny windowsills are best for warm, well-lit places; inside a kitchen cabinet near the stove is good when the grappa needs to be warm and dark. If the recipe requires the grappa to be "room temperature," just make sure it's not in direct sunlight and that the room isn't warmer than 60°.

A progress check is needed every few days as the grappa steeps. Because alcohol is volatile, it may evap-



Infusing grappa couldn't be simpler. After you select your flavoring agent—here, it's black grapes—and put it in a jar, fill the jar with grappa.



The infusing grappa needs little attention beyond a shake to redistribute the flavoring agents. Occasionally, the jar also may need to be topped off with additional grappa, since the seal may not prevent all evaporation.



Strain the grappa after it's fully infused. If you've used fruit and it still looks good, taste it. It will have absorbed the grappa, and can make a heady dessert.

A slim, tulip-shaped glass is best for appreciating grappa's intoxicating aroma. Here, the author enjoys a sample of her cherry grappa.

orate if your seal is not tight and the grappa level may decrease. Top off with fresh grappa as necessary.

After steeping, filter the liquid and age the grappa. To filter, drape a piece of cheesecloth over a bowl and pour in the grappa. Gather the cloth's ends and lift it from the bowl to remove the solids from the grappa. (If you use fruit infusions, and the fruit appears to be in good shape, you can eat it as a heady dessert.) After filtration, you can transfer the grappa to a decorative bottle for display as it continues to age.

You can age infused grappa indefinitely. The following recipes' time periods are the minimum needed to create a properly flavored drink. As the grappa continues to age, it will mellow, lose some of its alcoholic edge, and acquire a "rounder" flavor.

GRAPPA DI LAMPONI

(Raspberry Grappa)

Fill a 1-qt. jar with washed raspberries, a cinnamon stick, 4 cloves, and 4 Tbs. sugar. Pour in grappa to cover. Seal and store in a warm, dark place for three weeks. Filter. Age for a month. Serve with fresh raspberries in each glass.

GRAPPA DI FICHI SECCHI

(Dried Figs in Grappa)

Fill a 2-qt. jar two-thirds full with dried figs and pour in grappa to cover. Seal and steep for two months in a warm, dark place. The figs are delicious, so filtering is unnecessary.

GRAPPA DI CAMOMILLA

(Chamomile Grappa)

Combine 2 cups dried chamomile flowers (available at health-food stores and tea shops), 3 cups grappa, and 3 to

6 Tbs. sugar in a jar. Let it rest in the sun for three weeks, shaking the bottle about twice a week to redistribute the ingredients. Filter.

GRAPPA DI MIELE

(Honey Grappa)

Gently warm 4 cups grappa in a glass container placed in a barely simmering water bath. Watch the heat carefully; you don't want the grappa to evaporate. Add 4 to 8 Tbs. good-quality honey, depending on the preferred sweetness, and stir until completely melted. Bottle and let rest for four months in a cool, dark place, shaking the bottle twice a week. Filter.

GRAPPA DI MENTA PEPERITA

(Peppermint Grappa)

Combine 30 fresh peppermint leaves, 4 to 8 Tbs. sugar, and 4 cups grappa in a jar. Cover and let rest in direct sunlight for five days. Let it steep in a cool, dark place for another three days. Filter and then age for a month.

GRAPPA DI ROSMARINO

(Rosemary Grappa)

Combine ½ cup fresh rosemary leaves and 4 cups grappa in a jar. Cover and steep for four weeks in direct sunlight. Filter. Age at room temperature for two months.

GRAPPA DI CILIEGIE O UVA

(Cherries or Grapes in Grappa)

This recipe is a little different. Instead of filtering, the fruit and grappa are served together, preferably in a brandy snifter. It makes a particularly wonderful after-dinner digestive.

Clip the stems of firm and plump cherries or grapes to ⅛ in. Fill a jar with the fruit, measure in grappa to cover, and add 1 or 2 Tbs. sugar for every cup of grappa. Leave the jar loosely covered, in sunlight, for a week, and then cover tightly and steep for three months, away from strong light.



SOURCES FOR GRAPPA

If you can't find grappa in your local liquor store, you can order it by mail. The following stores usually carry the Gaja, Poli, and Nonino brands, which I think are of good quality.

Foremost Sunset Corners, 8701 Sunset Dr., Miami, FL 33173; 305/271-8492.

Morrell Wine Co., 535 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10022; 212/688-9370.

Sam's Wines & Liquors, 1000 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60622; 312/664-4394.

Seaholm Wines & Liquors, 134 Wall St., Huntington, NY 11743; 516/427-0031.

Wally's Wine & Spirits, 2107 Westwood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025; 310/475-0606.

You may also call the following distributor to find nearby retailers of the brands mentioned above.

Vinifera Imports, 2190 Smithtown Ave., Ronkonkoma, NY 11779; 516/467-5907.

Lidia Bastianich has been carrying on the family tradition of making and infusing grappa since she was a child. At her restaurants, Felidia and Becco in New York City, she offers more than two dozen kinds of infused grappas. ♦