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How To Drink Grappa And Amaro, From The Experts At Nonino

By Alissa Fitzgerald

Whether you prefer a spritz, an aperitivo or just a low ABV drink, these refreshing cocktails have all seen a steady rise in popularity all over the world. Much of that has to do with a growing awareness of complex and slightly bitter spirits like grappa and amaro. As the 6th generation of the Nonino family to head up Nonino Grappas & Amari, Francesca Nonino is something of an expert. A quality spirit with a quality product but the magic? Well, that happens in the distillery and according to Francesco Nonino, the stills deserve much of the credit. “While most grappa distilleries operate year-round with 6 to 12 pot stills, our facility houses 66 artisanal pot stills and operates solely during harvest for eight to ten weeks a year. We distill around the clock, even in the middle of the night!”



Three generations of the Nonino Family Grappa Nonino

In case you're not familiar, and you should be, Grappa Nonino are an award-winning brand founded in 1897 by Orazio Nonino. In the 1940's, after losing her husband World War II, Silvia Nonino took over the reins of the business and officially became the first woman to manage a distillery. Subsequently, the women of the Nonino family have been the driving force of the business for the last three generations.

Amaro Nonino is a main ingredient in a Paper Plane cocktail but the family's greatest legacy is for changing the world's perception of grappa, a grape pomace-based brandy. “Grappa has long been perceived as ‘the fire water that could burn away even hunger,’ starting from the 15th century when

it was first made in northeast Italy.” Nonino explains. “Grape pomace was traditionally considered to be of little value, just a leftover from the winemaking process. But farmers, who wasted nothing, saw its potential: its sugars could be fermented and distilled.”

Other cocktails like northern Italy’s “caffè corretto” require adding a bit of grappa to your coffee and is a classic way to start your day with a kick.



Stills in work at Grappa NoninoGrappa Nonino

“Grappa is the most traditional and ancient spirit of Italy.” Nonino explains. “It is a distillate made from the fermentation and distillation of grape pomace, which is the skins, residual pulp, and seeds leftover from winemaking. To be able to call a distillate grappa, it must be made by distilling Italian pomace in Italy; otherwise it is pomace eau de vie, not grappa.”

Amaro on the other hand is completely different. “Amaro is a bittersweet herbal liqueur made from an infusion of herbs, fruits, and spices. It was born in Italy as a way of creating infusions that were intended to be medicinal and good for you. Each Italian family used to have their own secret recipe.”



The Borgo Nonino near the Grappa Nonino distilleryGrappa Nonino

Home distilling became common on farms because it reused what might otherwise be called waste from certain crops. Farmers would stock up on pomace over the months from various wine presses and vineyards. Due its slightly illicit nature, they often waited for bad weather to obstruct the steam from the still. This also meant that grappa was inconsistently made, could be very rough and was certainly very strong. Unfortunately, it's reputation as a common spirit made from waste stuck until Francesca's grandparents, Giannola and Benito Nonino stepped in. In December of 1973, they made Monovitigno Picolit, the first single varietal grappa kicking off what turned into a grappa revolution.

As pioneers of high grappa standards, the quality must be maintained and occasionally improved upon, Nonino explains. "We permit a maximum distance of only a couple of hours between the winery where we pick up the pomace and the distillery, to distill the juiciest, freshest pomace. My grandfather's first rule of distillation was always, "The quality of the pomace you distill directly determines the quality of the grappa you create."



Casks aging from Grappa NoninoGrappa Nonino

Like the generations before her, Francesca Nonino and her family have dedicated themselves to their business with a deep love and appreciation for keeping the ingredients local and the integrity of the spirit intact. "Today, Nonino Grappa still stands out because of its unique production process, which truly is all about preserving the fresh, aromatic qualities of the pomace." Says Nonino. "First, we only distill freshly fermented pomace—juicy and gently pressed—straight from the winemaking process. We never store it; we use it right away, unlike many (most) other distillers who store pomace for up to eight months. Second, we source our pomace exclusively from the best winemakers in our area."

Still have questions? Francesca Nonino has answers.

What's the difference between grappa and amaro?

Amaro and grappa are two distinct yet complementary expressions of the Italian art of distillation and liqueur-making, each reflecting unique traditions and flavors. Grappa is a true expression of the grape's essence. At Nonino Distillatori, we like to say it embodies the pure essence of the grape varieties, a result of the single varietal approach my grandparents pioneered in 1973. Our grappa is known for its aromatic depth and smooth finish, a testament to our artisanal distillation process. While grappa highlights the purity of the grape, amaro delivers a rich symphony of botanical flavors. Yet they both showcase the artistry and innovation behind Italian craftsmanship.

What do you wish people understood about grappa? About amaro?

I think the most important thing to highlight about grappa and any other spirit is that we need to build knowledge about what we are really drinking, and learn to read the label to understand the characteristics of the liquor you are buying: Having a craft distillery does not guarantee you get a craft product. A brand can own an artisanal distillery but buy industrial product from another distillery that's 10 times cheaper. For this reason, on all of our grappa labels we declare '100% distilled with artisanal method.'

A number in a bottle does not necessarily indicate the length of aging. To indicate aging, the number needs to be followed by the temporal unit (5 years or 12 months), otherwise the number is just the name of the product. The color of a product does not necessarily indicate the liquor is aged. It's possible to alter the color of most spirits without the need to declare this on the label. Therefore, for all our aged grappa we declare 0% colour added. Why does buying locally matter? Buying locally is fundamental for grappa. The pomace is the most aromatic part of the grape, yet it is also very delicate. Since pomace is essentially the "squeezed" remains of the grape, the natural yeast on the grape skins comes into contact with the sugars in the pulp, starting fermentation. While fermentation is essential for distillation, a secondary fermentation can lead to unpleasant tastes, off aromas, and the creation of methyl alcohol. Timing is crucial for this reason—even for transportation. We permit a maximum distance of only a couple of hours between the winery where we pick up the pomace and the distillery, to distill the juiciest, freshest pomace. My grandfather's first rule of distillation was always, "The quality of the pomace you distill directly determines the quality of the grappa you create."

What grapes make the best grappa?

It all depends on personal taste! The most interesting thing about distilling single varietal grappa in an artisanal way is that each distillation and each grappa is unique! Grappa's most distinctive characteristic is that it's made from pomace, the part of the grape richest in polyphenols and aromatic compounds, giving each grappa a distinct flavor profile. It can be dry, soft, aged, or unoaked, and each one has a unique personality. The tasting experience is especially influenced by the distillation method, and whether or not the pomace was distilled fresh. You can assess that immediately after the first sip: if it burns and you only taste alcohol, this means it is not a high-quality, artisanal grappa. The goal of artisanal distillation is to adapt the process to the specific characteristic of the pomace, capturing its essence and soul, and delivering that in the glass! How

should you drink grappa? Amaro? Amaro is traditionally served at the end of the meal to aid digestion, often chilled and served neat or over ice. Grappa is also seen as the perfect way to end the meal, served neat and room temperature, often paired with dessert. It can also be a nice way to start the morning! Adding a bit of grappa to your caffè is called a “caffè corretto,” and in northern Italy it’s a classic way to start your day with a kick. That being said, more and more people are drinking grappa and amaro in cocktails—or even as culinary ingredients! We love to host dinners that showcase how versatile our grappa and amaro are.

If you come visit us you will have Grappa Nonino in every meal: we spritz grappa on appetizers—the Monovitigno Moscato is delicious on raw fish, or our Monovitigno Chardonnay Aged 12 months in Barriques on lobster and shrimp. We thicken shrimp risotto (in Italian we have a specific verb that describes the process, “risottare”) with our Grappa AnticaCuvée Aged 5 Years. Even the main course benefits from grappa: we braise veal cheek with our Monovitigno Merlot and it makes it so juicy and delicious! For dessert, there’s crepes suzette flambéed with Amaro Nonino Quintessentia®, a coffee, and of course a grappa to help digestion at the end!

For a beginner, I would suggest pouring a little bit of Grappa Nonino Moscato over a fresh fruit salad, and our Chardonnay or AnticaCuvée on vanilla or chocolate gelato; or make a granita or a popsicle with Amaro Nonino! Can you use it in cocktails? Of course—grappa cocktails are delicious! My family, especially my aunt Antonella, is promoting the movement #BeBraveMixGrappa. Many international bartenders, including Simone Caporale, Salvatore Calabrese “il Maestro,” Monica Berg, Alex Kratena, and Joerg Majer are experimenting with Grappa Nonino, creating extraordinary and original cocktails. Being daring and going beyond mainstream trends to rediscover flavors and ingredients is a wonderful way to create unique cocktails for a “liquid cultural experience.” Cocktails were initially created to disguise the taste of poor-quality distillates with sugar and flavorings, but today, the quality of the products we can work with has enabled a completely different approach to mixing: celebrating the ingredients, enhancing what is inside the bottle. The goal is for the cocktail to be delicious and respectful of the ingredients you use. And what better way to get people to know and love Italian culture and lifestyle than offering Grappa Nonino in a cocktail?

Where did the Paper Plane cocktail come from?

The award-winning bartender Sam Ross, also co-owner of Attaboy and Diamond Reef in NYC, created this equal-parts cocktail in 2007. He was one of the first to go against the tradition of drinking amaro straight when he used Amaro Nonino Quintessentia (it’s not an OG Paper Plane without it), Aperol, bourbon, and lemon juice in his cocktail. He originally created it for The Violet Hour in Chicago, and the guests loved it so much he brought it back to NYC and served it at the Milk & Honey cocktail bar on the Lower East Side. The name comes from M.I.A.’s “Paper Plane,” a hit at the time, and he garnished the original cocktail with a little paper plane. A variation of the Last Word cocktail, the Paper Plane has become a modern-day classic all over the U.S. How does Benito’s passing change things? We have lost our Master Distiller, my grandfather Benito Nonino, fourth generation of distillers in our family. It is a great loss, but his values and his presence are

always in our distillery and live on in all the life lessons he taught to his daughters Cristina, Antonella, and Elisabetta and to me. We decided to honor him by celebrating his life with a ceremony in his distillery. It was touching and beautiful to see how many people he inspired. Even the journal The Times celebrated him as “Italy's 'father of grappa' whose family distillery elevated the uncouth, poor relation of wine into a premium beverage.” We will continue to put all our heart and effort into crafting the best grappa in the world, just as he taught us.

What’s next for the Nonino brand? And the family behind the business?

We are becoming more and more sustainable! Grappa production has always been part of a circular economy: we have always used the pomace from our distillation process as fertilizer in my grandmother’s garden. She grows the biggest, most delicious tomatoes, and we believe they become so big and good because they grow with all the love we put into making our grappa! This year, we have more sustainable news: Nonino Green Spot flour! This “Farina Nonino” is made from our distilled pomace, giving new life to what would otherwise be a waste product. Through an innovative fermentation process (five patents), we obtain a flour that maintains the essential nutritional properties of pomace while harmonizing the flavor, making it versatile for use in many recipes. This upcycling process not only yields a gluten-free product with high nutritional value, but also increases yield and lowers production and environment costs, as well as reducing energy consumption. And the bread we make with it is incredible!