

Schnaps Decisions

Austria's dry fruit brandies are a world away from Sour Apple Pucker



BY ERICA DUECY

➤ EVERYONE HAS A SCHNAPPS STORY. THE SORDID PLOT USUALLY involves a few lukewarm shots, a chaser of teenage stupidity, an epic hangover, and the eternal swearing-off the syrupy liqueur. But European-style schnaps (yes, with one “p”) — also called eau-de-vie or fruit brandy — is a dry, high-proof spirit made from fermented and distilled fruit. It’s a fiery sipping experience, with nothing sophomoric about it.

In the mountains of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, schnaps is the après-ski drink of choice, knocked-back as a shot or savored as a few sips. It is also enjoyed as a digestif following a hearty lunch or dinner, with the high alcohol content thought to settle the stomach. There are hundreds of small distillers making these rustic fruit brandies for local markets in those countries. Most are pleasant, but a little rough.

There are just a few producers in Austria’s upper echelon — namely Gölles, Reisetbauer, and Purkhart — who make luxury eaux-de-vie that transcend the category and get shipped stateside. Imbibing one of these spirits for the first time is a Willy Wonka-worthy experience.* Reisetbauer’s raspberry brandy, for example, is raspberry’s Platonic ideal, like biting into the ripest possible berry, tasting earthy, juicy fruit, followed by a clean, alcohol sweep. Then, Everlasting-Gobstopperlike, the alcohol evaporates, and you are left with



At Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro high on Aspen Highlands, Chef Andreas Fischbacher raises a glass — and the reputation — of Austrian schnapps.



concentrated raspberry essence, which lingers, pleasantly, seemingly forever.

Fortunately, the alpine eau-de-vie experience has become more accessible than ever. Alongside familiar fruit brandies like cognac and calvados, Austrian brandies are appearing on the menus of upscale restaurants, particularly those at elevation. Chef Andreas Fischbacher sees fruit brandies as the next big thing in on-mountain restaurants. At Aspen's Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro, eau-de-vie has become a menu staple, says Fischbacher,

who manages several of the resort's restaurants. Cloud Nine offers eight fruit brandies, including pine, cherry, pear, and apricot. "People are interested in it because it's something new, and because it's a pure product with no sugar or chemical flavors," Fischbacher says.

Indeed, there's no flavoring — natural or artificial — in these eaux-de-vie; it's the fruit, the whole fruit, and nothing but the fruit. And not just any fruit: Austria's premier eau-de-vie distillers grow their fruit in the foothills of the mountains, where the slopes offer good drainage, hot days with intense sun, and cold nights — ideal conditions for producing high-quality fruit. In fact, many of Austria's distillers began as orchardists. Alois Gölles is a second-generation fruit farmer who branched into fruit vinegars, then found his passion producing luxury fruit brandies. As he relates, the recipe is the same for any top-end fruit brandy: "You have to use ripe, perfect fruit as the starting point, because you're multiplying those flavors."

Fruit is picked and mashed, separating the pits or seeds from the flesh "to focus on the pure fruit flavors," he says. Then the fruit ferments in temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks for about two

weeks. Next, the fermented mash is double-distilled in a copper-pot still so it releases alcoholic vapors. Those vapors (called raw brandy) are collected and distilled again to make a smoother, fine brandy.

Afterward, it is aged in stainless-steel tanks for a few years before being diluted with fresh spring water, then bottled and sold. Some varieties, like Gölles' "Old Plum" and "Old Apple," are aged for several years in charred oak or other wood casks to impart a caramel color and complex secondary flavors like vanilla and toast.

The quality of the fruit is the secret to world-class eau-de-vie, concurs Hans Reisetbauer, who is one of Austria's most visible and award-winning distillers. He too began as a fruit farmer and now grows 20,000 trees on his own land, and supplements from orchards around the country to make more than 90,000 bottles of fruit brandy a year. Along with the common flavors like apple and raspberry, Reisetbauer is known for his esoteric varieties like carrot, ginger, and rowanberry. Where many producers pick all their fruit in one or two passes through the orchard, Reisetbauer is an obsessive exception. For the apricot harvest last season, Reisetbauer's workers made 14 passes through the orchard during July and August, selecting only fruit that had reached optimal ripeness. As a result, Reisetbauer's eaux-de-vie are known for their bright, intense flavors.

Despite the seeming robustness of fruit brandy, Reisetbauer and others recommend using care with its storage. "You don't want to freeze these spirits or you'll lose the subtle aromas," says Haus Alpenz's Seed. Bottles should be kept in wine-cellar conditions, served neat or with a slight chill, and sipped from a small brandy glass.

Whether as an après-ski sipper or a memorable finish to a celebratory meal, Austrian eau-de-vie is a spirited addition to the on-mountain bar. The sweetest part? Knowing that you've graduated from Razzmatazz, and other syrupy schnapps with two p's. 🍷

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