



Words by Alan Burns

LIQUID GLASS

A bottle spins in flames as tongs stretch one end to form a slender, elongated neck. Molten-hot glass builds a tiny framework, until a final puff of air inflates sails and hull of a fairy-tale ship ready to sail inside a grappa ocean. These are vignettes of the Italian artisans who bring Sandro Bottega's glass designs to life.

I'm in a glass workshop north of Venice, a region historic for glass artistry. I'm here to watch Bottega's designs become glass bottles that will carry his grappas. Stacks of raw material surround us: tubes and rods of crystal-clear glass, ready to be transformed. Each bottle is worked on by several artisans, much more labour-intensive than I imagined.

Sandro Bottega is third-generation head of a grappa and wine producer, but he has transformed it. In his hands grappa, often a fiery, rough spirit, has become refined, elegant and highly drinkable. The bottles, designed by Bottega, are often sought after as much as the liquid they contain.

The bottles range from elegant and flowing, to whimsical, to those containing shapes such as horses, ships or hearts. To me the common thread is a purity of design involving clarity and light. Some of my favourites include the undulating Cenerentola (Cinderella), cubic Cubetto, sensual Alambicco, and the black-bottle Jazz containing a tiny glass saxophone.

The grappa is equally remarkable. This is not grandpa Enzo's harsh drink. Bottega has developed smoother, refined grappas often made from a single grape variety such as pinot noir or chardonnay. Sandro designed his own stills to better retain the character of each grape variety.

Grappa is a product born of opportunity, using grapes after wine makers have finished with them. The *marcs* (skins and pulp of grapes which have already been pressed to make

wine) are placed into vats to ferment for eight to 15 days as the *marcs'* sugar turns to alcohol. This is then distilled in small batch stills. The grappa matures in vats for at least three months to improve smoothness and balance.

Finally, Bottega cold filters his grappa to remove harsh oily elements and reduces the alcohol level to 38% versus the 40% level of most spirits. While that 2% gap may not seem like much, it makes a big difference in taste. The lower alcohol reduces the alcohol burn, creating a milder product that enables appreciation of fine grape aromas.

I recently spoke with Sandro Bottega about his designs:

"Venetian tradition has always been a blend of many cultures, architectures and arts. I try to build on this tradition but with a modern view.

"Blown glass is an extremely flexible material which can create any shape provided that it is done quickly when the glass is red hot. Each bottle is unique. They are irregular because the hand cannot shape precisely like a machine. But, a machine cannot make what can be done by skilled hands."

"I design bottles to express myself and to focus attention on symbols or social themes. For example I have made bottles dedicated to peace, fraternity, wildlife preservation, respect of different religions, and against poverty."

"I rarely use colour as I prefer a minimalist style, to convey the purity of our grappa."

Distilleria Bottega markets most of its hand-blown bottled grappas under the Alexander Society brand, with others under the Bottega Club brand. Both are available across North America and around the world.

I find that many of Bottega's designs look organic, as though they were grown rather than created. That seems fitting for a product that begins in the vineyard and is transformed by an artist. Enjoy!

