

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO COOKING THE ULTIMATE PORK ROAST

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## The Perfect Holiday

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## DRINK

## Crystal Clear

Austrian *schnaps* is the essence of peak-of-season fruit

BY MATT GROSS



ONE MORNING ABOUT 20 years ago, I arrived at Amherst Regional Junior High School to hear an amazing story from my friend Jimi: The previous day, he'd been walking with a few friends along some railroad tracks that ran through the hills of western Massachusetts, when he'd found a mostly full bottle of peach schnaps. After sniffing to make sure the liquid wasn't something else, they'd chugged it. They got really wasted. I was impressed.

I've heard many variations on this story: schnaps (often peach but sometimes peppermint) consumed in odd places (basement rec rooms, booze cruises) and by odd methods (a water gun?) by people more concerned with inebriation than with taste. Somehow, though, I never drank it myself. Maybe there was always enough beer around, or perhaps, once I'd acquired a mildly discriminating palate, the drink's debased reputation scared me off. When it came to schnaps, I thought, Why bother?

But that was before I learned about the good stuff. On a trip to Vienna last summer, I met Peter Hämmerle, the spirits critic for *Falstaff*, the country's top food magazine. A trim 53-year-old with a neat goatee, steely short hair, and rimless eyeglasses, Hämmerle grew up in Vorarlberg, the mountainous Alpine state where the making of *schnaps* is a local art. In his apartment I found myself surrounded by hundreds of bottles of the best *schnaps* in Austria—the country that produces more of this type of fruit brandy than anywhere else.

"I was born in a region where lots of fruits grow, and it's quite normal that everybody has trees behind their house," he told me. Once a year, a communal mobile still would circulate

MATT GROSS writes the "Getting Lost" column for the New York Times. His most recent article for *SAVEUR* was "Taipei, Family Style" (April 2010).

among the households, and the families would follow a process (as they still do today) that's little changed since distillation technology became widespread in Austria in the 18th century. At each home, someone would mash fruits—usually apples, pears, plums, and cherries—and let them ferment for several days, then distill them into a strong, clear liquor of around 65 percent alcohol. Water would then be added to make the drink palatable, bringing the alcohol content down to around 40 or 50 percent. This was real *schnaps* (as compared with schnapps, the sugar-sweetened, cordial-like American version I remember from my youth). *Schnaps*, which Hämmerle explained is simply the term for fruit brandy in Austria, is also known as *edelbrande* or *eau-de-vie*; other regional brandies, like France's calvados (made with apples) and eastern Europe's *slivovitz* (made with plums), fall in the category that Austrians would call *schnaps*. The drink was bottled immediately, and families kept bottles on hand to serve when guests stopped by, or at the end of a meal.

As common as *schnaps* was, it was rarely very

good. "The pears and apples you couldn't sell, you used them for *schnaps*," Hämmerle said. Nowadays, he added, producers realize that you cannot make fine *schnaps* from subpar fruit. As an example, he poured a *schnaps* made from Williams pears (the same variety as Bartlett) from Stockvogler's, a distillery one hour south of Vienna, into a traditional long-stemmed,

**THE PEAR SCHNAPS WAS INCREDIBLE, A BURST OF SHARP PEEL FOLLOWED BY RIPE FRUIT. IT WAS, AT FIRST TASTE, THE BEST PEAR I'D EVER EATEN**

V-shaped glass. The nose was incredible, a burst of sharp pear skin, and when I sipped it, the potent elixir spread ripe fruit and warm alcohol through every part of my mouth. It was, at first taste, the best pear I'd ever eaten—and yet it was like no pear I'd ever eaten. Abstracted from the action of biting and chewing, the *schnaps* was the Platonic ideal of the Williams pear.

That impression got complicated as we

tasted different *schnaps* and I encountered less-familiar fruits. I recognized the floral, citrusy quince, but the powerful almond flavor of rowanberries was altogether new to me, as was the mysterious *mispel*, with its vegetal, almost pickled-artichoke taste. (I later learned *mispel* is Japanese loquat. That hardly helped.) How could I make sense of these drinks? It was like reading Joyce's *Ulysses* without ever having heard of the *Odyssey*.

To get a better handle on *schnaps*, I drove to Riegersburg, a village in the region of Styria, near the borders of Hungary and Slovenia. There I found the distillery of Alois Gölles—one of the best producers in Austria, according to Hämmerle and others—where I was hit with a dizzying perfume. Raspberries! Inside, two copper stills were bubbling away with bright fermented fruit juice, and a computer display monitored temperature, pressure, volume, and other details pertaining to the distillation.

"Now is the raspberry season," said the stout 50-year-old Gölles. He explained the *schnaps*-making process: as fermented juice boils, a

**14 to Try** Serve *schnaps* slightly chilled in a small-bulbed or V-shaped glass, and don't swirl; that can destroy the spirit's delicate aroma. Below, tasting notes on some of our favorite Austrian bottles, as well as a few from artisanal new-world producers that make their fruit brandies in the *schnaps* tradition.—M.G.

**Clear Creek Distillery Kirschwasser** (\$28; 375 ml) Some of the best American *schnaps*

comes from Oregon fruit grower and distiller Stephen McCarthy. This version has the aroma of cherry candy (in a good way) and a tart, slightly medicinal bite.



**Clear Creek Distillery Williams Pear** (\$25; 375 ml)

This juicy-tasting *schnaps* smells of fruit so ripe it's ready to burst, but tastes of leaves, stems, and aromatic oils that leave a long, delightfully spicy finish.



**Gölles Cherry** (\$65; 375 ml) A very traditional *schnaps* that smells like ripe cherries and has an ever-so-slightly buttery aroma.

**Gölles Old Apple Barrel-Aged** (\$50; 375 ml) This barrel-aged apple *schnaps* has a golden hue and a round, smooth depth; the taste is spicy, woody, fruity.

**Gölles Wild Plum** (\$60; 375 ml) The aroma of this *schnaps*, from the highly regarded Austrian distiller, will at first smell mysteriously fruity. On the tongue, however, the spirit is tart and tight, opening up to a round plummy flavor that's easy to recognize.

**Gölles Apricot** (\$65; 375 ml) A strong, clear apricot aroma leads to a lush, bright, sweet-tart stone fruit flavor. This pretty *schnaps* has a much more pronounced aroma of apricot than most other versions. Sip this between courses as a palate refresher.



**St. George Aqua Perfecta Framboise Eau-de-Vie** (\$40; 375 ml) St. George is a microdistiller based in Alameda, California, and its raspberry *schnaps* is a bright, round swirl of berries that leaves a slightly syrupy flavor under your tongue.



**Reisetbauer Carrot** (\$76; 375 ml) Sweeter, earthier, and tasting intensely of carrot. A delicious novelty.

**Reisetbauer Ginger** (\$132; 375 ml) A pure expression of ginger flavor, juicy and refreshing (and untraditional). Great for sipping or cocktails.



**St. George Aqua Perfecta Basil Eau-de-Vie** (\$40; 375 ml) Made by distilling a combination of basil and grape brandy, this spirit is grassy and piney, with the minty undertones of fresh Thai basil. Consider it a cocktail component.



**Warwick Valley American Fruits Pear** (\$29; 375 ml) Unrefined and charmingly astringent, this is a throwback to the rustic fruit brandies of days gone by. Its small-batch distiller, in upstate New York, uses local fruit for all of its distillations.



**Westford Hill Framboise** (\$27; 375 ml) This micro distillery in northeast Connecticut is producing a wide variety of brandies with local fruit. The powerful nose of this raspberry version is followed by a ripe, juicy taste; on the tongue, the spirit relaxes and mellows into a balanced sip.

**Reisetbauer Williams Pear** (\$72; 375 ml) This aromatic *schnaps* from Austria's best known producer smells intensely of pear skin and tastes like the juicy fruit plucked from the tree at its moment of perfect ripeness. Imagine a fresh, flavorful pear in high-proof liquid form.



**Reisetbauer Raspberry** (\$132; 375 ml) This beautiful *schnaps* has a pronounced berry flavor, but the concentrated taste isn't needlessly fruity—it's woody and wild, like the berries themselves.

condenser collects its fragrant vapors, which are then condensed into liquid form. In a third still was crystal-clear raw brandy; this was the spirit's second distillation, a common strategy, Gölles said, among producers who want a more refined, aromatic end product. But he added that distilling isn't simply a matter of boiling off and capturing the alcohol. No, the flavors—and off-flavors—come in waves: an unwanted, garlicky “head,” followed by the “heart,” the delicious stuff you actually want to drink, and finally the “tail,” which has an awkward scent of hay. Seventy pounds of raspberries are used to make each liter of *schnaps* (in contrast to 33 pounds of cheaper pears). And though the computer watches the temperature and alcohol content, it takes a trained nose like Gölles's to sniff out just where (and when) the heart begins and ends.

Gölles, the son of a farmer, comes to his profession with training. “I went to school not only for growing fruits but also to learn how to process fruits and make wine,” he said. After graduation, he persuaded his family to switch

**“THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, YOU WANTED A LOT OF SCHNAPS,” SAID THE SON OF THE DISTILLER. “TODAY, YOU WANT GOOD SCHNAPS”**

from growing fruits for the market to growing fruits for *schnaps*. This was in the late 1970s, when the *schnaps* industry was in decline. At the time, Austria's winemakers were rising to international prominence, and *schnaps* makers wanted to follow suit. Bigger firms were unable to adapt to the gourmet market, but small distillers like Gölles put an emphasis on quality and gained renown. Like all great *schnaps*, his express the characteristics that make fruits wonderful—the tight astringency of pear skins, the way an überripe blackberry dissolves on your tongue. His aged apple and plum *schnaps* are stored in oak barrels for seven years and have a round, rich flavor of concentrated fruit. But, Gölles's *schnaps* also have a slightly rough-around-the-edges mouth-feel from the intensity of the alcohol that reminds you of the drink's humble roots.

I found none of that rusticity in the spirits made by Hans Reisetbauer, a big, shambling 44-year-old who is almost universally acclaimed as Austria's best *schnaps* maker. Like Gölles, Reisetbauer is a farmer's son who saw a way to take his family's business in a new direction. As we walked among the roughly 20,000 fruit trees on his farm in Axberg, in Upper Austria, he told

me that his family had been raising commodity crops like corn when he decided to make *schnaps* from the best fruit he could get his hands on. He leased 3.7 acres from his father and by 1995 had 100 bottles of Williams pear *schnaps* and 200 bottles of *kletzenbrine* (dried-pear *schnaps*), some of which he brought to the Destillata, an annual championship for *schnaps* makers. His *eaux-de-vie* won “Schnaps of the Year.”

The fact that Reisetbauer raises his own fruit gives him an advantage over other distillers, who often purchase theirs from as far away as Spain. Reisetbauer can pick his pears and plums the moment they ripen and ferment them immediately, capturing flavors and aromas at their peak. “Fifty percent of our quality is the fruit,” Reisetbauer said. Unlike Gölles, Reisetbauer strives for an utterly clean *schnaps*, with none of the fiery alcohol to distract from (or, depending on your taste, enhance) the flavor; his *schnaps* are not less alcoholic, but he distills them so that their intensity is balanced by fruit. You see this in his juicy, fragrant fruit *schnaps*, as well as in his more forward-looking products, like carrot *schnaps*, which tastes more like carrots than most carrots do.

After witnessing all this delicious progress, I was curious: What was *schnaps* like before Gölles and Reisetbauer? So, I took a train into the Austrian Alps to Stanz, a village of 654 people—and 54 small-scale distilleries—high above the Inn River. There were apple, pear, plum, and cherry trees in bloom everywhere, and a plaque in town explained that ancient Romans had brought the art of fruit cultivation to the area. It was a Sunday; many of the distilleries were closed; when I stepped into Giggus, a family-run enterprise going back generations (the name is dialect for *schnaps*), the distiller's 17-year-old son, Daniel Nothdurfter, showed me the stills, which were small and old and produced liquor through a single distillation. This was a far cry from the technology behind Reisetbauer and Gölles, yet the drinks had an undeniably rustic charm. An old varietal of plum was sticky and musty, and the gentian violet woodsy and smooth, like a drink of wildflowers. I asked Daniel how his family's *schnaps* had changed over the years.

“Three hundred years ago, you wanted to have a lot of *schnaps*,” he said. “Today, you want to have good *schnaps*.”

And today, I thought as I walked through the village, today I will. 🍷

See THE PANTRY, page 134, for information on where to buy *schnaps*.