

How To Drink Brandy

by Mark Hutchenreuther
Or, why a hot tub is an excellent brandy set

I got turned on to brandy many years ago, when I was traveling a lot to Minneapolis. Actually, for around a year and a half I was spending one week out of each month up there. When we went out to eat dinner, we often ended up at one of several Greek restaurants.

I fell in love with Greek food, and ended up with a collection of three outstanding Greek cookbooks. My first was one recommended by a business associate named Toupusis, or something like that. He was Greek and knew all the good restaurants there. That book is really the best one, and the one I would recommend. It is, The Complete Greek Cookbook, by Theresa Karas Yianilos, published by Avenel Books in MCMLXX.

One of these days, when I have the time it takes, I will make stuffed grape leaves or Dolmathes. It will have to be in the Spring, when ground lamb is more readily available. Ground beef just doesn't make it, and I would probably be extradited and shot if I tried to use ground turkey! I do use grape leaves from a jar, but their distinctive flavor adds to the dish. And the real challenge is getting the damned things out of the jar.

Getting back to Minneapolis, after a fine dinner of Dolmathes or Moussaka we would usually discuss the day's efforts over a snifter of fine Greek brandy. This was usually Metaxa 5-star, although we occasionally had their 7-star. To say that Greek brandy is unique is a gross understatement. Some will say that Metaxa tastes awful, but they are the ones who haven't developed a taste for Greek wines like Retsina either. Metaxa is strong and distinctive, to say the least.

Brandy service in a restaurant is minimalist at best. To the amusement of the staff, we made use of the candle at the table to heat the brandy in our snifters. Sometimes they would honor our request for a second candle so we didn't have to share.

This led to a Christmas list one year that included a brandy set. And Santa obliged, as she usually did. (Santa is really a woman, but you knew that. Especially those of you living in Santa Maria or Santa Barbara.) I found fuel for it and actually used it a couple of times. Some of the aforementioned detractors might suggest that the Metaxa itself should have been used as the fuel.

Then, one year I discovered the ultimate brandy set -- my hot tub. No messy fuel. No tricky flames. I did find that a brandy snifter with a heavy base and taller sides works best. It has something to do with the center of buoyancy and center of gravity if you are technically inclined. I'm sure there is a name for the distance between the center of buoyancy and the center of gravity, but it escapes me. Whatever it's called it needs to be positive and maximum. And as the tall sides imply, you need a good freeboard as well.

And this must be savored in solitude or with an intimate minimum of guests. In other words, you need to minimize the sea state in the hot tub. You don't want to accidentally dilute the brandy with green water over the bow, and you don't want to lose any brandy overboard either. Nor do you want to have a fatal collision at sea, because snifters **are** made of glass.

Try it sometime. Even if your brandy isn't Metaxa. And even if your hot tub is really a bath tub.