

imbibe

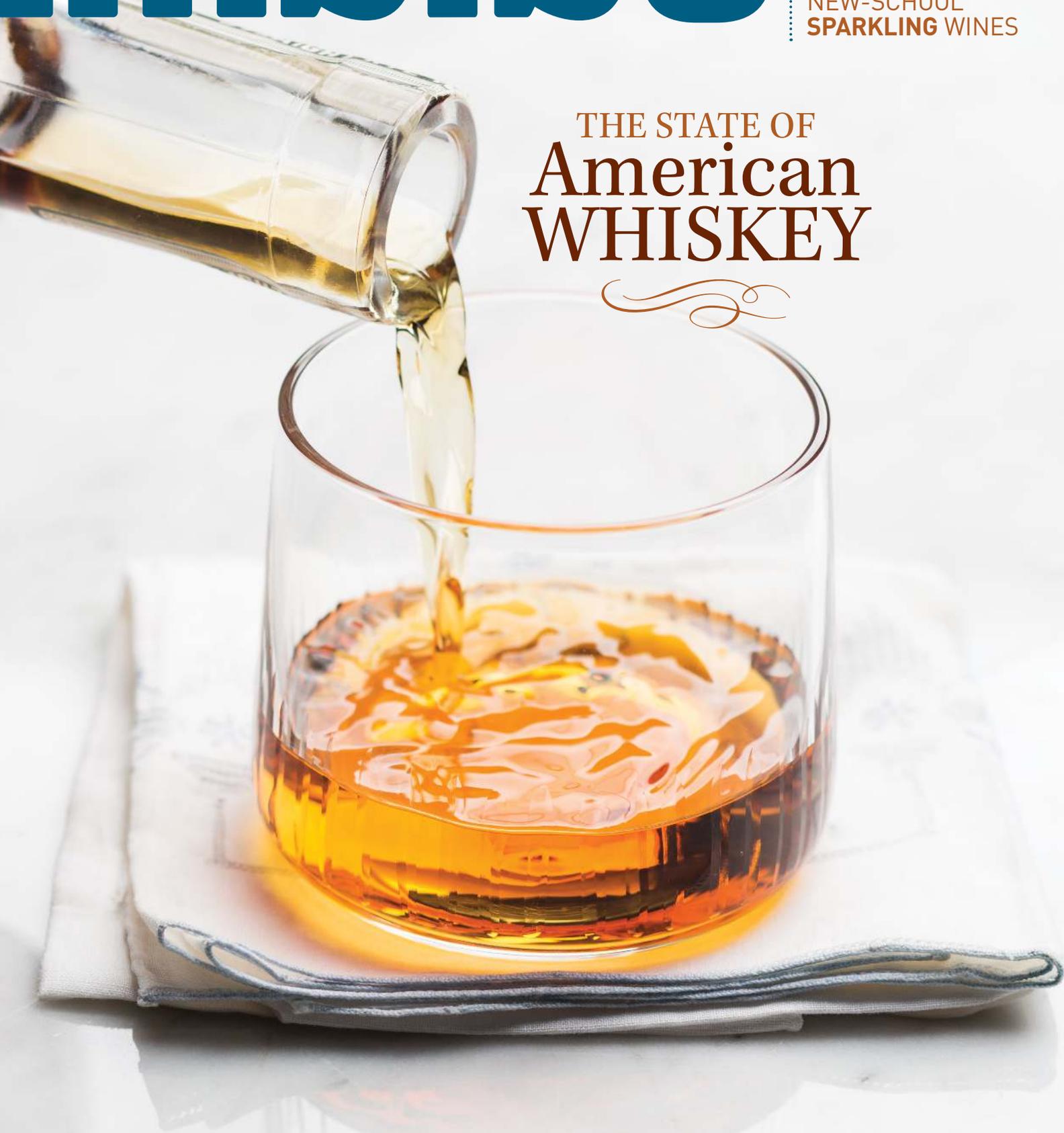
LIQUID CULTURE

PLUS:
DESTINATION
TOKYO

TASTE TEST:
PILSNERS

NEW-SCHOOL
SPARKLING WINES

THE STATE OF American WHISKEY



quench Heading to the local enoteca for insight into Italian wine.

When in Rome

In college, I worked at a brew pub and a cocktail bar. As a textbook overachiever, I made it my job to know my stuff even before I was of legal age, so when I moved to Rome shortly after graduation in 2003, I was stunned by my total ignorance of Italian wines. Relocating to a new country with limited language skills was disorienting enough, but being surrounded by people who seemingly possessed an innate knowledge of indigenous grape varieties, wine regions, enology and legislation made me feel all sorts of inadequate. I was desperate to learn about my newly adopted country and its wine culture but had no clue how to tackle such a vast topic, so when my friend Angela told me she was enrolling in a sommelier certification course, I eagerly joined her. For the next year, we supplemented our classroom instruction with regular visits to *Il Gocetto*, the ideal setting for curious, budget-conscious neophytes.

With frescoed coffered ceilings, a wood-accented interior and bottle-laden floor-to-ceiling shelves, *Il Gocetto* could get by merely on its looks. But since this enoteca opened on the ground floor of a Renaissance-era building in 1983, owners Sergio and Anna Ceccarelli have built an enviable cellar of more than 800 labels from small, traditional producers. This, I would learn, was not a given in a city teeming with powerful distributors with catalogues dominated by conventional wines.

Like most of *Il Gocetto*'s loyal clientele, which planted itself on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, Angela and I trusted Sergio and Anna's tastes. We drank our way through the wines by the glass, a uniquely long list of more than 30 wines covering most of Italy's regions, with equal representation given to north and south. At the



Livia Hengel

time, glasses started at €3.50, and with a simple snack or two, we could order (and share) a few wines paired with marinated vegetables, some cheese or salumi for €15 or less. On extravagant nights we would invite friends and order whole bottles of Ribolla from Friuli, Barbera from Piedmont, Verdicchio from Le Marche or Fiano from Campania, guided by the Ceccarellis and their love of autochthonous grapes.

Our budgets may have changed since then, but *Il Gocetto* remains the same, with as ample and affordable a wine list as ever. The wines by the glass are still neatly written on a chalkboard behind the bar, while the absence of a bottle list means I still have to survey the room and take my selection directly off the shelf, a process that is complicated by the consistently packed interior. Meanwhile, over the past decade, many of the other enotecas in Rome's *centro storico* have updated their décor, introduced full kitchens and printed proper lists featuring detailed descriptions of each wine. The Ceccarellis aren't much interested in that kind of change, making only small adjustments to their stock from one vintage to the next, preferring not to mess with a format that so clearly works. Even the limited food menu hasn't changed, and small plates of marinated vegetables, cheeses, cured meats and canapés continue to be prepared in an impossibly tight corner at the end of the bar.

Fourteen years later, I approach *Il Gocetto* with more knowledge than I had as a recent transplant to Rome. But I am still in awe of Italian wines and their ability—and that of Anna and Sergio—to stimulate the most inexperienced novice with the same effortless spirit as the most advanced student. By **Katie Parla**