



Nonino: “Grappa, Cinderella and then the bow of the Dolce Vita”

GIANNOLA AND BENITO’S IDEA, FAR BACK IN 1973, OF USING THE POMACE LEFT FROM WINE-MAKING, WITH WHICH VERY LOW LEVEL ALCOHOL WAS MADE, AND SELECTING IT BY THE VINE VARIETY. A REPUTATION THAT SOON BECAME WORLDWIDE. THE INVESTMENTS IN CULTURE AND THE PRIZE.

Roberta Paolini

Giannola Nonino met Marcello Mastroianni in the foyer of the Theatre of Europe. Mastroianni was going to watch his friend Tognazzi at the theater. Giannola approached the myth of La Dolce Vita, held out her hand and said, “I’m Giannola I am a big fan of yours”. Mastroianni looked at her: “Nonino? ... I’m a big fan of yours”, and he bowed and kissed her hand.

“They have made a Cinderella become the Queen of distillates”, wrote the *New York Times* reporting the famous words of Giannola Nonino. For decades grappa was little more than a pocket form of heating for peasants in Northern Italy – wrote also the American newspaper – the most refined Italians and most foreigners scorned it. But all this happened before the arrival of the Noninos. The consecration of the family of Percoto, a small rural village in the countryside of Udine, came from the columns of one of the world's most important newspapers.

And if grappa is no longer considered a poor distillate, the younger and not so chic brother of whiskey and cognacs this is due to Giannola, her husband Benito Nonino and their three daughters Antonella, Elisabetta and Cristina. This family from Friuli has elevated the alcohol of the peasants to the rank of elixir. Pulling out the soul of the pomace. From the boiler where the skins of the grapes “cook”, to the tower of the copper still. A magic that intoxicates, first steam then distillate, with a master who still “cuts” the heads and tails of the distillate. Because the souls, this is their true name, are really the noblest parts of the pomace.

It all started with a vision, as it always happens. The Noninos were the first to understand that it was possible to make wonderful grappa, the most delicious of all, distilling the pomace not all together, but by single vine variety. The pomace was considered the leftover of the grape-harvest. From the skins of the grapes instead the Noninos demonstrated not only that it was possible to make a very good distillate, but that it is possible to have a high rank distillate, which can compete with whisky and cognac.

Nonino grappa is the result of years of research and passion “Benito – Giannola tells - had managed to make the miracle by selecting the primary product pomace, withdrawing it immediately after pressing. Controlled fermentation and separated according to the quality of the

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vine variety, and after a few days he distilled with his batch steam stills with artisanal method producing the first Grappa Monovitigno". A kind of miracle that preserved in the distillate the flavors and aromas of the grapes from which it came. The cover of the December 1999 Wine Spectator supplement dedicated to the spirits of the world opened the article inviting the readers to toast the new millennium with Grappa Monovitigno Cru Picolit Nonino.

The use of Picolit was a real challenge. A wonderful type of grapes autochthonous of Friuli and with an ancient history appreciated since ancient times in the courts of the entire Europe. "Every year – Giannola tells - in November we wait for the harvest of these spargola grapes which is then put to wither on racks to be finally distilled to obtain a kind of grappa that now has become legendary". The Cru Monovitigno Picolit has marked history not only of the Nonino, but of grappa in Italy and worldwide. An incredible challenge, using a vine variety so precious, and moreover extremely rare, to make grappa was considered crazy. Even the phials chosen for this distillate had to be smaller, 250 ml maximum, for nectar extremely expensive for the primary product, the production and the final rendering. A jewel of Italian distillation. Giannola still remembers when they tasted the grappa coming from Picolit grapes for the first time. "It was December 1st, 1973. After tasting it, just distilled with Benito I said to him, *'Benito, Benito Ghe la gavemo fatta'* (we made it)".

This was the first test: from that first production we did not gained nothing from the investment, except that since then the Noninos have become those who they are today.

In this way they began the tradition of monovitigno grappas. They are still the only ones who keep the pomace in stainless steel tanks, left to ferment within few hours after the harvest. They have managed to replant in Friuli vine crops of the highest quality. "We use only fresh pomace and grapes, selected from the best areas – Giannola tells - Since 1989 we have also planted in Buttrio in Friuli an experimental 40-acre vineyard with grapes of Fragolino, Ribolla Gialla and Schioppettino for the grape distillate created by the Noninos in 1984."

The Nonino distilleries, unique in the world, consist of five artisanal distilleries, one for each family member. Each consists of 12 copper batch steam stills, plus one for each grandchild as a sign of continuity of the distilling art of distillation. The Nonino nectar is distilled respecting the tradition and the rhythms of craftsmanship at the same time of the grape harvests. The Nonino family takes personally care of the purchase of the pomace and follows the different stages of distillation.

Claudio Abbado, Gianni Agnelli, Cesare Romiti, Claude Levi Strauss, Ermanno Olmi, in the course of time many have been seduced by this Italian uniqueness. For which the Nonino have invested not only in business terms, but of culture. The prize they established in 1975 has become an appointment for the world culture, and thanks to this award the small village of Percoto has hosted the great names of the world literature, philosophy and cinema. And whoever has come in contact with this reality he/she has come out amazed, astonished and inebriated. Nothing is left to chance, to massive or industrial management, distilling grappa is a very matter. "I always tell my daughters - says Benito - if one day you don't intend to commit yourselves so hard do not sell the company ... close it!".

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The aging of the grappa is a very delicate process, ruled by the Italian law “We happen to hear of distilleries that let people visit the cellars where the aging takes place and they enter freely - says Giannola - I don't understand how it is possible. To open the cellar where the barriques are housed, we need the Customs officer to remove the seal. This shows that there was no discipline in such an important sector like ours. “The Ministry of Agriculture reiterated with the DM 747 the obligation of the fiscal control on the aging cellars.

In the 5 aging cellars 1960 small casks and barriques are housed. The grappas marked with the name “reserve” were subjected to an aging of minimum 18 months and up to the maximum number of years stated on the label, always under control of the Customs and Monopoly Agency and bottled without color additives. “We are not obliged to give all this information on the label - says Giannola - but who cares about the quality of our distillate, which is a treasure, whose production preserves the spirit of our places, of our nature, of our culture, should protect it”.

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“We need rules as for Whisky and cognac”

Grappa Nonino has revenue for 14.4 million euro, growing in 2016, 51% of which realized abroad in 72 countries. The production follows the trend of the year's harvest; the Noninos have never stressed the production, in order to maintain the level of craftsmanship and quality of their distillate. Compromises have never been accepted. Therefore no industrial production, if grappa is a jewel so it has to be treated. The Italian law, unfortunately, has not adopted yet a strict rule for the production as on the contrary there is for the most important distillates like whisky and cognac. To obtain quality grappa the Nonino family self-imposes a strict process and distills exclusively fresh pomace which is taken to the distillery within few hours from wine-pressing. “In Italy there isn't a law that requires transparency in the label and so that indicates who the actual Grappa distiller is – says Giannola Nonino – So it happens that there are producers that have a distillery for the visits where copper stills are exhibited, but then they purchase grappa made by industrial distilleries. The obligation to indicate the name of the actual producer is one of the provisions that Minister Martina, if he wants to give transparency, shall decide to issue, imposing the obligation to indicate both the name of the distiller and the name of the bottler besides the method used for the distillation.

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THE FACES

Giannola Nonino (1), her husband Benito (2) “the creators of monovitigno grappa and the founders of the company. The French sociologist Alain Touraine (s): he was awarded the Nonino Prize “Master of our time” 2016.

PHOTOS

Above, the second generation of the Nonino family working in the company: Benito and Giannola's three daughters, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta Nonino.

Above, the oenologist Luigi Veronelli in the Nonino cellar in the Seventies. Veronelli immediately supported the Nonino adventure.