

- FIVE GENERATION DISTILLATE -

GRAPPA HAS THE SCENT OF WOMEN

by *Alessandra Piubello*

Since 1897 the Nonino Family has been toasting to a high proof tradition. Rewriting the story of aquavita with a female touch. In Friuli and all over the world.

Let's drink, let's drink from this merry chalice, that beauty so truly enhances; and the brief moment will be happily inebriated with voluptuousness ... on the notes of the famous waltz rhythm drinking song of the first act of Giuseppe Verdi's *Traviata*, the opening of the thirty-seventh edition of the Nonino Prize takes place. Imagine the scene: in the temple of distillation, among the wood and copper pagodas, five distilleries, 66 stills and a chorus that surrounds the room with powerful voices that fly high on the wings of music. In the background, in the half-darkness, stand out the white gloves of a group of children that accompany the music with their gestures, the Manos Blancas Chorus of Friuli, awarded by the Nonino Family some years ago. Then, spectacularly and in a single movement, the ancient steam stills are opened while the white magic flows in the glasses. Let's raise the goblets, let's toast together with Grappa Monovitigno Il Prosecco Late Vintage (a preview for the guests) to this Prize that has gained international reputation.

Clear and pure, this novelty expresses a delicate scent of acacia flowers, golden apples and honey; little by little the fragrance becomes succulently sweet, giving life to a soft sip, complete and convincing. Sinuous and elegant, it is a further confirmation that the Noninos have been able to turn Grappa from Cinderella into the Queen of distillates. The "fire water" revolution starts from this little village, Ronchi di Percoto, in the southern part of Friuli, in an ordinary though tormenting countryside, south of Udine. Here, with passion and determination, pages of history that have led the Noninos to be acknowledged as the true ambassadors of Italian Grappa in the world have been written. Pages that have to be read and told, with the classic opening words "once upon a time" that dates back to the nineteenth century, when Benito Nonino's great-great-grandfather, Orazio, distilled from house to house with a wheel mounted still. At that time grappa was a common, cheap drink with a high alcoholic content, a heritage of poverty, cold, and hunger. But let's come to the Sixties: Benito marries Giannola and they start their adventure to ennoble the most ancient and traditional distillate of Northern Italy, researching the absolute quality.

"When the first drops came out", Giannola Nonino says, "I collected them in my hands. My daughters Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta (a family that actually is a matriarchy, *writers' note*), were close to me, unaware but enchanted by the sacredness of the event. I smelled the fragrance of acacia and quince apples of my childhood and shouted at my husband: we've made it!". It is 1973, the year that marks the turning point: the official birth of the "Nonino method". Benito, the gifted interpreter of the still, with an artisanal drop to drop distillation of separate varieties of pomace obtains the first Grappa Monovitigno (single grape grappa), Picolit. Until then distillers were accustomed to collect the most different varieties of pomace together and distil them in a period of months. Having demonstrated the validity of their idea, and being determined to carry on the distillation of autochthonous vines, Benito and Giannola realize that Pignolo, Schiopettino, Ribolla Gialla, and Tazzelenghe had not been included in the EEC list of viticultural varieties grown in Friuli, marking their future disappearance. Giannola, with her vivid temper, opposes the institutions and, in 1975, decides to create a money prize for the safeguard of typical varieties. The Nonino Risit d'Âur Prize (Gold Shoot) is born, a deed of love towards the land of Friuli and rustic civilization, to protect and pass on the ancient values of quality, and the respect for the land and its traditions. Since that moment the destiny of the prize and the success of the company go along together, an indissoluble interlacement of work, culture

and sense of the family. Important stages follow one another, the mission of saving the vines is accomplished in three years, in 1977 the Literary Prize is established, with the support of people as Luigi Veronelli, Mario Soldati, Gianni Brera, and Father David Maria Turollo.

In 1984 besides the two existing prizes, the International one is created; it is reserved to a foreign writer who, however, is published in Italy. In the same year the tireless couple thinks up another total innovation. The Noninos distil the whole grape and not only its leftover, creating ÙE (grapes in the language of Friuli), grape distillate, taking a new way, for which they obtain the Ministry Authorization. But how have these epochal changes been conceived? The Nonino artisanal discontinuous distillation plant is the product of the continuous research made by Benito, a prodigious alchemist. Still today, at the age of 78, he cannot stay away from his work, controlling his precious stills even during autumnal nights. The stills, working 24 hours a day, at the same time of the grape harvest, distil fresh and sound pomace immediately after fermentation at controlled temperature, in this way avoiding ensilage and the use of the demetilization column. The discontinuous equipment allows controlling the quality of the primary product for any kind of pomace, grapes or fruit, deciding times and methods of distillation, following the operations at any instant, and so intervening at the right moment with the cutting of heads and tails in order to select just the best part of the distillate. Excellence is born from keen research, a brilliant intuition comes from challenging stated certainties. Also with the Nonino Prize this family has anticipated the events: three prize-winners were later awarded the Nobel Prize. Namely Rigoberta Menchù, Nonino in 1988 and Nobel in 1993, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Nonino in 1993 and Nobel in 2001, and Thomas Tranströmer, Nonino in 2004 and Nobel in 2011. This year, this influential prize, well known for being an independent and outside-the-norms voice (nicknamed Rebel Prize for its rebellion against stereotypes) has awarded the Swiss theologian Hans Küng (Nonino Prize), the Chinese poet Yang Lian (International Prize), the English historian Michael Burleigh (A Master of our Time) and the farmers of the “gardens of Gorizia” (Risit d’Âur Prize).

And so, every last Saturday of January, Percoto becomes a small capital of literature, where important personalities from all over the world are welcomed with the same true familiarity reserved to common people by our Lady of Grappa, the way Veronelli used to call Giannola, and her three fairies, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta. On leaving the steaming stills of this distillery lost in the countryside of Friuli, after listening to deep conversations on the meaning of life, a sacred fire runs in the veins ... but it isn’t just grappa!

CAPTIONS

Excellence comes from keen research and courage

If once grappa was stored in big bottles and demijohns, the Noninos have revolutionized also the packaging. In the side page, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta Nonino, the three wonderful sisters of the fifth generation who are entrusted with the future of a company that has a great past (www.nonino.it). “There is grappa before the Noninos and then the one after”, the “New York Times” wrote.

Above, Benito Nonino, 78 years of devotion to his work, who, with his wife Giannola (left, with Grappa Monovitigno Moscato) has consolidated the worldwide reputation of the company.

In 1975 Giannola creates the Nonino Risit d’Âur Prize (Gold Shoot), for the safeguard of the typical varieties of Friuli. In all the images, there are the boilers where the batch takes place.