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A Dynamo and Her Daughters Turn Leftovers to Gold

By FRANK BRUNI

GIANNOLA NONINO was given garbage, and she simply refused to accept it. That is one way to distill her experience and adventure, a liquor-trade tale in which she played Pygmalion to a peasant's swill.

Before Ms. Nonino administered her makeover, Italian grappa was no more dignified than its ingredients: the grape skins, seeds and stems left over from making wine. That mash was trash, and the crude concoction it produced often tasted that way.

But she saw a potential in grappa and a possible market for it that no one else did. She envisioned what it became: a crystalline nectar that could compete with cognac and do battle with brandy.

"I have changed grappa from a Cinderella to a queen," said Ms. Nonino, 65, at the end of a recent lunch here, over a glass of that post-dessert delicacy.

She accomplished something else, too. In the process of refining grappa, she both exemplified and defied what Italian ingenuity is all about, becoming a success story at once utterly representative and strikingly different.

Like many profitable businesses in Italy's rich north, hers is compact and focused, propelled by a special sense of style and built on the indefatigable drive of a closely knit family.

Unlike many others, the Nonino operation is a matriarchy through and through, with one sex clearly reigning supreme.

Giannola is the muse and mastermind of the enterprise. The senior executives are her three spirited daughters: Cristina, 40, Antonella, 37, and Elisabetta, 35.

They have no brothers. Their father hovers on the fringes of the frenetic activity. Their spouses are kept at an even greater distance.

"There is a family rule that husbands stay out of the business," Elisabetta said.

That formula works. Exactly 30 years to the month since Giannola and her husband, Benito, 69, unveiled the first truly high-end grappa, they have a brand and business well known not only throughout Italy but also in Germany, Japan, South Africa and America.

From their headquarters here near the northeastern Italian city of Trieste, the Noninos produce about one million liters of grappa a year, about 20 percent exported.

In recognition of that, they just received a special prize given annually by the president of Italy to the entrepreneur who has helped to bring worldwide prestige to the phrase "made in Italy."

That award belongs above all to Giannola, the mother of all Italian grappa — at least as it is currently seen, sipped and savored — and a sharp-tongued, sharp-witted, obstinate force of Italian nature.

"I DON'T ever let up!" she said with a throaty chuckle and a mischievous wink at her daughters, who were huddled with her where almost all Italian families huddle: the dining-room table.

"The lady is a grump," Cristina added, "but she's bravissima."

"When she married my father," Antonella chimed in, referring to the early 1960's, "his mother said, 'That woman will be your ruin.' Instead she was his fortune."

Benito Nonino's relatives were then distilling a liquor of an entirely different kind. Grappa was the Italian equivalent of Kentucky moonshine: a cheap source of warmth, a lighting path to drunkenness.

"It was a raw drink, associated with men and hard work," Giannola said. She wanted more for it and for her family, suspecting that both could do better.

Her scheme started with the winemaking detritus from which grappa had long been made. That gritty refuse mingled different varieties of grapes and usually sat around for days on end.

Giannola went to winemakers' wives, who depended on their husbands' for spending



Sandro Michaliches for The New York Times

"I have changed grappa from a Cinderella to a queen."

GIANNOLA NONINO

money, and offered them extra cash if they would keep the leftovers of one kind of grape separate from others. She also insisted that they hand it over while it was still fresh.

She and Benito, meanwhile, invested in state-of-the-art equipment, with the goal of sanding down enough of grappa's rough edges so that its fruit could be tasted, its sweetness set free. They accomplished that in December 1973, with a special batch of grappa from a single type of grape, the picolit variety.

Then came the harder part: selling it. "The bourgeois wouldn't even keep grappa in their liquor closets," explained Antonella, the family's unofficial historian. "They were ashamed."

Giannola had a few ideas. She put Nonino grappa in clear, gently curved, distinctive bottles that looked like upscale chemistry-class flasks. She placed silver stoppers atop them and used red yarn to attach labels that she wrote by hand.

She stormed wine tastings and fine Italian restaurants, her treasure in tow. She mailed it to famous people, beseeching them to taste it. "For 10 years I did nothing but work on this grappa," she said. "I didn't even have time to watch television, I was so busy writing the blessed labels."

One day a car pulled up to the family's offices. A driver got out and placed an order, on behalf of his employer, for 48 bottles. That employer was Giovanni Agnelli, the head of Fiat. That moment was the validation of Giannola's vision.

She never really doubted herself. If a woman could manage something as unruly as a family, why not a business?

In the Noninos' case, there were no boundaries between one and the other. Dinner was a

strategy session. "Dad worked in the distillery, and my mother did everything else," Antonella said, adding that she and her sisters could not help but be swept into the whirlwind. "Grappa is part of our chromosomes."

So is marketing. While most Nonino labels are no longer handwritten, the family's push to fix grappa's image as a special, \$60-a-liter luxury never ends. Over the years, the Noninos have put their grappa in so many elegant containers that a museum in Milan once collected them for an exhibition.

GIANNOLA'S life is like a rose-colored version of having it all.

Her youngest grandchildren's drawings decorate the walls of the offices that she shares with her daughters. Her house, repeatedly renovated over the decades, is just a few dozen paces away: close enough for her and her daughters to eat lunch there almost every day, with the grandchildren flitting into and out of view.

She has many Italians' candor. She has all Italians' flair for melodrama, which was clear when she cataloged the toll of her exertions.

"I've had three ulcers, a broken leg and two broken wrists," she said, not making clear precisely how these ailments were connected to grappa.

But the second of the wrist injuries was classic Giannola. It happened in a restaurant, toward the end of a business lunch, when she sped too recklessly from the table and lost her balance.

She was sprinting to get the check before any of the men there could.

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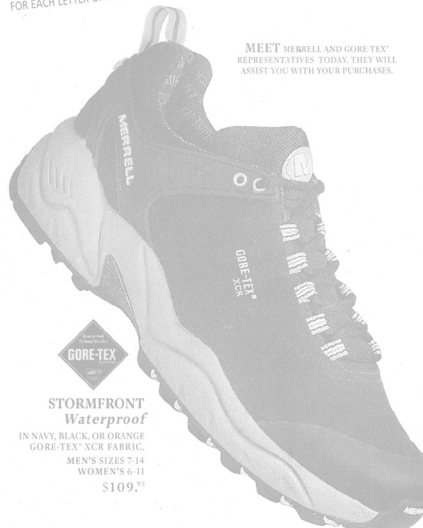
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