

Centoveniti anni della Famiglia Nonino

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Nature, History and the man's work, the distillate of the «Nonino recipe»

By Paolo Bricco – 17/06/2018

«I was a child. My father Luigi was closing his plow factory and in the night I heard my mother Tina whispering to him: "Gigi, the girls are growing up, they will attend a good college in Udine, shall we be able to deal with these expenses?". My father reassured her: "The Birds live in the air; the flowers live in the meadows; we will make it too" ». This is Giannola. «Nature does not accept compromises. You have to adapt to nature». This is Benito. They are the Noninos. They are two entrepreneurs. They are a family. They're Italian.

There had been war. There was peace. Luigi's plows –Giannola's branch – didn't sell anymore with the mechanization of agriculture and the company would become an iron furniture factory. Grappa – Benito's branch – had been a poor drink for centuries – for peasants and alpine troops – and the two of them transformed it into a popular and elite phenomenon, economic and – thanks to the [literary prize](#) founded in 1975 – cultural.

In Ronchi di Percoto, a few kilometers from Udine, on one evening between the end of spring and the beginning of summer, while crunching golden scampi [sprayed](#) with their [Grappa Monovitigno Moscato](#), I immediately realize that besides me, Giannola and Benito, there are two other silent diners: Nature precisely – because the success of the Nonino Company is based on its religious respect, calibrated with crafts work – and our History, the one which passes and the one which does not pass, today and tomorrow, in the specific version of a peasant Italy that, from a village, manages to arrive – with the good fortune destined to the humble and the persevering – everywhere in the world.

Giannola has the features of a good devil. Her hair is a radioactive red. Her eyes are hazel brown. Her teenager-like forelock – while we taste d'Osvaldo's ham with fig mustard and [Grappa Monovitigno Picolit](#) – sometimes flounces on her face, almost pushed upward and downward by the swift and fluvial words that come out of his lips. Benito, instead, says a few measured things: it has the soft stone face that the Italian peasants have, the hardness of a life mitigated by knowing how to do things and succeeding – once a week, not much more – to laugh heartily, silence and being secluded as a method to understand the world rather than as an individual identity.

They talk and snort, they smile and look at each other furtively, they start a half-fight and then they make peace like two young boyfriends, who have been married since 1962. Giannola goes on as if she was driving a tractor between the rows of vines and Benito, annoyed, gets up and leaves, but then comes back. Together they have the same non-stinging animosity and the same non-excessive sweetness that can be found in Carlo Goldoni's "Baruffe Chiozzotte".

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At a certain point – as we move on to the risotto with scampi, of course with Grappa Riserva aged five years – Giannola describes their first kiss, the emblem of the fifties and of their –our – innocence of that time: «I had gone to buy the milk, Benito offered me a ride on his Fiat 1100 car, we went to the grove at the bottom of the village, we chatted, and then there was the magic of the first kiss, an unforgettable emotion that I wished to Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta, our daughters, and that now I wish to our eight grandchildren». And, at that point, I feel like I'm in a comedy called "Baruffe Percote" because Benito turns red, occludes his jaws slightly, and says in a low voice "these things cannot be said" and rushes out of the room.

Their story includes the soul of the Country, with its personal delicacies. And there is our public History, of being Italian. Our tragedies and our untied knots and – often – not even loosened. Benito's father – not by chance Benito – was named Antonio. He was a Mussolini socialist. He was denounced to the partisans by one of his friends. They took him away. He wouldn't come back. «I remember everything about that day – Benito says – and I remember what, after a short time, my mother Silvia did. The Germans came to our house. They asked if he knew who had been. She knew it. But she said she would not say his name: "Too much blood has already been shed, and no other deaths will bring back my husband to me».

I thank as a gift the story of a private matter made by a man who normally speaks very little. I see Benito being upset for a moment and – then – come back here and now, with a force and a silent presence toughed but not overwhelmed by the torrential and lively character of his wife. The turbot brought to the table by the chef Massimiliano Sabinot is delicate. And, having absorbed the emotion of Benito's memory, I think that, really, this complementarity they have is one of the reasons for the development of the company.

Today the Nonino has a turnover of 15 million Euro per year and has 40 fixed employees, plus 18 seasonal ones. «We are small – says Benito – but the dimension corresponds to our nature. If we wanted to increase the revenue, it would be simple. But we would alter the rigorous style of production losing the control of the whole process». The grammar of Grappa has strict rules. And the Noninos have defined the new alphabet of this product, since the decision - in 1973 - to obtain it from a single grape variety, distilling separately the pomace of Picolit grapes. From 1975, they have reimplanted Schioppettino, Pignolo and Ribolla Gialla, the ancient Friulian vines on the brink of extinction. Since 1984 they have distilled the whole grapes creating the [grape distillate](#). While Benito, with the vigorous precision of the blacksmith who works the iron, explains to me every stage in distillery and every passage of the reconquest –years long, and which still goes on – of the ancient rows of vines to the cause of grappa, Giannola is persuasive in the description of one of the Nonino innovations: Pricing, the hardest thing in the world, fixing the value of things and then persuading the others to acknowledge it. Meanwhile, tasting [UE Gran Riserva Nonino 27 Years](#), my head starts spinning around.

In this both entrepreneurial and family prism that unites the villages of the Italian countryside to global cities embedded in international markets, the first face is grappa and the second face is the literary prize that, with almost divining faculties, has awarded five personalities who would later receive the Nobel Prize: for Peace Rigoberta Menchù; for literature V.S. Naipaul, Tomas Tranströmer and Mo Yan; for physics Peter Higgs.

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The list of artists awarded and involved in the jury – poets and writers, filmmakers and musicians – is endless and sparkling. With many of them the Nonino have created lifelong closeness and humanity, as with the beloved Claudio Abbado and as with the enigmatic Leonardo Sciascia who – a guest for two months in Giannola's family house – wrote here "the Knight and Death". Benito shows me a photograph, with Sciascia and his wife Maria, and their grandchildren Vito and Fabrizio: I taught them to play football. My daughters, one evening at dinner, heard Leonardo and Claudio Magris discuss about Twentieth Century literature». At that point Giannola intervenes: «A wonderful thing». And Benito closes the speech: «Yes».

This list has been composed over the years with Giannola's intuitions and charm. You should see Benito lovingly admiring his wife who tells me about Jorge Amado. «The publishing house gave me his house number in Bahia. I was convinced that, in Brazil, they spoke Spanish. And, I don't know why, I thought Spanish was similar to our dialect. I called him and said all in a breath: "Son Giannola Nonino, gavemo fatto un premio e la giuria la ga deciso de assegnarlo a Jorge Amado ma el deve vignir in Friul a ritirarlo" (I am Giannola Nonino, we have created a Prize and the jury has decided to award Jorge Amado but he has to come to Friuli to withdraw it). On the other side of the phone, a voice answered me in Venetian: "E mi sono Zelia Gattai. Son de Pieve di Cadore e sono la moglie di Jorge. Ghe digo subito che vignimo: mi, Jorge, Paloma e João Jorge, i nostri fioi" (And I am Zelia Gattai. I am from Pieve di Cadore and I am Jorge's wife. I tell you immediately that we will come: Jorge, Paloma and João Jorge, our children, and I). A dialogue that almost transforms the two women – Giannola and Zelia – in two characters who could safely stand on a page of "Gabriella garofano e cannella", but truly "That's life, Funny as it seems", as Frank Sinatra sings in the background of our dinner, in this Percoto that Claude Levi-Strauss defined in an interview with Corriere della Sera "the most exotic of my trips".

The conclusion of the dinner, with a chocolate cake and crepes flambées with [Amaro Nonino](#), is worth "Babette's Lunch" in Carnia. You look at them, you listen to them and you hear them, with the perception amplified by grappa. Giannola and Benito. Their alchemy is also the alchemy of a company. It is the alchemy of being Italian, with all the shameless meekness we are capable of. Farmers and citizens of the world, full of fears and without fear of anything, business –Grappa turned into a small Louis Vuitton of international beverage, the analysts would say and the bankers who would go crazy to get their hands on this small, small Jewel - and culture. All inextricable and all fused together. Like Giannola and Benito's story, with her telling him – still in front of a stranger – «but have you ever loved me? » and he who, in front of a stranger, darkens in his face "and stop it for once" and, then, back to smile like that day in the grove of Percoto.