

# Spirit Brand of the Year: Nonino



*L to R: Elisabetta, Antonella, Cristina and Francesca Nonino/Image by Giulia Lacolutti*

Grappa maker [Nonino](#) originated in the late 1800s, when Orazio Nonino began driving a mobile still from house to house and distilling the byproducts of wine making, like grape skins, seeds and stems, done by peasants. Eventually, in 1897, he would establish the company's first brick and mortar distillery in the Friuli region of Italy.

But the story of this prolific brand didn't truly begin until the 1970s, when scion Benito Nonino and wife, Giannola, began to produce high-quality, single-varietal grappas. It was Giannola, in particular, who helped turn around grappa's rustic, fiery image. She longed "to turn grappa from a Cinderella into a queen," she says.

This was no easy feat. Traditionally, Grappa was only considered a byproduct of winemaking, and was often produced crudely and given little respect. Pomace from multiple producers and grape varieties was also frequently mixed together without much thought.

Yet, Giannola saw its potential. She envisioned a possible luxury market for the crystalline spirit when no one else did.

Toward that goal, the Noninos crafted the first single-vineyard, single-grape grappa in 1973. It featured Picolit, a white grape typically prized as a dessert wine.

The end result, the highly perfumed [Grappa Nonino Cru Monovitigno Picolit](#), was a success. It was packaged in beautiful, perfume-like bottles, with the necks wrapped with red yarn and the labels created by Giannola herself. Other grappa producers took notice, and, eventually, the category was reinvented largely as a premium Italian brandy.

In 1984, Benito and Giannola pushed the category even further, unveiling the world's first single-vineyard, single-grape distillate produced using whole grape clusters. Made in limited quantities, the product, known as *ÛE* (pronounced "OO-ay"), introduced unique and particularly intense aromas and flavors.

Rounding out their portfolio of elegant grappas distilled from the pomace of familiar varieties like Chardonnay, Merlot or Moscato, [Amaro Nonino Quintessentia](#) was added to the lineup in 1992. Better known to American consumers as "Amaro Nonino," this bittersweet, herb-scented amaro is made with a portion of *ÛE* that's been aged in barriques. It's since been embraced by bartenders and is a cocktail staple often specified by name. Drinks like the now-classic Paper Plane wouldn't be the same without it.

The newest addition to the portfolio is [L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink](#), introduced in 2018. The sunny yellow, low-alcohol sipper, infused with dried botanicals, fits the current enthusiasm for spritz-style drinks.

Significantly, the label features an illustration that represents Benito and Giannola's three daughters, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta, who now run the business.

"We grew up inside the distillery," says Elisabetta. "It was something very natural for us."

When Elisabetta gave birth to two daughters, it seemed in keeping with the Nonino lineage and the company's future.

"To us, it's normal," says Francesca Nonino, daughter of Cristina and the sixth generation to join the family business. "It's our family. It's always been like this."

"The most important thing is it's run by family," says Francesca, who entered the family business with enthusiasm as soon as the opportunity arose. "I knew I wanted to do this because I had the example of my grandmother and my mom. They were my mentors, but also my family."

She jokes that even relaxed home gatherings are punctuated by work conversations. "On Sunday, my grandmother, she's 80 years old and sends me work email." But that connection means to her that Nonino is more than a business. It's a legacy.

"I'm part of something bigger," she says. "I'm the sixth generation, but I want Nonino to have six more generations. We want Grappa Nonino to be for many, many generations."

For its vision to reframe a traditional spirit for the modern era, *Wine Enthusiast* names Nonino as its Spirit Brand/Distiller of the Year. —Kara Newman

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