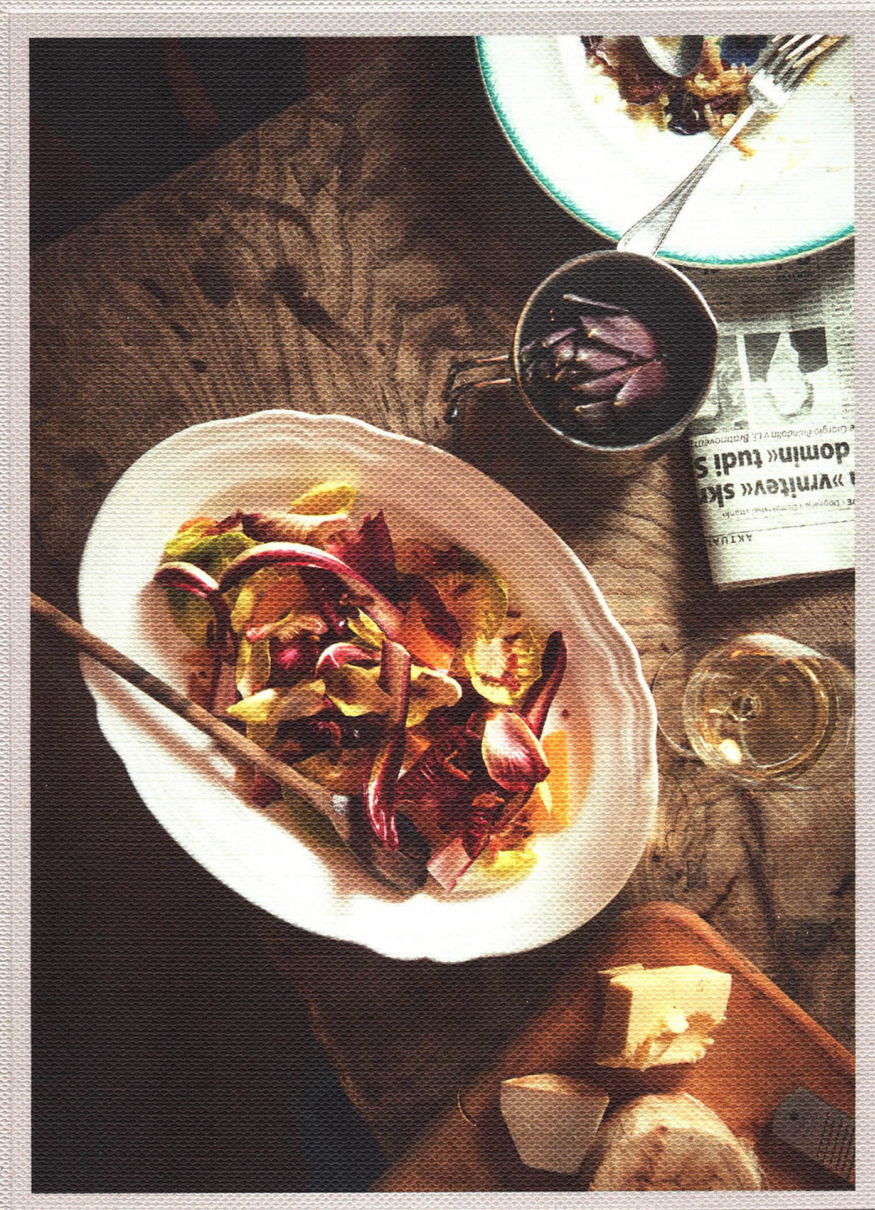


Friuli

FOOD AND WINE



Frasca Cooking from Northern Italy's
Mountains, Vineyards, and Seaside

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Wood and copper vats at Nonino Distillery



In Praise of Firewater: A Note on Grappa

In 1970s Italy, vodka was all the rage—and the world assumed that grappa tasted like gasoline.

Originally, grappa was made by peasants using the pomace (grapes, stems, and sticks left over from the winemaking process; basically, the by-product of the prime material) to create a fortifying liquor for the wintertime. *Mezzadria* (sharecropper living) was the way of life, and grappa was a necessity, not a luxury. Just like the French had marc in Burgundy, the Italians—specifically those in the Veneto, Alto Adige, and Friuli regions—had grappa.

To make grappa, you wait for the August arrival of the pomace from red and white grapes, then distill it in large copper vats (or whatever is available) for three months. The resulting liquid—technically, a neutral brandy—is grappa. Up until the 1960s, grappa producers (who could be almost anyone) could slap a label on a bottle and sell their (somewhat harsh) wares. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Giannola and Benito Nonino changed everything.

The Noninos are a Friulano phenomenon. Although the family owned a distillery dating back to the 1890s, it wasn’t until the late 1960s that Giannola, being a restless and innovative woman, decided the world needed a refined and sophisticated digestif. “Let’s make grappa from the grape!” she said. “Not just using the stems, not just the bits but the skins. And let’s not blend the grape skins, but let’s do single-varietal grappa too!”

What happened next was a huge investment and risk. The Noninos bought up grand cru vineyards all over Friuli, specifically in the Colli Orientali. Here they planted Picolit, Ribolla Gialla, Fragolino, Schioppettino, and Sauvignon grapes *solely for the purpose of making grappa*.

While the rest of the world was buying pomace, they were purchasing vineyards in the Butrio—in the same neighborhood as producers such as Meroi and Pontoni.

The idea to make single-vineyard grappa did not start with Chardonnay or Pinot Noir. It started with a notoriously difficult grape to grow: Picolit. Farmers don’t like to plant it because it has the propensity to abort its grapes midlife, which makes obtaining a healthy yield challenging. But if you do manage to yield enough and then distill it, you’re off to the races. If that wasn’t enough risk, Gianolla also modeled the bottles for their product on an apothecary-style vial—not the heavy-shouldered grappa bottles of the past—custom-built glass bottles that would look beautiful on a woman’s dresser or in a dining room, like a seductive elixir. It did not hurt that the Noninos were close in proximity to the talented glass-blowers of Murano and Venice!

To go a step further, Gianollo contacted the wives of winemakers, asking them to set aside their grape skins. She offered ten times the going rate for those skins in order to incentivize the women to work for themselves and have their own financial independence. The first production was in 1973, and almost the entire inventory went unsold. People were not used to paying high prices for grappa.

Natural Selection: On the Origin of Drinkability

When you open a lot of bottles during a dinner party, what wines are left over at the end? Many times, it seems the well-known, big-score wines are those that remain in glasses and bottles. But the bottle of Schioppettino and that Sauvignon Blanc will have vanished. Why? Friuli wines are more drinkable than wines from other regions. In Friuli, white wines can have weight but not be clumsy, and red wines can be svelte and still completely delicious and intriguing.

But Gianolla showed up at the best events, and the most refined restaurants, with her grappa at the ready. Because of the historically low quality of grappa, the market was open to something new. And soon enough, she won over the world, starting with Italy. The Noninos didn’t open the window for high-quality distillation products, they blew out the whole house!

When we visited the distillery on a rainy spring day, we accidentally went to Benito and Gianolla’s home first. Gianolla came running out in a bathrobe to greet us, jumped into her sports car, curlers still in her hair, and floored it to the distillery. Here, we were greeted enthusiastically (and that’s an understatement) by her three daughters and (many) glass trays of amaro cocktails (see Aperitivo Nonino, facing page). Over three hours, they fed us, poured us (too much) beautiful grappa, and showed us their warehouse, a stunning old airplane hangar with massive copper vats, many with the names of the family’s children labeled on the front.

The distillery and their worldwide domination is a testament to their vision. No family has higher standards. Just as they are the standard bearer for grappa, the Nonino amaros are also blue chip. At Frasca Food and Wine, we built a custom grappa and amaro cart. While it contains a mix of producers, it was in full sincerity custom-built for the objects d’art that are the Nonino bottles. And what’s truly amazing is that you can taste the varietal character of these grapes even after the distillation process. Today, the company is run by the three trailblazing daughters, Cristina, Antonella, and Elisabetta, who, in keeping with their parents’ vision, have made grappa evolve from its humble beginnings to the *Cederina alla regina* (Cinderella of the region).



From left: Elisabetta, Gianolla, Cristina, and Antonella Nonino

APERITIVO NONINO

(Amaro Giannola-Style)

Makes 1 serving

Tastewise this is similar to a *bicicletta* (half parts white wine to Campari), but it calls for grappa and Champagne, so it’s less delicate and more full-throttle. The bad news/good news is that this goes down easy. This was the drink the Nonino family served when we arrived at their home, which was perfect, as it’s fittingly high voltage and elegant.

- Ice cubes
- 1 orange slice
- 1 tablespoon Amaro Nonino Quintessentia
- ¾ cup Champagne or sparkling wine of your choice

In an aperitivo glass, combine a few ice cubes, the orange slice, and amaro and top up with the Champagne. Serve immediately.



POPPY SEED AND CURRANT BISCOTTI

Makes about 20 biscotti

For this biscotti, we have taken a Friulano approach, combining white chocolate, orange, and poppy seeds (which, like many spices, were introduced to Friuli on their way from Trieste, a major spice port, to Vienna and Budapest). We don't like our biscotti to be super-crunchy and dry or, er, *rock* hard. Rather, there's an overall tenderness to these biscotti; they're a little chewy with white chocolate chunks and sweet currants.

¼ cup unsalted butter, at room temperature	½ teaspoon baking powder
¼ cup packed brown sugar	Pinch of kosher salt
1 tablespoon granulated sugar	¼ cup chopped white chocolate
1 egg	2 tablespoons currants
⅔ cup all-purpose flour	Finely grated zest of 1 orange
¼ cup poppy seeds	½ teaspoon vanilla extract

In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, on medium-high speed, cream the butter and both sugars until pale and well combined, about 3 minutes. Add the egg and keep mixing until combined, stopping the machine to scrape down the bowl as needed.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, poppy seeds, baking powder, and salt.

With the mixer running on low speed, add the flour mixture to the butter mixture in three additions—it's okay if the flour is not completely incorporated. Add the chocolate, currants, orange zest, and vanilla and mix until all the ingredients are incorporated evenly, about 30 seconds. Refrigerate the dough (still in the mixer bowl) to rest for 1 hour.

Using your hands, gently shape the dough into an even 1½-inch-diameter log (to measure diameter, poke a cake tester or skewer through the log vertically, marking the point of entry with your finger, then measure the part of the tester that was in the log). Place the log on a plate and freeze for 20 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Transfer the log onto the prepared baking sheet and bake for 30 minutes (the log will have spread out). Let the cookie log cool on the baking sheet for 25 to 30 minutes, then transfer, using a long spatula or chef's knife to support the log, to a cutting board. Using a serrated knife, cut the log on a slight diagonal angle into ½-inch-wide pieces (to get the shape of traditional biscotti).

Lay the slices cut-side down onto the prepared baking sheet and return to the oven to bake until golden brown around the edges, about 15 minutes. Let cool on the baking sheet. The biscotti will keep in an airtight container, at room temperature, for up to 1 week.

