

■ THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER • 2020

\$10.00 US/\$12.00 CANADA

THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

THE EVOLUTION OF A

California **ICON**

Nicole Hitchcock is
head winemaker for
J Vineyards & Winery.

J VINEYARDS & WINERY

OFFERS SPECTACULAR
SPARKLING WINES AND ELEGANT
PINOT NOIRS ELEVATED BY
WORLD-CLASS HOSPITALITY

A Revolution in RAW MATERIAL

HOW THE NONINO FAMILY TRANSFORMED GRAPPA FROM FIREWATER TO A PREMIUM SPIRIT

by Michelle Ball

Three generations of the Nonino family: Giannola (center) with her daughter Elisabetta (left) and granddaughter Francesca (right).



PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



PHOTO: JEREMY BALL

Francesca calls her grandmother Giannola Nonino “the Grappa Queen,” adding that “[she’s] a concentrate of energy and passion. Grappa is her life. She put all of her soul in this product.”

When Francesca Nonino shares the story of her family’s legacy, she does so with such visceral enthusiasm that you can’t help but be entranced. She views the history of Grappa Nonino with a similar sense of reverence. “When I was little, the Nonino story was almost like a fairy tale,” says the sixth-generation brand ambassador, who credits the tremendous efforts of her grandparents Benito and Giannola for elevating Grappa Nonino—and the grappa category as a whole—to the status it enjoys today.

Based in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the family business was established in 1897 by Orazio Nonino, who bartered with local winemakers to exchange a portion of his grappa for their grape pomace. At that time, grappa had a poor reputation as a harsh distillate, but Orazio’s grandson Benito and his wife, Giannola, set out to revolutionize how the spirit was made.

“My grandfather really understood the importance of respecting the raw material” from the outset, says Francesca, who emphasizes that the family continues to exclusively use fresh pomace from sources no farther than a two-hour drive from the facility. By contrast, Italian law allows for the distillation of pomace from the beginning of harvest in August through the end of June the following year. If the pomace is stored for too long and the yeast begins to spoil, however, there’s a higher likelihood that off-flavors will appear in the final distillate. “We are completely against stocking the raw materials. That means that we distill day and night,” Francesca notes, adding that Benito, now 85, still sets his alarm in the middle of the night to cut the heads and the tails of the distillate.



PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM

Jeff Cirace is co-owner of and buyer at V. Cirace & Son, Inc., in Boston, MA.

Serving Fans of Grappa, Both New and Old

Jeff Cirace, co-owner of and buyer at V. Cirace & Son, Inc., in Boston, Massachusetts, is a passionate advocate for grappa: His family’s shop, which was established in 1906, boasts one of the largest selections of grappa in the country with roughly 100 products in stock. Yet the category was long a difficult sell due to its poor reputation. “Distillers like Nonino have really changed that mentality and brought grappa to a whole other level,” insists Cirace. “They’ve upped the game. I have the opportunity to offer a consumer a very elegant style of grappa, which they’ve always thought of as fiery. But that’s just not the case anymore.”

Though in the past Cirace’s customers consisted primarily of older Italians, Americans’ newfound interest in premium imported spirits such as Cognac and single malt Scotch has extended to other categories. “They’ve expanded their horizon and tasted some grappas that are, in my opinion, as good or better than some XO Cognacs,” says Cirace.

That opinion is shared by David Othenin-Gi-

rard, spirits buyer for Los Angeles' K&L Wine Merchants, who says that Nonino "historically set [a] standard that is rarely matched in the category." He also agrees that while there is budding interest in grappa, those willing to purchase a premium product like Nonino are already somewhat familiar with it.

Othenin-Girard notes that the program at K&L focuses on high-quality grappas, as inexpensive bottlings can reinforce the negative stigma long associated with the spirit. This limits the number of producers they can sell, as producing grappa with fresh premium pomace can be highly expensive, but he believes it's worth the tradeoff. "People assume that because you're using the leftovers from wine, you can use anything and it will be good," explains Othenin-Girard, "but that's obviously not true. I think the freshness and the quality of the grapes are so important to the ultimate quality of the product."

Othenin-Girard's favorite label from Nonino is the Picolit Grappa, which he describes as "the crown jewel" of the portfolio if not the whole category. As he puts it, "I think very few grappas made by any producer anywhere get close to the quality and the complexity that that spirit offers."

At Westchester Wine Warehouse in White Plains, New York, wine and spirits buyer Ned Morello also chooses to run an elevated grappa program. "In my mind, grappa is one of the truest distillate expressions you can have. You're trying to get it right right out of the still," says Morello, who prefers the unoaked expressions of the spirit. "To me, Nonino is the gold standard." He names the Nonino il Merlot di Grappa as his personal favorite, describing it as both rich and round. "The fruit really jumps right out of it and the aromatics are fantastic," he adds. "The finish echoes on and on. . . . It's truly one to be savored at the end of the meals."



PHOTO: DOUG YOUNG

Ned Morello is the wine and spirits buyer at Westchester Wine Warehouse in White Plains, NY.



PHOTO: REBECCA PEPLINSKI

Armando Vasquez co-owns La Scarola in Chicago, IL.

As a digestif, grappa is often served at the end of the meal. That's why Armando Vasquez, co-owner of popular Chicago eatery La Scarola—which services a strong Italian clientele—has made after-dinner drinks a fixture on his menu. After trying various grappas over the course of his 22 years in business, he says he chooses to exclusively offer Nonino "because it's a good product [that has] had a really good response from the customers." Like Morello, he also prefers the opulent, slightly sweet mouthfeel of the Nonino il Merlot Grappa.



Sixth-generation brand ambassador Francesca Nonino.

To accommodate the unpredictable influx of pomace during harvest, Nonino boasts 66 artisanal pot stills whereas the average for a distillery of its size is only six to 12. Maintaining its emphasis on quality means partnering only with premium wine producers in addition to sourcing from the family's own estate vineyard; because the fruit is not only farmed at a higher standard but also rarely hard-pressed, the leftover skins contain more juice and therefore retain more flavor.

But the Noninos' most significant innovation was their decision to focus on single-varietal grappas. This had never been done before on a commercial scale, as producers would traditionally combine all of their pomace before distillation. To make an even greater impact, Benito and Giannola chose to start with Picolit, an indigenous grape unique to the region that produces only a few intensely concentrated berries per bunch.

In 1973, the couple set out on their new endeavor asking their winery partners to separate the Picolit from the rest of the pomace. They were immediately met with resistance since this required additional labor and space. But Giannola was persistent and approached the wives of the winemakers for help. "Thanks to the cooperation of women, she was able to

collect the first batch of Picolit pomace," says Francesca, admitting that they also paid extra for the privilege.

When the first drop of Picolit grappa fell from the still, the room was filled with a succulent perfume of acacia honey, quince, and raisins—a bouquet that Francesca notes is nostalgic for Friulanos who grew up with the variety. That was the first time that the Noninos made the connection between the region's terroir and the spirit, a leading principle that guides their process today. "In fact, my grandmother said, 'Benito, Benito, we did it!,'" Francesca recalls of the story that has been passed to her over the years. Since the first production was so limited, they chose to package it in a handblown perfume bottle, indicating the expression was the crown jewel of Grappa Nonino. Today, each bottle also arrives with an identity card that includes the vintage, the bottle number, and the bottling date along with the signature of Giannola, whom Franc-

esca refers to as the "Grappa Queen."

The Noninos are a tight-knit and passionate group who clearly love what they do, and Francesca is committed to protecting that legacy. "I feel that it's in my blood," she says. "All of the female role models in my family worked in the distillery. I feel like I'm part of something bigger." When she herself was learning the craft of distillation, she recalls, her grandfather would tell her, "You need to be able to put the essence [and] the soul of the vineyard in the glass—or you need to change your job."

Continuing to focus on indigenous varietals like Picolit is part of that mission. Cultural artifacts in their own right, they carry a sense of nostalgia that reinforces the family's ability senses to craft a spirit with a true sense of place. "The first time I distilled was a little bit emotional," recalls Francesca. "The thing is, you're immediately able to understand from that first smell the essence of the raw material." ❧

Francesca, Giannola, and Elisabetta Nonino with Terlato Wines team members Kanchan Kinkade and Jamie Wideman (first and second from left) and Josh Wagner (right).



PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM

Nonino on display at V. Cirace & Son, Inc., in Boston, MA.

Tasting Notes

Nonino il Moscato di Grappa

An excellent option for those new to grappa, with distinctive Muscat characteristics of orange blossom, honey, and nectarine. The silky mouthfeel lifts on the finish with flavors of lemon peel and white peach skin.

Nonino lo Chardonnay di Grappa

Light amber in the glass, this grappa offers caramelized notes of toffee and hazelnuts layered with hints of brioche.

Nonino Picolit Grappa

The 40th-anniversary vintage of this rare, prestigious, and complex grappa bursts with notes of blueberry, rosemary, and honey that evolve in the glass with each nosing. A thick viscosity coats the mouth, mimicking an oak-aged spirit.