

PLATINUM

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the cover Nonino family

The grappa revolution

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The story of a great love and an intuition that has changed forever the sector at global level. Nonino, consecrated in January 2020 the best distillery in the world, is a brand but above all a family in which today three enthusiast generations live together.

The Nonino family, from left Elisabetta, Antonella, Benito, Giannola, Francesca and Cristina

In the story that in these pages we will try to synthesize, there is no business strategy designed to conquer market shares. There is no ambition or attempt for redemption. There is, instead, a deep, indeed, granitic conviction that “doing the right thing is a duty”. And the “right thing” is to promote a unique and qualitatively superior product, so that the whole world can share the pleasure of tasting it. We are in the province of Udine, in Ronchi di Percoto, the heart of an industrious Friuli, devoted to its land and traditions. Here the art of distillation has always had only one name: Nonino. The story of Giannola and Benito, of their daughters Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta and today also of the very young Francesca, the most recent entry in the company, is a family and business story which has its roots at the end of the Nineteenth century and which, despite the succession of five generations of enthusiast distillers, has managed to remain perfectly balanced between the awareness of its own potential and the typical, polite local discretion.

Of course, a fundamental ingredient is not missing: that pinch of craziness and fiery determination (very feminine) capable of breaking any known pattern, even in terms of marketing, capable of daring, of always looking for the new while keeping faith, however, with the principles of an ethics that reminds past times but that, fortunately, here it is very, very current. In January 2020 Nonino was elected (first Italian and first brand of grappa in the history of the contest) “Best Distillery in the World” for the year 2019, on the occasion of the 20th edition of the “Wine Enthusiast Wine Star Awards” in San Francisco, the most important international recognition of Wine & Spirits in the world in the field of wine and spirits. But this is just the latest of the many awards won in the long career of the Noninos. And it is also thanks to all this that today, in front of Italian grappa par excellence, we can recognize a “before” and an “after”. “The 'before' - explains Giannola - tells of a 'Cinderella' mostly relegated to warming the spirits of farmers during the rigors of winter or after long and tiring working days, for decades ignored and underestimated by restaurateurs and sommeliers. The 'after', on the contrary, is the exploit of what has become a true 'queen' of spirits. I knew it, I always knew it: it was immediately clear to me that Benito's grappa was an unprecedented product”.

In the temple of grappa

“Grappa was never lacking,” wrote Father David Maria Turoldo in his 1991 eulogy to memories and times lived in the land of Friuli, “My Golden Childhood. And it was true. Once upon a time, grappa belonged to the end-of-meal ritual par excellence. Its dignity, however, was still unexpressed, and it did not manage to conquer a place of prominence among the noblest spirits. That is, of course, until Giannola and Benito triggered a real epochal change. Ronchi di Percoto is the heart of the Nonino world: it is the real “temple of grappa”, as Benito says. Here, at the end of the nineteenth century, Orazio Nonino went around with his itinerant still on wheels distilling grape pomace in the houses of farmers and getting paid with the “mondure”, which means with a part of the product. This until 1897, when he decided to rent a house (the first written document of the family dates back to that date) and to establish his “permanent” distillery there. Here, Antonio Nonino (Benito's father) created the label that reproduces the “fogolar - furlan” (Friulian fireplace), symbol of the Friulian family of the past, gathered around the fire to tell stories and to drink a “drop” of grappa. After Antonio's death, in 1940, Silvia (Benito's mother) took over the reins of the business, becoming, in fact, the first Italian “grappa maker”. It was here that the love story between Giannola and Benito began: a union and a marriage that turn out to be a winning union also under the professional profile. Giannola is fascinated by the passion and dedication with which her husband takes care of his grappa: “Dad's - his three daughters confirm - is an almost alchemic virtue, capable of giving life to a distillate of truly superior quality. Today, Cristina, distiller and responsible for the Italian market, also lives and works here as well as Antonella, responsible for communication, for the German and Austrian markets, for the Nonino Prize and Borgo Nonino and Elisabetta, responsible for the North American market, for personnel, for the insurance sector and for legislative adjustments. Their “personal” distillery was officially inaugurated in 1987 by the Minister of Agriculture of that time, Filippo Maria Pandolfi. The results of their research and tireless experimentation are the products that dare such as, for example, Gioiello, the honey distillate; ÛE, the grape distillate; Frut, the fruit distillate; the Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink, all brands protected by registration. “We have learned to intercept the signals coming from the world of bartenders - explain the Nonino sisters - triggering a sort of revolution in the very concept of grappa. The goal is to attract a young audience inviting them to sharing, to conviviality but also to responsibility”. This is a road that Francesca Nonino, representative of the sixth generation, is enthusiastically following, responsible for web communication and committed to following the United States and Russia together with Elisabetta. Without forgetting that being open to new trends and experimenting does not mean forgetting the art of tradition.

The real innovation

“We had an excellent artisanal product, but it was not enough - recalls Giannola - There was still a lot of mistrust towards this 'poor' distillate”. But what happens in the 1970s is revolutionary. In 1973, Giannola has a winning intuition: “Why don't we differentiate ourselves by distilling the pomace of just one type of grapes?”. The choice falls on the pomace of Picolit, the typical and most renowned grapes of the area. Helping her in the selection of the primary product there are the wives of the local winemakers who, on the other hand, are not very willing to accept this unexpected novelty. And from a very feminine alliance, after a wait made unforgettable by that aura of sacredness that the three little girls of the house barely perceive but respectfully share, the

Monovitigno Nonino is born, today a prestigious registered trademark, yesterday the happy synthesis of an enlightening gamble: to all intents and purposes the revolution of grappa. But something is still missing. A “queen” is not such without a crown. And the crown of Nonino grappa becomes that precious blown-glass phial, which makes it unmistakable, unique and exclusive. Giannola does not give up, however, not even in the face of the persistent reticence that continues to relegate this mystical distillate behind the scenes. And she dares again, even more. “Rather than sell it off, I’ll give it away,” he concludes. Giannola makes sure that Nonino grappa reaches the estimators of international distillates and the most famous personalities of the jet set: Gianni Agnelli, Sandro Pertini, Eugenio Scalfati, Indro Montanelli, Marcello Mastroianni, Sean Connery... And he is right again. The phenomenon explodes: Grappa Nonino Cru Monovitigno (registered trademark) Picolit quickly goes around the world, becoming a real status symbol. “Wine Spectator”, in December 2000, opens with it the article dedicated to world spirits. The “queen” finally its place on the throne. But the Noninos' mission does not stop here.

Let's save autochthonous vines

Pignolo, Schioppettino, Ribolla Gialla and Tacelenghe are autochthonous Friulian vine varieties that the Nonino family would have liked to use in order to widen their experience, respecting the principle of distillation vine by vine. But the lack of their inclusion in the EEC register of vine varieties cultivated in Friuli risks to condemn them to oblivion. With the help of Gino Veronelli, the undisputed master of Oenogastronomy, Giannola and Benito establish an award dedicated to the winemakers who accepted the challenge to save the four Friulian vine varieties. It is 1975. That is the moment of the Literary Prize organized to keep alive the soul of the rural civilization. Percoto also becomes a land of culture and welcomes celebrities such as Ermanno Olmi and Leonardo Sciascia. In 1983 the Nonino International Prize is born: “an act of love towards our land”, underlines Giannola, “which still contributes to pay homage to illustrious and important people in different fields but also to transmit the values of quality, respect for the territory, its traditions and its fruits”. A mission that the Prize still pursues today, despite the pandemic that has imposed the stop to the last two editions. The next appointment is for January 2022.

Borgo Nonino

In Persereano, 500 meters from the distilleries and on the edge of the wood realized by Benito with essences of the Friulian wood, Borgo Nonino is born. It is a group of 6 buildings, the oldest of which date back to the Napoleonic age, equipped with 8 bedrooms. At the Borgo they organize visits to the distillery and the aging cellars with tastings of grappa and distillates.

Award as the best distillery in the world at the “Wine Enthusiast Wine Star Awards”