



The cornerstone of modern grappa - Monovitigno® Picolit Nonino

by Thomas Pennazzi

In the history of distillates it is almost never possible to determine a terminus a quo, from which it is possible to calculate a before and an after. The history of alcohol is vague, foggy, collective, and made more of rumors and perhaps than of concrete facts.

In the history of grappa, however, we have a certainty. The whole building of modern grappa is based on a single bottle, the single grape Picolit of the Nonino family. A real cornerstone which continues to be produced in small quantities, this distillate represents the moment of rebirth of Italian grappa. Being able to hear the story of this happy intuition from the voice of the person who conceived it was a privileged occasion. It is possible to realize that behind the ideas that revolutionize a world there is not always a research office, a marketing genius, or some American stratagem, but a life lived and maybe, a charismatic personality. Giannola Nonino could be the quiet wife of an even more quiet but demanding producer of grappa from Friuli. Those who have known her know that this is not true: she is the creative spirit of the family business, the soul of the success of its products, in which she strongly believes; a volcanic character, where verbal exuberance reflects all the inner passion and entrepreneurial energy demonstrated over the years.

The revolutionary idea was born from a curious frustration. The Noninos, during convivial occasions with Udinese entrepreneurs, used to offer with fair pride some good bottles of their distillates, sure to meet the approval of their guests. On the contrary, the grappa they offered was not served, but it was sadly confined somewhere. Something had to be done. It is useful to remember, for the benefit of younger readers, that grappa in the seventies and until the mid-eighties of last century dragged with it the stigma of being a low-ranking alcoholic beverage, made more to get Alpine soldiers and bricklayers drunk than to please the palate of those who approached it to enjoy it. It often deserved this bad reputation because of its cheap quality, even of famous brands. The dominion of cognac and of the rampant whisky, uncontested for little longer, from which some sophisticated Italians began to import notable expressions, was such as to exclude grappa from the list of fine spirits. Which, according to ancient custom, was produced from assorted pomace; when one wanted to do better, white pomace was separated from the black one. It was the best Italian industry could offer to the public at that time. The blow suffered by the Noninos was therefore the springboard for a brilliant idea that broke with tradition. What was at stake was not so much the quality of the distillate, since there were already many excellent grappa makers around Italy, but the image of the product itself. So, on December 1, 1973, bearing the allure that the half sister of brandy missed, grappa monovitigno was born, not just from a kind of grapes whatever, but from the famous Picolit. The most splendid enological gem of Friuli, to say it theatrically with Carlo Goldoni, which already in his time produced wine praised in all European Courts.

That December, Giannola and Benito put a double trump on the table, capable of not raising the eyebrows of refined drinkers and of marching elegantly dressed around the world as the standard bearer of Friulian wine production, whose destiny they have always cherished. Because this other daughter of the noble Picolit was then followed by a tireless work of international promotion, by the family of distillers from Percoto, so that today grappa is known and appreciated more abroad than in Italy. It is destiny, you might say: no-one prophet at home, and it is also true for cognac in France. It goes without saying that after Nonino's intuition all Italian distillers followed, and nowadays more single varietal grappa is produced than common one, with excellent commercial results. But if it is true that the reputation of an illustrious wine drives the sales of grappa, it is not

true that every great vine variety gives great grappa. You will have to experiment among the thousand varietal expressions of our country in order to understand this little truth. However, it is certain that grappa lovers and all of us must recognize the Noninos that they paved the way for modern grappa with this iconic bottle - proudly called The Legendary Grappa - and pay them the deserved honor by tasting their creation at least once.

THOMAS PENNAZZI

Born among the corn of the Po Valley, some beer flows in his veins; therefore he cannot argue about wine, which he divides in the two elementary categories of drinkable and not. In return since he was young he devoted himself to his spirit, and he has been writing about it on the web using a pen name.