



GRAPPA'S *moment*

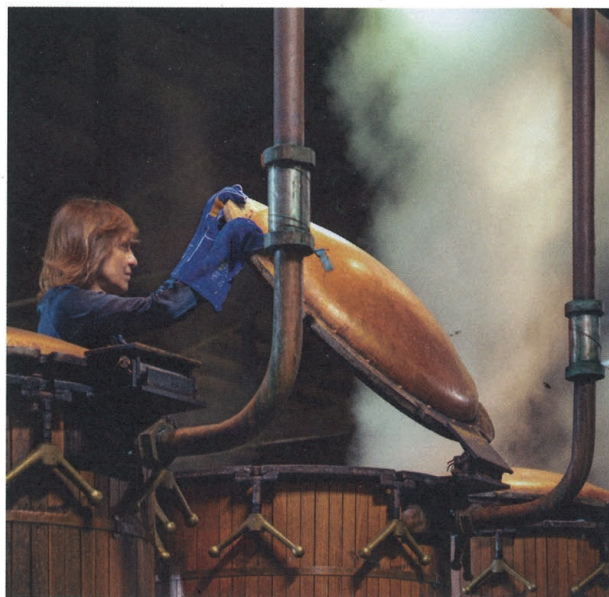
CAN GRAPPA GO MAINSTREAM? NONINO THINKS SO. AND IF THERE'S ANYONE WHO CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN IT'S THE POWERHOUSE WOMEN BEHIND THE BELOVED BRAND.

by Fiorella Valdesolo
portrait by Giulia Iacolutti

Nonino, the artisanal spirit brand based in Friuli, Italy's often overlooked but astoundingly gorgeous Northeast corner, is accustomed to overcoming adversity. In fact, it's part of the brand's DNA. While Nonino is more than a century old, the legacy that has cemented its reputation as a leader in the modern spirits space can be traced back to Silvia Nonino. Part of the third generation of Nonino, Silvia was notably the first master distiller not just for the brand, but in the entire country of Italy. It was the late 1930s, a time when women's dealings with alcohol or any duties outside the home was minimal, but Silvia's position was one born of necessity when her husband, Antonio, was killed during World War II.

"She had to learn how to distill and make liquor because she needed to take care of her family," says Francesca Nonino, part of the sixth generation and an effusive ambassador for her family's brand. And the struggles Silvia faced because of the war were real. Oil and butter were scarce and there were alcohol taxes to be paid so Silvia began separating and selling the grape seeds from the pomace (the grape leftovers from winemaking that is essential for producing grappa).

"Everything was used for creating value in some way," explains Francesca. Besides keeping her family's brand afloat, Silvia also crafted the first recipe for what would become one of Nonino's signature spirits, the Nonino L'Aperitivo, a big, bold, beautiful botanical aperitif with a heady aroma that nods to her prowess in the kitchen. The recipe was revitalized in 2018 as L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink by sisters Cristina, Antonella, and Elisabetta Nonino, who are at the helm of the brand today.



A reverence for quality ingredients and adhering to a time-honored process is what has continued to place Nonino's products in a league of their own. "One of the most important parts of distilling is to start with amazing raw material," says Cristina, a master distiller who learned the art from her father, Benito (he passed away in 2024). Nonino uses only the freshest pomace sourced from local winemakers and distills quickly to preserve its integrity. They also only distill during the grape harvest (8 to 10 weeks of the year, working 24 hours a day) and using an artisanal steam distillation process to achieve an elegant product. Many of their competitors on the other hand, says Francesca, let their ingredients linger in storage before distilling and rely on industrialized production methods. "It's what I call artisanal washing," says Francesca, adding that transparency is part of the Nonino credo.

But while grappa has a long and storied legacy in Italy, it still has an image problem abroad. Grappa has been slower to catch on outside of Italy than amaro, says Sammi Katz, a bar professional and the co-author of the book *Spirited Women*. "Grappa is still considered to be firewater given away to tourists and that's because around 80 percent of it is made with cheap, industrial ingredients," says Sammi. "But when it's made well, grappa is a beautiful representation of Italy and its people." Though if people have been burned by bad grappa, they're hesitant to try it again. "Someone would never do the same thing with wine, have one bad glass and then say they don't like wine, period," says Francesca, adding that much of her job now is reeducating the drinking public in the fine art of grappa, and, most importantly, that not all grappa is created equal.

Francesca predicts that once more people taste a refined grappa like the ones produced by Nonino, palates and minds will change. Much like was done years ago with tequila, which needed its own rebranding for a foreign audience. "What happened for tequila can happen for grappa," adds Francesca. And the growing cocktail culture will help accelerate grappa's popularity. "People want a cultural experience when they're drinking a cocktail, and there is nothing more representative of Italian culture than our spirits," she says. Just as bartender Sam Ross introduced Nonino Amaro to an American audience via his now legendary 2008 Paper Plane cocktail, she believes the same can be done with grappa. The Paper Plane, a simple, four-equal-parts cocktail using bourbon, Aperol, fresh lemon juice, and Nonino Amaro Quintessentia® (as Francesca puts it, "It's not a Paper Plane if you don't use Amaro Nonino!") played no small part in catapulting the amaro category into the mainstream in the U.S. (Nonino Amaro is still the brand's most well-known product here.) And the Noninos hope that their grappa, whose quality speaks for itself, will follow a similar trajectory.

Sammi, for one, already loves using grappa in a Collins instead of gin or as a vodka replacement in an espresso martini. While good grappa like Nonino's is not inexpensive, a little goes a long way when you're using it as an ingredient because of its innate vibrancy, adds Francesca. "You just want to make sure you make it the star of the cocktail," she says. "In the future you can expect grappa to be in some of the most iconic cocktails in the world."

OPPOSITE: PHOTOS BY JUAN HITTERS



LE DONNE

recipe by Sammi Katz & Olivia McGiff
illustration by Olivia McGiff

The name translates to "the women" and is an homage to the many generations of them at the helm of Nonino. Crafted by Sammi Katz, it uses both Nonino's delicate L'Aperitivo and their Amaro, along with aromatic rose and a splash of Prosecco.

1¼ ounces Nonino L'Aperitivo Botanical Drink
¾ ounce Nonino Amaro Quintessentia®
½ ounce fresh lemon juice
¼ ounce rose syrup
1 ounce seltzer
Prosecco, to top
1 lemon twist, for garnish
Rose water in an atomizer, for garnish

Combine all the ingredients, except for the Prosecco and garnishes, in an ice-filled wine glass and stir gently. Top with the Prosecco, garnish with the lemon twist and a spritz of rose water, and serve.

ROSE SYRUP

Makes about 1½ cups

1 cup white sugar
½ cup dried rosebuds

Combine 1 cup water and the sugar in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over low heat. Stir until the sugar fully dissolves. Remove from the heat, then stir in the dried rosebuds. Let steep for 20 minutes, then fine-strain into a nonreactive container and let cool. Store airtight in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

From *Spirited Women* by Sammi Katz & Olivia McGiff. Reprinted by permission of Union Square & Co.