

# SISTEMI&IMPRESA

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Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta Nonino  
Managing directors of Nonino

## When distillation is in the DNA

*The tradition that leads to success*

By Nadia Anzani

COVER INTERVIEW

***The respect for history and the territory. Innovation. And 100% artisanal methods. These are Nonino's winning ingredients. The Friulian distillery known all over the world. Africa included.***

*An interview to Antonella Nonino, Managing Director and Responsible of External Relationships and Marketing of Nonino.*

Without history there is no future. In the Nonino distilleries this is something they have understood quite well, so much that they have made it one of the pillars of the success of the Company based in Percoto, a small town south of Udine, on the market since 1897.

Passion, determination, tradition, love for the territory, innovation and culture are the levers that have made this family company the synonym of quality in the world. Thanks to them, in fact, grappa has had a positive repositioning, passing from a second class spirit – produced from pomace, the leftovers of winemaking – to a refined distillate, loved by opinion leaders from all over the world.

The turning point was the year 1973 when Benito and Giannola Nonino, after years of tests and experiments, had the intuition of distilling only the pomace of the grapes of the Picolit vine variety (and not mixing several varieties as it had been done until then), immediately after fermentation, using their batch artisanal still. The Monovitigno was the beginning of the Nonino revolution in which an important divulgation role was played also by Luigi Veronelli, among the main figures in the valorization of the Italian wine and food heritage.

Today in the company there is the fifth generation: Antonella, Cristina and Elisabetta, the daughters of Benito and Giannola, an iron couple still at the helm of the firm, who have been able to hand down to their heirs the right amount of determination and competence to lead the company with determination and face the international markets. And so far they have not disappointed the expectations: it is enough to say that in a period when the consumptions have

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moves top down, with its 35 employees, 24 for of whom are women, the Grappa company closed the year 2015 with a turnover of 14.5 million Euro and the first four months of 2016 has a growing positive trend. "This is due also to the strong presence we have abroad", says Antonella who's in charge of the marketing and communication department. "50% of the turnover is made in foreign markets. So far we export in 59 Countries in the world; the Eurozone and North America are traditionally the most important areas, but we are doing well also in South Africa, for example, and also in Ruanda and Angola".

### **Grappa in Africa is a surprise ...**

True, and it is a surprise also for us: in the global world it is important to explore all the markets and Africa is a very interesting Continent.

### **Moreover your grappa is unique. Which were the steps that brought you to be the number one of the sector?**

Research and innovation first of all, and a distillation 100% with the artisanal method, whose production stages are followed personally by the family members. A strict work that led us to the creation of Grappa Monovitigno in 1973 and in 1984 to the creation of  $\dot{U}$ E the Grape Distillate (The ministerial Authorization for the distillation of grapes was granted upon specific request of the Nonino distilleries). In an age when profit seems to be the dominant measure of every success, our family's target has never been earnings, but the commitment for a constant improvement, for the extreme research of quality, for innovation, for the production of the best grappa in the world, respecting the tradition, the territory and its culture.

Principles that our parents inherited by their families and that we sisters have breathed since childhood.

### **How have you turned them into practice?**

Our production process is unique and consists in collecting fresh pomace on the same day it is pressed and fermenting it immediately in stainless steel tanks. Fermentation is immediately followed by distillation in batch steam stills created by our father Benito. This means a huge investment in terms of energy and equipment because to carry on this unique production method we realized five artisanal distilleries all under the same roof. If we speak of aged grappa, Nonino distillates go through a natural ageing in barriques and small casks under permanent control by the customs agency and are bottled without color additives.

### **An *ante litteram* farm-to-table production ...**

Exactly, but also a way to give value to our territory and to make it known all over the world. Because with the innovation of the Monovitigno Nonino, our family has made grappa and Friulian vine varieties known and appreciated in the entire world, even if at the beginning it was not easy to convince the wine growers to separate the pomace by the vine variety as for them it was just a waste of time in a very hard working moment as the harvest is. But we, to distil the Monovitigno, needed to collect separated pomace.

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### **What do you mean?**

My parents had realized that to have high quality grappa it was necessary to start from a fresh primary product first of all. This meant establishing a constant relationship with the suppliers: as I have already mentioned the producers were reluctant to supply us the Picolit grape pomace separated from the others; they were not used to such a procedure and turned up their nose and my mother, to convince them, paid that pomace even 15 times more than the cost of normal pomace. Ours is a transformation activity and therefore the relationship with the land is vital: since 1989 we have also planted our own vineyard in Buttrio to have grapes grown for distillation and produce very high quality grappas.

### **Have you ever thought of diversifying in wine as you have your own vineyard?**

It could be interesting and, telling the truth, we are testing the quality of the wine produced in our vineyard with tastings and trials. But we haven't gone further. Also because at the moment we are deeply involved in our core business and this requires a lot of energies. Consider that we personally follow all the production and all the activities to make our distillates known.

### **What do they consist in?**

Tastings and presentations of our products also abroad. Making culture of the product, and explaining it in first person, especially in foreign countries, was a very important choice for our growth. And then our company is always open for who wants to know grappa, taste it, and see the manufacturing process. People must understand what there is behind the quality of our products. To know the people who work, and look at the Noninos in their eyes.

### **Being committed in first person, then ...**

Sure. Making the market understand that behind the product there is always a family has always been very important. Not by chance my mother asked Oliviero Toscani to take a picture of the whole family with a bottle of grappa in our hands. The target was to personalize the product, to give it a soul, to allow it to be coupled with faces. And it was a success.

### **A strategy that later was followed by other entrepreneurs.**

Correct. Our mother was a forerunner of direct communication. To make people know the values behind which the product is born, which in our case are tradition, quality, history and family. To know one's roots deeply is important also to continue on a marketing strategy that reflects the story of the Nonino and that can make culture of distillation giving transparent information about grappa.

### **How much do you invest in research and development every year?**

4.5% of the turnover. But I think it is important to remind that our family has always reinvested the profits in the company, to make it sound and continue to invest and make innovation.

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### **Which are the latest products born with the Nonino brand?**

Grappa Nonino AnticaCuvée, a unique reserve aged in casks and barriques for five years and distilled with artisanal method and bottled without color additives.

### **How important is the transparency with the final customer?**

Transparency is crucial and the label should contain all the information on the product: how it is distilled and by whom. Unfortunately in Italy there aren't regulations that rule the production so that there are many bottlers that introduce themselves as producers, but actually they buy already made grappa.

### **You have made a lot of innovation also on the side of communication linking your brand to a prize that has become a synonym of culture, and not only in Italy. How was the idea conceived?**

The Nonino prize was born in 1975 with the aim of saving a series of Friulian autochthonous vine varieties that were dying out. Our parents decided to establish an acknowledgement in money for who grew these vine varieties and to promote their cultivation even if that clashed with the laws of that time. The initiative wanted to draw the attention on the theme to obtain the acknowledgement of the autochthonous vine varieties and the authorization to replant them. In fact three years after they managed to obtain the authorization of the European Community to replant Schioppettino, Tazzelenghe and Pignolo, later joined by Ribolla Gialla, varieties that today are a pride of Friulian wine-growing. In its DNA the Nonino Prize has a strong social value and of valorization of rural civilization and of the territory.

### **Later, however, it was extended to the cultural environment and in the years you have even anticipated five Nobel Laureates.**

Yes, in 1977 the Technical Prize was joined by the literary section with Mario Soldati as the president of the jury. This year we have reached the 41<sup>st</sup> edition. The jury of the international prize, today presided by Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2002, and composed by Peter Brook, Edgar Morin, Antonio Damasio, John Banville, Claudio Magris and Ermanno Olmi (just to quote some names) delivered the International Prize to the Swedish novelist-philosopher Lars Gustafsson, the prize *Master of our time* to the French sociologist Alain Touraine and the Nonino Prize to the project Born to Read that promotes reading for children until six years of age. The *Nonino Risit d'Aur* technical prize was awarded to Marco Simonit and Pierpaolo Sirch, "Grape Preparers", who conceived an innovative manual pruning of the grapevine and are appreciated at international level. Simonit and Sirch, with their wonderful team, have in their hands some of the most important vineyards in the world. They are unique people who treat the vineyards with their heart and great passion.

### **Just like your family, always strong and united. Have you ever quarreled?**

We discuss a lot, but in a constructive way and we wish it will go on like this. The strength of our family lies in having a shared dream that goes beyond working: making the best grappa in the world with the addition of a strong knowledge of the art of grappa distillation and a tradition that

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we want to hand on to the new generations. Grappa is a part of the family and we are happy when it is appreciated on the tables everywhere in the world.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of working side by side with your family?**

The advantage is that there are more ideas. The difficulty is finding a shared vision to carry on. But the best thing is living everything as a conquest for the good of the company. This is why, in spite of the many discussions, at the end we always come to a decision to carry on, day by day, with determination, as our parents taught us.

### **Respect and ethics, in short, as the keys to proceed with success in this age so deprived of reference points for everybody, entrepreneurs included, as Alain Touraine, one of your prizewinners, highlights ...**

Yes, without forgetting creativity and our roots.

### **ANTONELLA NONINO**

Antonella Nonino is Responsible of the External Relationships and Marketing of the family company and of the International Nonino prize, a cultural, literary and gourmet acknowledgement born 41 years ago. She follows some foreign markets, among which Germany, the United Kingdom and the Asian market. In the company at her side, besides her parents Giannola and Benito, there are her sisters: Elisabetta, Administration Manager of the company, Responsible of Human Resources and of the Russian, North American and Brazilian markets, and Cristina, Responsible of the distillation and of the Italian market trade. All the three sisters have also the role of Managing Directors of the company.

### **Photo page 4**

*Monovitigno and Riserva grappas aged in barriques and small casks, 0% coloring agents*

### **Photo page 6**

*The Nonino sisters in the ageing cellars: from left Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta*

*The phase of the head cutting of the distillation with artisanal method of Nonino Grappas*

### **Photo page 7**

*Benito Nonino in the distillery*

*Giannola Nonino with Grappa Monovitigno Moscato*