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Innovation Knocks, But At The Back Door Of The Farmhouse: Giannola Nonino And The Transformation Of Grappa



Giannola Nonino, far left, and her family transformed the grappa industry. Photo Credit: Cathy Huyghe

It was the mid-1970s in northern Italy, and Giannola Nonino had a business idea that would revolutionize an industry: to transform the ragged, industrialized distillation of grappa production into something unique, artisanal, and very specific to its origin. To do that, she needed local grape growers to separate their harvest by individual varietal, a practice that is commonplace today but was rare back then.

She asked at door after door, farmhouse after farmhouse, grower after grower. Everyone said no. In fact, many laughed at her idea.



Giannola Nonino responded with a stroke of innovation and savvy, one of several such instances that would come to characterize the turning points of her company's history: she went around to the *back* of the farmhouse, and knocked on the kitchen door where the farmers' wives answered.

She offered to pay them ten times the going rate for their pomace, at a time when women in agricultural areas in particular earned little money of their own. (Pomace is

Cent'anni della Famiglia Nonino

the skin, pulp, seeds, and stems of grapes left over after they're pressed for wine. Grappa is made by distilling the pomace.) All they had to do was keep the pomace aside in single-varietal batches.

One of the farmer's wives said yes, and then another, and then another, and the experiment took off. Today the network of grape growers who contribute to the Nonino grappa brand has grown to more than 350, and Nonino is regarded as a premium grappa producer and one of Italy's most prestigious native brands.

The trajectory of Giannola Nonino's success can be plotted using those moments of savvy insight as "landmarks." Knocking on back doors in order to talk to farmers' wives was an early example, but she was inspired to make grappa in the first place because of a pride in her locality, and in her home region, that was instilled by her father.

"My father was sensitive and well-read, and he studied the customs of Friuli," she said. "That's how I learned about the land and the indigenous grapes."

Her father also cultivated a sense of self-respect and determination in her family that hinged on what Nonino calls "education," but it's a concept not limited to schooling. "We learned how we should behave in the world," Nonino said. "We weren't just frivolous little girls as the others believed. Our identity was in our intelligence. If we were determined and saw that our projects could succeed without hurting anyone, we knew we could overcome any obstacle."

Nonino was born into a post-war Italy full of obstacles to the entrepreneurial spirit, but she was also alert to the trends and opportunities around her. Nonino's daughter Elisabetta explains that after two world wars, the world began to learn about grappa. Demand increased, and in the 1960s and 1970s, many distilleries changed from small to large-scale, more industrial production. Giannola, with her father's sensitivity to local customs, was inclined to zig when the others were zagging.

Also in the 1970s and 1980s, Elisabetta Nonino said, "the psychological shift was away, finally, from mere survival. You saw it in the food scene too. Restaurants emerged from trattoria into something more refined. Pasta and cheese differentiated too." With grappa, the differentiation traveled from generally red or generally white pomace to – in Nonino's case – the pomace of individual grapes.

It was the effort to preserve indigenous varieties that led to what may have been Giannola Nonino's most striking and impactful innovation of all. In the 1970s she had to fight for lesser-known indigenous grape varieties – the same grapes she wanted to use in her artisanal grappa – to be listed by the government as heritage products, so that farmers would be authorized and incentivized to grow them again. Her efforts were successful and those indigenous varieties were likely saved from extinction but, more importantly from a branding perspective, the idea of the Nonino Prize was born.

The Nonino Prize was established in 1975 as a technical prize, Nonino explained, to recognize people who were committed to growing and sustaining those lesser-known indigenous varieties. In 1979, the Prize was expanded to the literary realm, to writers and journalists who documented the realities of farm life in Friuli. In 1983, the Prize was opened to international recipients. Over time four recipients of the Nonino Prize have also won the Nobel Prize. It was a brilliant stroke of ongoing publicity for Nonino's brand, that also sealed its relationship to its origins of preserving what's unique and typical of a particular area.

Note: I am grateful to Jeremy Parzen, who translated my interview with Giannola Nonino.