

Centoventi anni della Famiglia Nonino

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GRAPPA. A REFINED LEGEND

NONINO

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In Italy grappa for long time had the reputation of a rural spirit and of "grappaccia", obtained at the best from the leftovers neglected by everybody. Today, on the contrary, it has become a valued luxury manufacturing product.

“With the little money earned by digging the hotel garden, Peduzzi had taken a solemn hangover. [...] In the cellar near the bridge they served him three more grappas on credit because, on the work of that afternoon, he was very mysterious but he seemed also quite self-confident”. This is the beginning of the tale *Out of Season* by Ernest Hemingway, written in 1932 in Cortina d'Ampezzo, 21 years before the visit of the writer to the homeland of Grappa, that's to say Friuli, where he was a guest of the Nonino family, today well known for the production of Grappa in Ronchi di Percoto, a renowned brand that this year celebrates the 120 years of activity.

Hemingway was very well acquainted with Grappa still in the First World War on the Italian front, but also during his trip to Italy in 1923 and then during the stays in Venice in 1948 and 1954. Although grappa in those years was not yet a beverage as refined as it is today and not very well known outside the borders of Italy, the production of the Noninos worked busily so that the name of this spirit and its brand became known and appreciated all over the world.

Those who know refined drinks are aware that Grappa is the Italian brandy, obtained from the leftovers of the wine production, i.e. the pomace made of grape skins, seeds, and the little residual pulp and juice. For a long time this beverage was considered as a rural spirit, called "Grappaccia" and obtained at best by the leftovers neglected by everybody; in short it was considered a “distillate for the poor extracted from the wastes of wine casks” or “a harsh drink for hard men”.

Even Hemingway, accustomed to rudeness, described Grappa as a “rustic alcoholic combat drink, something hard to drink before launching in the battle”. Therefore, in his tale grappa was also used as an economic drug for the local drunkards, constantly urged to like this stimulating beverage, also thanks to its low cost.

However, a radical breakthrough occurred at the beginning of the Seventies, when the producers of Grappa Nonino revisited the whole concept of this spirit, perfecting the product and finally turning it into a valued artisanal luxury product. As the whole process was neither forced nor transient, boutique grappa soon found itself among the finest spirits in the world.

The great transformation of grappa

didn't bring to the limelight only versions of excellence, but it also succeeded in supplanting almost completely poor quality and low cost ones. While all the bars in the world next to the excellent

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labels of single malt whiskies there are also generic ones, whereas fine vodka, the famous Popov, and grappa are present almost as a rule only in special boutique versions.

One of the main protagonists of this revolution was the Nonino brand. In fact, in 1973 Benito Nonino and his wife Giannola, the fourth generation of the family managed distillery, created what in the world of luxury grappa became a standard, therefore a beverage no longer produced by any grape available but rather by a single variety of vines. The first grappa to be produced according to this principle was that from *Picolit*, a variety of little known local grapevine.

This simple grappa distilled from a single grape (which will conquer the celebrity with the name of *Monovitigno*) aroused an extraordinary interest, so much that today almost all the main brands of Grappa propose products of this kind offering an incredible variety of mono varietal grappa. *Picolit* grappa is still today one of the diamond tips of the Nonino offer, marketed in a bottle of great value in the form of a small sphere with a narrow cylindrical neck. The refinement of its contents matches that of the packaging because the Nonino is synonymous of the extreme and severe ascetic elegance.

The whole story had a modest start in 1897 when Orazio Nonino founded the distillery in Ronchi di Percoto, a small town near Udine. Orazio worked as a farmer at the farm of the German family Kechler in San Martino di Codroipo not far from Udine. Ernest Hemingway, who was twice a guest at the villa, had the opportunity to taste Orazio's grappa right in the distillery of the Nonino family.

The Kechlers owned vineyards and produced wine

And the scraps were given to the farm workers to distill the grappa necessary for their consumption. Orazio seized the opportunity and started the commercial production with only one still. The activity was further developed by his descendants Luigi, Antonio and, finally, by Benito and Giannola, who together with their three daughters – Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta – manage the company.

“When our parents took over, grappa Nonino already enjoyed a reputation of respect, but they soon realized that its potential was not exploited at the best. In fact, grappa is a typical beverage of northern Italy, with very stiff winters, which was linked to the peasant culture and considered a very strong raw product. So mum and dad began to experiment in order to improve its quality and obtain mono-varietal grappa from the local Picolit grapes, famous for the refined notes reminiscent of figs, apples quince, honey, bread crust... They learned that the aroma and taste of the grappa produced from the skins and seeds of the individual grape varieties, such as Picolit, Moscato, Merlot and Chardonnay, are very different. This was a great revolution in the world of distillates which had always been obtained from the leftovers of mixed vines, so much that the market was even shocked” – says Antonella Nonino, public relations manager at the family company.

To emphasize that it was really special grappa,

Benito and Giannola decided to bottle their product with the Nonino brand inside unusual bottles labeled with the indication of the year of the harvest, the total quantity produced and other data of this type. At the same time they began to develop special relationships with wine producers to make sure that their grappa could count on the freshest primary products.

Today, in fact, the Nonino Company, immediately after the pressing of the grapes (already on the same day) carries the skins and seeds left to its own distillery and begins fermentation in steel containers to prevent the deterioration of the primary product. After a few days they proceed to

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the distillation in small copper stills; distillation that is carefully controlled and carried out in a completely artisanal way. This phase is supervised by Benito, eighty years old, and his daughter Cristina. After distillation, to let the spirit acquire a harmonious taste, it must rest for a period ranging from three months to one year before being bottled.

“All the freshness of the primary product is transferred to the distillate, giving it an extraordinary flavor. The Moscato, for example, smells intensely of flowers, while the Merlot spreads a particularly rich and elegant fragrance. Such refined grappa, besides the fresh primary product, requires also a precise fermentation and an artisanal distillation. Many manufacturers allow the formation of methyl alcohol, thus losing the organoleptic properties, the freshness and the typical characteristics. In this way they compromise grappa when later they have to proceed with the demethylation treatment. For this reason we believe that our method is optimal to obtain excellent grappa” – says Antonella.

In 1984 Benito and Giannola first launched on the market

another novelty called *ÙE*, a distillate obtained from whole bunches rather than only from the leftovers of wine production. For this new product, they used the most diverse varieties of grapes such as Verduzzo, Moscato... It is therefore a distillate similar to our *lozovača* (grape distillate) with the difference that Nonino, for *ÙE* uses first quality ripe grapes, whereas for brandy they use not yet ripe grapes which do not have enough sugar content for the production of wine.

The distillate *ÙE*, which cannot be called grappa because of its extraordinary softness, is ideal for a long maturation in barriques, and is very popular in countries where there is no tradition of grappa.

After Picolit, among the Monovitigno Grappas of the Nonino, many others appeared, including Ribolla, Fragolino, Moscato, Schioppettino, Merlot, and Chardonnay... A further step was represented by aged Grappa, called Riserva, such as Chardonnay Barrique Riserva Antica. The maturation of Nonino Grappa is completely natural, without the addition of color additives, and takes place exclusively in the new barriques and in those where first sherry was stored. Grappa is also aged for several years (there are versions 5, 14, 18, 19 and 28 years of maturation).

As in Friuli, once an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the productions of Fruit distillates were also known, even the Nonino production offers some, such as Slivowitz, Williams Grappa and Kirsch. The company also produces some specialties like the liquor Prunella, obtained with the juice of plums with the addition of the distillate of the same fruit, the honey distillate of the Amaro.

Although Nonino today offers a few dozen

products, among which the different varieties of grappa predominate, the owners are proud that as much as 60% of the production is represented by Grappa Tradizione, the version similar to the one produced by Orazio Nonino, but more refined and adapted to modern tastes.

Today, the Nonino sells half of its production in Italy and the other half in the rest of the world, in 70 countries, among which a particular position is taken by Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Also exports to the United States and Canada increase, therefore the future of the brand is more than radiant.

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“You see, actually, our distillery consists of five small distilleries, or five groups of stills, one for every member of the family, with the difference that our mother has a larger number of stills, one for every grandchild. The future of the family activity is therefore assured. We are delighted that the whole world has fallen in love with Nonino but for us it is even more important the role played in promoting the culture of Grappa” – concludes Antonella Nonino.

Box 1

Grappa Nonino, though incomparable from the quality point of view with valid industrial typologies, in the supermarkets is sold at 12-13 Euro for half-liter bottles (poor quality industrial grappa is sold at 6-7 Euro). The cost of mono-varietal grappa such as Moscato or Merlot varies between 20 and 25 Euro, Antica Cuvée is sold at about 35 Euro, whereas Picolit and mono-varietal varieties of long ageing can reach the price of some hundred Euro.

Two and three liter bottles are particularly beautiful, but also the wonderful six-liter imperial, which often adorns bar shelves.

Among the various packages, the crown goes to Picolit UE, whose bottle was designed by the famous Venetian company of Venini Glass Makers (there are also Riedl and Baccarat versions).

Here (in Croatia) some varieties of Nonino Grappas can be purchased in the supermarkets of the Konzum chain and in the Delikatese Bonkulović store in Zagreb.

Box 2

Noble Amaro

In the latest years, Nonino has achieved a great success with the Amaro Nonino Quintessentia, even if it is an old and truly unique product. In fact, this liqueur has been welcomed with wide open doors in the world of aperitifs and cocktails thanks to the return of classic beverages.

This bitter can be drunk straight or with ice cubes or with chopped ice and mint. It has inspired several *mixologists* well known in various parts of the world for their excellent cocktails, such as the *Nonino Frozen* similar to Caipirinha (mixologist Davide Girardi), *Paperplane* with the addition of Aperol and Bourbon (mixologist Sam Ross, New York), *Beati Fumo* with Laphroig whisky (mixologist Mike Ryan, Chicago), *Negronino*, a version of the Negroni cocktail (mixologist Mexence Traverse Hong Kong), *the Reanimator* with rye whiskey (conceived by the cocktail historian David Wondrich and recommended by Eric Asimov, the main wine critic of The New York Times), *Sigaro Nonino* an infusion with cigars (mixologist Tony Country, Hong Kong)...

“The recipe was invented in 1933 by my grandfather Antonio. At the beginning it was called Amaro Carnia, after the historical-geographic region of the northeast of Friuli. It is a classic recipe for bitters that is obtained by the infusion of more than 25 medicinal plants, enriched with a small quantity of grappa. When my parents started the production of UE, a softer distillate than grappa and aged in barriques, they began to use it to enhance the bitter. Aged UE has a special taste that truly ennobles the bitter” – explains Antonella Nonino.

Box 3

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The Nonino Prize

Every year, in January, the Nonino Company organizes the Nonino Prize event for literature, divided into four categories Nonino Risit d'Aur Prize, Nonino Prize, International Nonino Prize and Nonino Prize Master of our time.

The jury is composed by distinguished personalities such as the independent scientist James Lovelock (97 years old), the drama and film director Peter Brook and the film director Ermanno Olmi. The winners of this year are the Italian archaeologist Isabella Dalla Ragione (Nonino Risit d'Aur Prize), the British Professor of Mediterranean Archaeology Cyprian Broodbank (Nonino Prize 2017), the French writer Pierre Michon (Nonino International prize) and the political philosopher John Gray (Nonino Prize – Master of our time).

The prize draws its roots from the research dedicated to the ancient autochthonous vine varieties of Friuli for the distillation of the pomace with which Benito and Giannola Nonino would begin the production their mono-varietal grappas. In November 1975, in order to “stimulate, reward and have officially recognized the ancient autochthonous vine varieties of Friuli” and preserve the biodiversity of the territory, the Nonino family established the prize called Nonino Risit d'Aur. In 1977, with the clear aim of placing the problem of rural civilization in the foreground, it was joined by the Nonino Prize.

The Italian writer and director Mario Soldati was appointed the chairman of the jury. Since 1984, the year when the prize was expanded with the international section, 34 literary prizes have been awarded to writers from 23 countries. The importance of the Prize is highlighted by the fact that the event enjoys extensive television coverage by RAI and that five Nonino prize winners later won the Nobel Prize as well.