

stream

ANTONELLA NONINO

BLONDE, RADIANT SMILE, ENTHUSIAST IN HER TONE AND MANNERS,
a volcano of passion, Antonella Nonino in her life shows the courage and the initiative typical of Italian entrepreneurs.

by Costanza Romagnoli

She was a member of the jury of the Cartier Women's Initiative Award
which for over ten years has supported innovative and sustainable projects by women entrepreneurs coming from different areas of the world.

While remembering and telling the story and tradition of her family, always based on craftsmanship, she immediately wants to make clear that, even if this time it is her turn, it is as if her sisters were speaking too. "We are somehow three in one, we have always shared out tasks and we learned to work in the company when we were children, we can say we were born in the pomace! Elisabetta, the most reserved of us, takes care of the export, in particular of the US market and of North America, and supports our father in the management of the 40 hectares of experimental vineyard planted in Buttrio in 1989. Cristina, maybe the liveliest, follows our father in the distillation and takes care of the Italian market. I, with our mother Giannola, take care of the marketing and the press office and follow the Nonino Prize. I am a curious and enthusiast person and I consider myself lucky because through grappa I have met extraordinary people and extremely different worlds". The story of the Nonino distillery contributed to the creation of extraordinary inventions that were fundamental not only for the Nonino family, but for the entire world of distillates and in particular grappa. Everything started with great-great-grandfather Orazio, the founder of the Nonino family, who in 1897 established in Ronchi di Percoto the premises of his distillery which, until then, had existed as an itinerant still assembled on wheels. Their grandfather then, sharecropper of the Kechler family in Friuli, with his still went to other families of farmers to distill the pomace, considered a waste product of winemaking. For the families of the farmers, on the contrary, it was a meaningful resource because they obtained grappa that became an important part of the family economy; it was a medicine and a tonic against weariness. According to the New York Times: "Grappa was little more than a cheap, portable form of central heating for peasants in northern Italy... Fancier Italians, and most foreigners, disdained it. But that was before the Noninos of Percoto came to prominence". "The date that marked the turning point was December 1st 1973", says Antonella, "when our parents revolutionized the way of producing and introducing creating the single varietal Grappa, Monovitigno® Nonino, distilling the pomace of Picolit grapes separately. It was such an innovation that just a few months ago it was the object of a study published by the London School of Economics Business Review, were it is told how Benito and Giannola Nonino turned Grappa from 'Cinderella into a Queen of the

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Market'. A story of successes that started, as it often happens, with hard work and a bit of genius. "Our father Benito has always followed the distillation process and, taking our mother with him in the distillery, he made her fall in love with this world and this extraordinary product. Our mother had and still today has a great passion, a remarkable physical resistance and unconditional love for her territory and her roots. When she joined the family, her mother in law managed the distillery. Our grandmother had become a widow very young; alone and with her little children she managed the distillery, the house and the family.

When my mother Giannola got married, in the sixties, she started to follow our father in the distillery, carving out her space and falling so much in love with the art of distillation and of grappa that she was appointed Cavaliere del Lavoro by the President of the Republic in 1998. Our mother, when she entered the company, realized that when she brought grappa as a present to the families of her friends, it was never offered together with the other great international distillates: cognac, whisky, and vodka but it was relegated in the kitchen. My parents did an extraordinary work, after years of experimentations, always distilling 100% with artisanal method in copper batch steam stills, revolutionized the world of grappa". The grappa created from Monovitigno® was extraordinary, the problem was that nobody knew it, and then Giannola got an idea off spontaneous marketing. She invited and personally went to make grappa known in wine shops and to customers: she created contacts and organized meetings. It was the Seventies, the period of the economic boom and the Italians started to discover the pleasure of sitting at a table, to share good things together with friends and family. Giannola had the intuition that the packaging has to be aesthetically elegant and communicate the preciousness and quality of the content.

And over the years, with our father, she has managed to make Grappa appreciated in the global markets.

In the Nonino family team work has always been fundamental.

Photo legend

From left: Cristina Nonino, Antonella Nonino, Benito Nonino, Giannola Nonino, Elisabetta Nonino

Antonella and her sisters knew that going to the distillery meant staying with their mother because she was always occupied with new experiments or to receive the customers in her office. Besides the desire of staying with their mother, however, it was also necessary to give a concrete support, especially during the harvest period.

"When the office was closed, the phone rang at home, so we had to give our little contribution answering during the weekends or taking note of the loads of pomace that had to be withdrawn very fresh from the suppliers. We grew up next to our job. In my times we started the school year in October and the month of September we were still on full holiday. We, on the contrary, were always busy, at least to welcome mom and dad with the table well laid when they came back from work". Over the years, growing up, the complaints and snorts because we had to work slowly turned into the awareness we had gained precious experiences. Antonella and her sisters managed to give a more and more active contribution, starting with the support with the languages. Giannola and

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Benito have always asked to be helped in translation both for the customers and the suppliers, and as they knew how important it was to know different countries and languages, they sent their daughters to study abroad. “It was very fascinating to follow, with our father, the purchases of the barriques and the small casks for the ageing of grappa; today we have 2015 in different types of wood in our cellars, under seal and surveillance by the Customs and Monopoly Agency. Our aged Grappas and Riserva are bottled after natural ageing, without color additives. In New York, Elisabetta and I, who traveled together, alternated studying with tastings on the weekends. The US market is very important and it appreciates grappa and keeps Made in Italy products into very high consideration. During the day my sister and I parted, we went to visit several customers and then we met again for dinner. I remember the visit to Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago, to the Metropolitan museum rather than the Guggenheim in New York. All this allowed us to travel a lot and, at the same time, to promote and make Grappa Nonino known. Traveling and visiting new markets has become a priority for the company; over the years even the markets of Asia and Africa opened. Grappa has given us the chance, also through the Nonino Prize created by our parents in 1975, to meet great personalities of the world of culture and art”.

In the beginning, the Nonino Prize was established with the aim of protecting and having officially recognized some autochthonous vine varieties that were dying out, like Schioppettino. Then it was extended also in the field of culture, with the literary section: at first journalists and then men of letters, gaining international importance. “I happened to meet Peter Brook and, being fond of drama, it was an immense joy, I also had the luck of interviewing him for my thesis”.

“The Nonino is still today a family company”.

Antonella explains us. “The members of the family personally follow the stages of the production process to guarantee an extremely high quality of the distillate”. So far they are a company consisting of 35 people, 26 of whom are women. “Our father has always said that women are more strict and precise”, Antonella smiles. The Nonino Distilleries consist of five artisanal distilleries, each with twelve copper batch steam stills, one for each member of the family and Giannola’s actually has 18 plus one and they are dedicated each to one of the grandchildren, as a sign of continuity, good wish and spur. Great strictness in the production and great transparency in the label, this is their way of operating. “We are proud of being able to offer really unique grappa”. The new generations are starting to come close as well. “I have two daughters: Sofia and Gaia, Cristina has three children: Chiara, Davide and Francesca, and Elisabetta has three daughters: Caterina, Costanza and Beatrice. Francesca has already started to support us and carry on the use that sees grappa Nonino as the protagonist of fabulous cocktails. Our production needs great energy and total devotion”.

Photo legend:

From left: Cristina Nonino, Antonella Nonino, Elisabetta Nonino

Our father, 83 years old, still wakes up at night during the harvest period to control the night distillation then, in some time, it will be our turn.