

Grappa doesn't come only from dad

Grappa was a cheap distillate used by poor woodsmen to get warm. Then the Nonino came and they made it a noble Aquavita.

By Tobias Piller

Nobody can resist Giannola Nonino's powerful charm. The most famous Italian Grappa producer is used to embracing the whole world. Reserved and formal personalities surrender in front of her. As Paolo Bulgari, of the billionaire dynasty of Italian jewelers, whom she convinced to introduce a collection of grappa at Bulgari's head store, on the most prestigious shopping street of Rome, via Condotti. Before her nobody else had ever succeeded.

Nonino Grappa side by side with Bulgari jewels. The event represents a milestone for the distillery. Nonino Grappa was promoted among the aristocracy.

The road towards a noble grappa for prestigious wine stores and starred restaurants has been hard, and for Giannola and her husband Benito it means the work of their life, long before in Italy precious drops and expensive specialities became fashionable.

In the sixties the Noninos inherited a small distillery and, with it, the grandfather's family tradition; he managed a small distillation equipment assembled on wheels when in 1897 he settled in Percoto, near Udine. However, at that time grappa was considered a poor distillate, with which woodsmen, farmers and soldiers could get drunk very quickly. To satisfy the growing demand, besides methods of continuous distillation were introduced, by which it was making it possible to produce the Italian variety of aquavita at very low costs.

In prestigious Italian restaurants they turned up their nose for the local spirit and Cognac was requested as the after dinner drink, a fact she has always perceived as offensive, as the business woman says. Giannola and Benito Nonino tried, therefore, to ennoble their product in all possible ways and for this reason they can be considered the forerunners of the elevation of grappa to the standing of cult drink.

Instead of turning to the production of convenience goods, as many others did, Benito Nonino remained loyal to traditional methods with stills that have to be filled after any each batch, and anyway, he took taking the production of Cognac as an example to improve his procedures. In particular, he takes great care of the primary product of grappa, pomace: the dry skins that are left from the first pressing of grapes. Substantially pomace is a waste product of the winery. And it is often treated as such.

On the contrary the Noninos think that the quality of the pomace is vital for the taste and for the flavour of grappa. Therefore they convinced their suppliers of primary product not to deliver simply huge amounts of leftover, but to divide them according to the vine (stock) as it is done for grapes.

In 1973 the first grappa made in purity of single vine (stock) was introduced and for this occasion they immediately chose the rarest and most prestigious vine of Friuli: Picolit.

To avoid the loss of flavour, the pomace is immediately collected from pressing, promptly stored in steel containers and processed in a short period of time. The "grappa factory", with five different distilleries and a total of 66 stills, has the capacity to process the primary product immediately during the vintage. Not only the sense for business, but especially the love for the product and perfectionism are at the basis of the business strategy of the Noninos, as it is shows even today, after decades, after the family business has gone through a strong growth and among Italian luxury brands it has become an example for several commercial models. If because of a bad vintage, as in 2004, the primary product is not enough and not of good quality, the production is reduced proportionally and in the sales curve, which otherwise shows a continuous growth, there is a value that tends downwards.

No compromise is admitted in the production process. The distillation plants work day and night. The staff doubles from 30 to 60 units with auxiliary workers during the grappa campaign. Anyway, at the end of the vintage, and last year as early as the last days of October, they stop. "During the few weeks of the vintage the whole family draw up, the three daughters included, and sometimes we get in a competition with the five distilleries to produce the best quality", Antonella Nonino, the daughter, says. However, the idea that, as it happens elsewhere, the pomace can be stored for weeks and then processed slowly is unacceptable for her as for the whole family.

The production methods and the products have gone through a continuous refining with the passing of years. The most precious Grappa ages in 1400 barriques. And grappa has been joined also by "UE Aquavitae", essentially grapes aquavitae that is obtained not only from the leftover of the press, but directly from the skin, pulp and juice of the grapes. It has been called "UE", which means grapes in Friulano language.

Nevertheless, the aspiration to products always of great value represents only a half of the Noninos' success, which starting from humble origins has led to a yearly production that reaches one million bottles and alone, in the latest ten years, has increased the sales proceeds of 50%, up to 17 million euro. At the same time, Giannola Nonino, managing director of the company, has a real talent for selling that is not equaled in this sector. From the very beginning she has given importance to the presentation of the precious drops with style, in glass hand blown bottles, with silver caps and lively handwritten labels. She always conquers the person she is talking to with her friendly manners, which thanks to a disarming "tu" makes him/her you soon feel part of the family. Her three daughters look after the foreign market taking care of tastings from Rio to Tokyo and from New York to Shanghai, they have learned from their mother how to join charm and a determined sales instinct. Since then the Nonino company has been a female dominion. Benito, the father, gladly holds back to preserve his role of production and quality manager.

Among the grappa producers for Germany, the main export market for all Italian companies, the Nonino is one of the most prestigious brands. In the highest segment of the market they have a share of 6 per cent of the volume and 8 per cent of the sales proceeds. Anyway, if the Noninos divide the market accurately, it is not shown in detail that the total amount of Italian export of grappa in Germany is really considerable: about 3.8 million bottles for a value of 40 million euro. Of these the Nonino supplies normal grappa starting from 29 euro for the 0.7 liter bottle, asks between 50 and 90 euro for half a liter of grappa Monovitigno (Single Grape grappa) and up to 1,650 euro for prestigious numbered and aged products that can be found at KaDeWe in Berlin or at the famous store of gastronomic specialities Dallmayr in Munich.

Giannola Nonino is the leading figure of the family. The University of Udine conferred her a *honoris causa* degree. She has already been appointed "Cavaliere del Lavoro" by the President of the Republic. "The Noninos are acknowledged as the true ambassadors of Italian Grappa in the world", the official motivation reports.

PHOTO LEGEND:

The charming distiller lady: *Giannola Nonino (above). During the vintage period Antonella, Elisabetta and Cristina, the three daughters, join to help.*

Photo by Daniel Pilar