

ANNIVERSARIES The backstage of the Nonino Prize, born twenty years ago thanks to a family devoted to grappa for over a century. And among whose winners the greatest names of culture.

Friuli, Levi-Strauss's most exotic trip

by Giulio Nascimbeni

Mario Soldati's voice shouted on the phone: "Who is it? What? Where is this Percoto? What am I going to do there?" It took an hour to convince him. Then a letter from Gianni Brera arrived: "You can use my esteemed name ... but don't think bad of me, as I'm no whore, or at least I try never to be. I'm also glad of your initiative. I think the purest descendants of the Longobard Fathers are the people of Friuli and as I'm an illegitimate descendant I'm proud if it".

It was spring 1977. The addressee of Soldati's phone call and Brera's letter was Giannola Nonino. The story I'm going to tell has a cyclonic, irresistible and fearless protagonist: Giannola. A lady who is strengthened by obstacles. "My mother always raises", say her three daughters Cristina, Antonella and Betty. Benito, Giannola's husband, joins in. He is the master distiller who learned the secrets of grappa when he was a child.

Let's make a step behind, let's go to a day of the end of November 1975. The sky is of an almost unbearable blue, in the background the mountains with the first coat of snow. In Percoto the celebration for the distillation of grappa Monovitigno Ribolla has just finished. Luigi Veronelli, almost blessing, assists. Giannola confesses: "I felt the Joan of Arc of the wine tradition of Friuli".

For a RAI program she reads what she considers a proclamation (and she isn't afraid of words): "We Nonino, distillers in Friuli since 1897, create a competition aimed to stimulate and award the restoration of the ancient vines that are close to be abandoned: Ribolla Gialla, Schioppettino, Pignolo and Tazzelenghe. We will give a prize of a million lire and the Gold Vine Shoot to the wine maker who will set to dwelling the best implantation of one or more of the vines listed...".

The Gold Wine Shoot is promptly translated into Friulian and becomes the Risit d'Âur. The first winners are Dina and Paolo Rapuzzi of the company Ronchi di Cialla in Prepotto.

But all this is soon not enough for Giannola Nonino. In those years there is a lot of talking about the sunset of rustic civilization. Villages disappear. They often belong to a history that hasn't been written, to the failures (or the conquests, according to the points of view) of the age of consumerism. Plastic laminates have replaced wood, milk drums get out of the stables on a scooter foot board. And the most pathetic, the most tormenting sign of the old cohabitation (the possibility of giving a name and a face to any man's fate) is cancelled by the more and more frequent "biblical migrations".

Veronelli advises Giannola: why don't you award articles, books, and documentaries dealing with the "permanent value" of rustic civilization? The new jury is born: Soldati, the president, Brera, Morando Morandini, Veronelli and from Friuli Elio Bartolini and Amedeo Giacomini. The first meeting is held in a tavern in Percoto. Late at night, the choruses start. Soldati, as a soloist, sings a folk song that says: "Blessed be her mother", "blessed be her mother", with praise to "the two of

spades”. Enough is to think of the symbol on this card to understand the meaning of the malicious allusion.

The prize winners are Sergio Maldini and the documentary film maker Fulvio Molinari, later followed by Ermanno Olmi (for *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*), Dino Coltro, Ulderico Bernardi, Giuseppe Lisi, Enzo Golino, Gina Marpillero, Davide Lajolo, Mario Rigoni Stern, Tullio Kezich, Leonardo Sciascia, Piero Camporesi, Giorgio Bocca, Nuto Revelli, Tonino Guerra, Folce Portinari, Amedeo Giacomini, Carlo Sgorlon, Franco Loi, Domenico Rea, Luigi Meneghello, Tullio De Mauro, Alfonso Di Nola.

When in 1987 the winner was Tonino Guerra, among the crowd of wine makers and representatives of the Nonino Company there was Marcello Mastroianni and Giannola danced a waltz with the great actor. In 1978 Davide Maria Turollo and the writer of this article had become members of the jury.

The acknowledgement to Sciascia in 1982-83 deserves a separate account. We decided to award *Kermesse*. From a restaurant in Milan, Giannola telephoned Palermo. It was almost midnight. Giannola remembers: “Sciascia must have thought I was mad or, at least, crazy”.

Overcome by a flood of words, the shy and introverted Sciascia, who had always refused prizes, surrendered. A deep friendship was born. With his wife Maria and his grandchildren Vito and Fabrizio, Sciascia spent his last holiday in Percoto, in the summer 1988. He taught the Nonino girls how to cook pasta with mackerels. He ventured in the mountains, even if he suffered for dizziness. But above all in those months he wrote: *The Knight and Death*. The dedication for the Noninos said: “To Giannola and Benito, to whose serene hospitality this non serene story is due”.

The next step of the Prize took place in 1984. Even Italy is not enough for Giannola. She wants (and obviously immediately) an international section. Franco Iseppi, in the jury at that time, suggests the name of Jorge Amado. The people of Garzanti (editors) shake their heads: nothing to do, the Brazilian writer doesn’t want to fly, many times they have tried to convince him to come to Italy, but no chance.

Giannola obtains the telephone number and calls. She can’t speak a word of Portuguese, but why surrendering? Zalia, Jorge’s wife answers. Surprise, miracle. The lady speaks the dialect of Vento because her mother came from Pieve di Cadore. Yes, yes, she will manage to convince her husband. And so she did.

The following year is Léopols Sédar Senghor’s turn. How to contact him? Giannola learns he will be in Rome for a party at the Embassy of Senegal. She manages to be invited: there are some cardinals, many politicians, among whom Andreotti, the Foreign Minister at that time. Also in this case, mission accomplished.

For the year 1986 the jury decides to award Claude Lévi-Strauss, the great French anthropologist. Nobody knows his address, his agent is on holiday as Christmas is close. Giannola takes a plane for Paris together with her friend Mara Altan, the Brazilian wife of Cipputi’s “father”. They manage to have the phone number and Giannola (“with my poor French”, she says) explains to Monique, Lévi-Strauss’s wife, the reason of that trip. The answer is an invitation for lunch.

“Mara and I ring the bell – Giannola recalls. – Monique lets us in and he joins us, still a handsome man, distant but at the same time friendly. We sit down, and under a wonderful sculpture by Calder

and in front of a dish of *foie gras*, I ask him: will you come to Percoto? He smiles: “Mas oui, Madame Nonino”.

A couple of years ago Lévi-Strauss declared: “Percoto was the most exciting trip in my life”. Such a sentence, said by the author of *Tristes Tropiques* and *The Savage Mind*, has an absolutely rare value. The three names I indulged most on, Amado, Senghor and Lévi-Strauss, opened the way to other “internationals”: Henry Roth (the American of *Call It Sleep*), Aron Gurevic, Rigoberta Menchù from Guatemala (strongly supported by Turollo), Jaques Brosse, Norbert Elias, Erik Orsenna, Alvaro Mutis, Peter Brook (for the movie *Mahabharata*), Zhong Acheng, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, V.S. Naipaul, Hans Jonas, Chinua Achebe, and Julio Llamazares.

On Saturday 28th the twentieth edition of the Prize. At 11 sharp Benito Nonino, with the songs of bands and choruses, will distil the new grappa. The air will take the intense perfume of this gift of the land and of loving passion. Hundreds of people will applaud the simple magic of the rustic rite before celebrating the prize winners of 1995.

I don't know who Giannola will dance the closing waltz with, but I know, and I'm ready to swear it, that the thoughts of Our Lady of Grappa, the way Brera called her, will already be projected towards 1996. And so, saying hallo in Friulian, “*mandi*” to indelible memories and “*mandi*” to the future.

Zanzotto, Jaan Kross and Klibansky the 1995 Prize winners

The Nonino Prize celebrates its twentieth birthday, but when it was born, the Risit d'Âur (Gold Vine Shoot) was just for those who restored ancient vines. The delivery of the 1995 Prizes will take place on Saturday 28th January in Percoto (Udine). The jury, honorary president Mario Soldati and president Claudio Magris, had taken this decision: “Nonino Risit d'Âur XX year” to Andrea Zanzotto of the complete works (Mondadori); the “Nonino International” to Jaan Kross from Estonia for *The Fool of the Czar* (Garzanti); the “Nonino to a personality of our time” to Raymond Klibansky.

Didascalie foto:

Sx: Mrs. Nonino and Jorge Amado

Centro: Giannola Nonino with Mario Soldati (center) and Davide Lajolo in the grappa distillery

Dx: Mrs. Nonino with Sciascia