

WHEN GRAPPA BECOMES CULTURE

On 29th January Claudio Abbado will conduct, in Udine, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra to celebrate the twenty five years of the Nonino Prize. A special homage to the Family that has revolutionized the world of grappa and has set a fashion.

By Claudio Altarocca

Left, Giannola and her three daughters: Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta.

The Nonino women in the grappa ageing cellar. Above the Noninos in a sketch by Altan.

He, Benito Nonino, is the genius of the stills, the man who turns grappa into a very high distillate, and she, his wife Giannola Bulfoni, is the inspiring and divulging nymph, she is “Our Lady of Grappa”, almost a goddess of energy and smile. No exaggerations, it is exactly like this. Giannola has recreated the popular *sgnappa* (grappa in Friulian), which from the barefoot queen of taverns has become the lady of fashionable salons. Giannola is beautiful and speaks like a happy stream. This is the only way to explain the unanimous applause for her Nonino Prize, really a special prize, with a story worth mentioning. A culture prize that makes culture, grown in time because Giannola attracts, seduces all the winners, even the most important in the world, and convinces them to come to Percoto, a village few kilometers from Udine, where the Noninos live and distil.

This year the Prize celebrates its twenty-fifth year with a guest, a friend like Claudio Abbado, who on Saturday 29th January will conduct, in Udine, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra in pieces from the Opera *Così fan tutte* by Mozart. For the one-hundred years of the Nonino Family, three years ago, another friend of theirs came, the director Peter Brook, who brought the national ‘premiere’ of *Happy Days* by Beckett. Today Abbado will homage the Noninos and their Prize.

Really an interesting story to tell. A story told by Giannola’s same voice, sitting by the fire of her favorite fireplace in the house of Percoto, the fireplace in front of which last year Abbado and Brook enlivened a formidable duet. Brook called himself an anarchist and hurled himself against the whole world because evil, “it is becoming bourgeois and politics, and so what can the artist do? He can act only here and there like a dentist working on this or that tooth. Well, the artist is a dentist”.

Giannola’s voice is deep, a little hoarse, and however brilliant, wrapping. It exhilarates and submerged. Impossible to resist it. She starts to tell from the beginning, from the very hard seventies, when the struggle began. The Noninos have just made a revolution, in their field: in 1973 the grappa made with only Picolit grapes was born, the grappa from a single vine, whereas before the pomace included different mixed varieties. Now they look for other autochthonous and glorious vines, but discover that the most representative, bearing cheerful and quite funny names (Schioppettino, Tazzelenghe, Pignolo, Ribolla), are on the way of extinction because, imagine, forbidden by the “people in charge”, the way Giannola calls the regional and Roman authorities, or by the “officials”, the way Luigi Veronelli, the oenologist-philosopher always supporting the Noninos, prefers to call them. Maybe the “people in charge” acted in good faith, thought they were

safeguarding wine growers from market collapses, considering that only the most widespread grapes, the mass ones, endeared to industry, could have success. The point is that the way was blocked.

“I felt lost – Giannola recalls -. But I am determined, I know what I want and don’t give up”. She goes to see the wine makers’ wives, she makes them her allies, and she gives them one hundred and thousand lire, instead of the usual fifteen thousand, for 220 pounds of pure, selected pomace. Above all, always advised by the oenologist-philosopher Veronelli, she “creates a competition, a prize for the wine maker that takes best care of outlaw vines”. This is the way the Nonino Prize was born. A challenge-prize, a prize-against. In good Friulian language its name is *Risit d’Âur*, which means Gold Wine-Shoot. A kind name, being the wine-shoot the small grapevine, the new-born grapevine, just a small plant with a light beard, that’s to say the first filaments, the first stirrings of new roots. The adventure ends up with a victory: in 1978 the denied vines are authorized and in 1983 even recommended. A good overturning.

“The temper is mine, but my father taught me the causes to fight for”, Giannola says. Her father, he is the model. A man born in Rosario de Santa Fé, in Argentina, where Giannola’s grandfather had emigrated and become rich working the land. “My father came back to Friuli and passed me the love for this land, for its traditions – Giannola says -. Just to say what kind of man he was, he had a plough factory, and when after the war tractors became popular he had to close, and sold his house and the family jewels to pay the salary to his sixty workers until they found another job”.

The Nonino Prize evolves, after the victory. After Dionysius if contemplates Apollo, it is both, it ranges from the land to ethics and art, the values that grow from the land. The *Risit* remains, but it is given to novelists, poets, essayists, journalists, and in the latest years to delicatessen sellers, dairymen, bakers, all those who honor the deep taste of food and wine, the wisdom and effort of a local tradition. And then the Nonino multiplies, other prizes are born for national and international narrative, for the “masters of our time”, and others more. The Nonino now awards the life, the style of a person, not a single work (the winners are never very young), and the style means going beyond one’s close identity, it means understanding, and integrating. This is the reason why it naturally becomes a cosmopolitan prize, the most cosmopolitan of our country. Not by chance the present president of the jury is Claudio Magris, the critic who sings Middle Europe, and the members are scholars and writers like Naipaul, Amado, Klibansky, Le Roy Ladurie, Brook, and our Veronelli, Morandini, Nascimbeni and Olmi.

“I’m not too cultured – says Giannola -. I like singing, dancing, and organizing, but I’ve never been a great reader. I say thank you to the Prize because it has allowed me to meet extraordinary people”. So many friendly faces. Giannola recalls Mario Soldati: “Going by car from Percoto to Milan he told me his life. I would slap me for not recording it. He told me of when his wife caught him in bed with his sister in law and shot him in his arm. “I have loved women, I have loved men, I have never denied myself anything”. She recalls Lévi-Strauss, cold and kind in his house in Paris adorned with Gallé’s vases and Calder’s sculptures: he too came to Percoto and said it was the most exotic trip he had ever taken. And recalls Sciascia, the dearest Sciascia. She called him one day in Racalmuto not long before midnight and the writer, quite embarrassed, answered her in monosyllables asking her few essential questions: “Where is Percoto? What sort of prize is it?”. He was overwhelmed too.

Sciascia came to Percoto and taught Giannola and Benito's three wonderful daughters, Cristina, Antonella and Betty, how to cook pasta with mackerels, and he used to send them tuna fish and marzipan little lambs as gifts. Abbado has a special place in Giannola's heart: "He managed to make an unprepared person like I am love classical music. From the shivers I feel in my body I understand when he is the conductor".

Giannola becomes quiet, she's silent for a while, then says: "Twenty-five years! Beautiful. It was beautiful. This year we will award the archeologist Emmanuel Anati, the Flemish writer Hugo Klaus and the American Edward Wilson, the father of socio-biology, the creator of the harmony between scientific knowledge and humanistic knowledge, and the theorist of biodiversity. Well, I think that the Nonino has listened to, even forerun, Wilson's alarm cry to save the vegetable and animal species that die because killed by the man. Here, in our small way, we have given our contribution. Long life good ideas and good battles".

Claudio Altarocca

Great personalities at the Nonino's court

ERMANNIO OLMI [1931]

Film director. He won the Prize in 1979 for *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. The movie tells the working story of four peasant families committed to work the fields for the owners.

HENRY ROTH [1906 – 1995]

American writer. Awarded in 1987 for *Call it Sleep*. The book tells the vicissitudes of a Jew child in a ghetto of New York in the early 1900. After this novel of 1934 he didn't publish anything until a year before his death.

MARIO RIGONI STERN [1921 – 2008]

Writer. Awarded in 1982 for *Uomini boschi e api*. One of the books that most witness his affection for nature. He wrote also *Il Libro degli animali* and *Arboreto selvatico*.

LEONARDO SCIASCIA [1921 – 1989]

Writer. Winner in 1983 for *Kermesse*. Also Sciascia was overwhelmed by the spirit of the Nonino Family: he taught Giannola's three daughters how to cook pasta with mackerels.

JORGE AMADO [1912 – 2001]

Brazilian writer. He won in 1984, the first year of the International Prize. Amado wrote political novels *O Pais do Carnaval* and humoristic novels *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*.

ALVARO MUTIS [1923]

Columbian writer. Awarded in 1991 for *The Snow of the Admiral*. The book is part of the trilogy *The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll*, together with *Ilona llega con la lluvia* and *Un bel Morir*.

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS [1908 – 2009]

French anthropologist. Awarded in 1986. He published works that belong to the classics of structuralism. *Structural Anthropology*, *The Savage Mind*. In the essay *Race and History* he refuses the cultural leadership of the West.

LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR [1906 – 2001]

Senegalese writer and politician. Awarded in 1986. He contributed to the renewal of the French colonial policy. In 1960 he became the President of Senegal.

JAQUE BROUSSE [1922 – 2008]

French writer. Awarded in 1989 for *L'Ordre des choses* and *Les Arbres de France. Histoire et légendes*.

ERIK ORSENNA [1947]

French writer. He won the prize in 1990 for *L'Exposition coloniale* which also won the Goncourt in 1988. The book is an imaginary biography under the form of a saga conceived on the style of the genesis: "At the beginning there was the book store".

ACHENG [1949]

Chinese writer. Awarded in 1992 for The Trilogy of the Kings consisting of *The King of Trees*, *The Chess Master* and *The King of Children*. The work that inspired the Cultural Revolution.

NAIPAUL [1932]

English writer. Awarded in 1993 for *India. A Million Mutinies now*. In this book Naipaul gets closer to his home country after outlining a pitiless portrait in *India. A Wounded Civilization*.

CHINUA ACHEBE [1930]

Nigerian novelist. Awarded in 1994 for the trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*. In his works the Ibo culture is revived in the light of colonialism.

JORGE SEMPRUN [1923 - 2011]

Spanish writer. Awarded in 1999. He served in the French resistance and survived at Buchenwald. In his works he reports his personal experiences. *The Long Voyage*, *What a Beautiful Sunday*. He was also a scriptwriter.

ANDREA ZANZOTTO [1921 - 2011]

Writer. He won the Risit d'Âur Prize in 1995. At the beginning his poetry was bound to a lively sense of the countryside, then, little by little, it moved towards the dramatic pushiness of the new industrial and consumerist reality.

SERGIO MALDINI [1923 – 1998]

Journalist. He won the Risit d'Âur in 1978. [the year when the Nonino Prize for literature was created] for the article *La vita Semplice (Simple life)*. In 1980 Maldini won the Campiello with the novel *La casa a nord est*.

AMIN MAALUF [1949]

Lebanese writer. Awarded in 1998 for *Ports of Call* in which he expresses the burning desire that his country may cease being tormented. In his work he managed to blend the light evocative soul of the eastern tale with the art of the western novel, mixing history and fiction.

YASHAR KEMAL [1922]

Turkish writer. He won the international Prize in 1997 for the complete works. His most famous book is *Il cardo*, 1956. The writer tells about the Land of the Taurus, the spirit of revolt of a population told with the tones of a fairy tale.

EMMANUEL ANATI [1930]

Archeologist. Nonino Prize 2000. His main researches concern the art and the religions of prehistoric tribes. In Camuno, Val Camonica, he founded the Center for Prehistoric Studies.

GRAPPA, FROM TRENCHES TO SALONS

By SERGIO MIRAVALLE

FROM A RUSTIC «SURROGATE OF COURAGE» GIVEN plentifully to the troops on the Carso, during the First World War, to a delicate, clear and fragrant aquavita to be sipped at the conclusion of elegant meals. This is grappa: the distillate that has interlaced its evolution with the Twentieth century. Let's examine the story of this slice of Italy to drink because grappa is, undoubtedly, only Italian. After years of discussions, it was acknowledged by the European Union. Since 1989 it is possible to call grappa only the distillate of Italian pomace, processed in Italy according to precise production methods. And the recent stand taken by Italian distillers in the negotiations between Brussels and South Africa, which doesn't want to acknowledge the exclusive right of the name, has confirmed the principle of the Italian primacy: "They have already stolen us the name pizza, but grappa is ours and only ours".

In the early Twentieth century the situation was still quite confused. The dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca [Literary Academy in Florence] has long ignored the existence of the word grappa, leaving the way to dialect words «sgnapa», «branda», «fil de fer». The first stills were filled with pomace, the leftovers of wine-pressing, consisting of stalks, skins and seeds. It was the "Gold water" quoted by Boniface VIII in the occasion of the Jubilee of 1300. The Jesuits, in 1600, studied the distillation techniques more deeply, replacing the alchemists who were in the permanent research of the mythical «quintessence». The Nineteenth century saw the achievement of new distillation techniques with the use of stills and more and more refined methods for the elimination of heads and tails and the bottling of only the heart of aquavita. But there was also a hidden production with a network of widespread smuggling that ran through the mountains: from Piedmont, to Trentino, to Friuli, spreading all over the Po Valley and beyond. It was the rustic version, homemade, or hidden in the woods, with clandestine equipment to avoid the heavy taxation that all the governments have always imposed on distillates.

During the Great War grappa was recruited and became the «weapon» of army supplies: the average ration was ten liters a day for 50 men, but before assaults the pick-me-up distributed in the trenches

could be more generous. And on the *Domenica del Corriere* appeared advertisements of elegant grappa hip-flasks, lined with leather, for the officers. It is with this mountain and a little reducing iconography that grappa lived for decades, undisputed queen of taverns, strongly rooted in the Alps and in Veneto, so much that in a famous wine-making family like Carpené Malvolti from Conegliano there is who was named Etilo (Ethyl – the alcohol that is the result of distillation).

In people's imagery grappa was brought atop the mountains by the Alpine troops or in the small barrels of St. Bernard dogs. To make it go «higher and higher» it was necessary to reach the Seventies. Mike Bongiorno became the testimonial of the lucky national advertising campaign of Grappa Bocchino by Canelli. «It was my father Giorgio who hired the popular presenter convincing him to accept being let down from a helicopter on the highest peaks in the Alps with a bottle of our Sigillo Nero», reminds Carlo Bocchino, who with his sister, Antonella, manages the historical Piedmontese distillery. That advertising campaign lasted ten years and Bongiorno, during a storm on a peak risked remaining isolated on the Mount Blanc. It was the years of counter grappa, proposed in the bars and lived as an alternative to aperitifs.

But it was also the years of the new pioneers. In December 1973, at Percoto in Friuli, Giannola and Benito Nonino loaded a still with only the pomace of the precious Picolit grapes, creating single grape grappa.

The Eighties were, also for grappa, the season of appearance, with more and more precious and elaborated bottles that brought it close to the persuasive world of perfumes. But not all followed fashion. In Bassano del Grappa, at the distillery Bartolo Nardini, which boasts the birth date 1779, the time of the Serenissima Republic of Venice, they continued with steam distillation and to bottle the one liter «white» and the «reserve», aged in durmast barrels. And at Neive, on the hills close to the border between the areas of Asti and Alba, Romano Levi the «grappaio angelico» (angelic grappa-maker) discovered by Luigi Veronelli, carried on, the way his father Serafino did, to operate the still with direct fire, one of the last still working ones and distill grappa that he bottles and names with strictly hand drawn labels. For Levi grappa is this: «A mystery that always recurs equal and different». In the latest years grappa has found a balance point, underlining the oenological roots. It has entered salons and the best restaurants' listings. It has conquered the youngest palates, fascinating also women. The 150 distilleries still operating (there were thousands in the early Twentieth century) produce nearly 40 million bottles a year. 80% of the market is concentrated in the Northern regions, ten per cent in the Center and South and the remaining abroad, especially Northern Europe, but also the United States and Japan. The leading brands (Nardini, Candolini, Julia, Bocchino, Nonino, Piave) cover one third of the production: the rest is represented by medium-small realities that give value to the strict tie with the territory. The law has stated the birth of geographical indication grappa in six areas: Piedmont, Lombardy, Trentino, Alto Adige, Veneto and Friuli. The seventh is the grappa from Barolo, the prestigious Piedmontese enclave that contains a deliberate counter-sense: Barolo grappa, being a pomace distillate shouldn't exist, because actually they distil the pomace of nebbiolo, the mother grapes that give the wine bound to become Barolo, but only after at least three years.

Actually the names of the wines are very rare on grappa labels and there is the growing phenomenon of distillates on commission by wineries that give their best pomace to master distillers. And also industries like Stock from Trieste, in the high market sector, now rely on author's grappa signed by Franco Barbero for the Piedmontese Brachetto grappa, Bruno Pilzer for the Trentine Muller Thurgau grappa, and Mercedes De Mezzo (one of the few grappa-making women) for the Friulian Cabernet grappa. All this has also meant an increase in prices due to the heavy taxation imposed. Grappa is taxed by ettanidri (100 liters of anhydrous alcohol); for a 40° bottle excise duties amount to 3,500 lire plus 75 lire for the State countermark and 20 per cent VAT

on the whole amount. And so, smuggling has almost disappeared, and a new crime was born: huge theft of grappa in the distilleries. As many as forty robberies have been denounced certainly committed by specialized gangs. It is easy to conclude that grappa, in this way, sells like hot cakes.
Sergio Miravalle.

A CLUB FOR EXPERTS

To drink well, it is necessary to study

The first Grappa clubs are being born. The national Institute for grappa is creating them, the association established in Brescia, which gathers 109 companies, with the aim of creating meeting points, information and formation of grappa tasters. «They aren't clubs for heavy drinkers – says Luigi Odello, 49 years old, Piedmontese wine-technician who moved to Brescia some years ago and who has written dozens of publications on grappa and distillates – we want to increase intelligent knowledge about this typically Italian distillate relying on the quality and typicality of its organoleptic characteristics and never on excesses».

At the Institute, which is also connected with ANAG (National Association of Grappa Tasters, founded at Asti over twenty years ago and with its seat at the Chamber of Commerce) they organize courses on how to learn to recognize the different kinds of grappa, compare them, and distinguish the distillation methods. And they also organize didactic visits to distilleries and areas of production.

How will the Grappa of the Twenty-first century be? The law states an alcoholic value between 38 and 60 degrees, and the trend of settling at about 40. Odello has no doubts: «Heart-burning grappas are over. Today it must have great personality and a scent flower and fruit oriented, which is obtained distilling more fresh and selected pomace.

In aged products part of these notes can be replaced by those of dried fruit, vanilla and tobacco scents. In any case grappa must be clear, without impurities or veins and to nose and palate it mustn't show any hint of mould, cooked, burnt, wood or metal taste.

Information can be found also on the web. The official website of the national grappa Institute is www.istitutograppa.org. Search engines, at the entry grappa, identify about one hundred sites, and there are also many distilleries that invite customers for a virtual tour among their stills.
s.mir.

Didascalia mappa Italia

The 150 distilleries today operating produce about 40 million bottles a year. 80 per cent of the market is concentrated in the Northern regions, 10 per cent in the Center and South and the remaining abroad. Here are the oldest ones.