

# Cent'anni della Famiglia Nonino

**CORRIERE DELLA SERA, 10 ottobre 2003**  
by Stefano Bucci

They represent the economic miracle of the North East, but they are also friends of Abbado and Naipaul. Now the Triennale Milan celebrates them.

## FROM THE GRAPEVINE TO THE NOBEL, A DISTILLATE OF CULTURE

The company, the prize, and the story: an exhibition tells the story of the Nonino family.

"When the first few drops of distillate came out, I collected them in my hands. Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta were close to me. Again I felt the smell of acacia and honey of my childhood. Then I said, or better I shouted, to my husband Benito: we have made it!" These words, said by Giannola Nonino, can be considered to be the essence of the epic story of the Monovitigno, which changed the way of making grappa. As a result, since December 1<sup>st</sup> 1973, its official date of birth, people only speak of "before" and an "after" the Nonino, at least as far as grappa is concerned.

The thirty years of Monovitigno Nonino, technically created with the separate distillation of the pomace of a single vine (Picolit), are celebrated in the exhibition opened yesterday at the Triennale Milan, the first "that does not celebrate an artist, an architect, a designer, but a family". Somehow it is an exhibition, which marks a turning point (strongly wanted by the present president Davide Rampello) for the same, historical, institution of Milan.

In Milan, more than the destiny of a vine, they tell the one of a family who, in 1997 celebrated "the first one hundred years of distillation". A story bound to the North East of the economic miracle which is already international: a quite female story, where daughters and nieces seem to have followed the way of their parents and grandparents "out of a spontaneous passion, uncompromising and catching". The same that convinced the Nonino to open, in 2004 in "their" Percoto (in the province of Udine) the Temple of Distillation. With three wood and copper pagodas, five distilleries (each with the names of Benito and his ladies) and twelve stills (called after their grand-children) they will carry on their work according to the "Nonino method". It is important to remember at the same time that 70 per cent of Italian grappa is produced ("unfortunately") industrially.

The Nonino, however, do not live on vine alone, as it is well witnessed in the book written by Cristina Compagno for UTET (*The Nonino case, the spirit of enterprise*), even if now they are all "noble" vines as pignolo, picolit, schioppettino, ribolla gialla, tazzelenghe, fragolino or citrus fruit honey. They live by choices that seem to be based more on passion than on marketing, starting with the ones made by the founder of the family, Orazio Nonino, a "sotàn" (a labourer with nothing or next to nothing) who in 1897 had started his first still in the cellar of his house and moving on to the choices of the thirty-five employees "non members of the family", who also are responsible of total sales (for the year 2002) of more than fifteen million euros, for production ranging between 500 and 700 liters "with a demand which constantly exceeds supply and with a production levels that change from vintage to vintage".

"Anger is what pushed us to make grappa well – says Giannola today – The anger I felt when I went to my friends' houses in Udine and they offered me only whisky, vodka and other distillates. Never grappa". Or, always Giannola adds "To get our grappa known, whenever I found out that there was to be a meeting or an important dinner anywhere in Italy, I took off with my daughters to be there to offer my grappa personally at the end of the evening's event".

The story of the Nonino is, furthermore, a story that, as it appears clearly from the exhibition of the Triennale, is not made only of bottles and other containers with beautiful shapes (signed by well-known brands as Venini), but also of art and culture, as shown in the bright sculpture by Marco Lodola, the portraits of the family by Oliviero Toscani, the photo mural by Aldo Ballo, the 37 strips signed by "Checco" Altan (*Ben, Noah's fourth son*), or the wall poster by Bruno Munari which reproduces the Nonino symbol twenty-five times. They are all exhibited at the Triennale.

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And especially as it is shown by the story of a prize. The *Nonino* concept was born in 1975, “to save the ancient vines of Friuli which were on the way of extinction”. Later in 1977, it was turned into *Nonino Literature*, a prize for which the first jury was made up of Mario Soldati, Father Davide Maria Turoldo, Gianni Brera and Luigi Veronelli, and which today, after being enriched in 1984 with an international section, can count on (in addition to a jury presided over by Claudio Magris) a list of illustrious luminaries from Leonardo Sciascia to Claude Levi-Strauss, from Rigoberta Menchù to Claudio Abbado, from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to Henry Roth. Once again, however, in Giannola’s reflections there is no celebratory voice, in fact it’s a down-to-earth familial tone she uses. “V.S. Naipaul? After the Nobel prize he called us immediately”. Just like one of the “family”.