

il Resto del Carlino

A BRAND, A STORY FROM FRIULI TO THE CONQUEST OF THE WORLD

Nonino, the Italian dynasty of grappa
A strictly female business

By GIUSEPPE TURANI

The post-industrial society is made also of grappa and forefront marketing can be born also in Percoto (Udine), a little village with few people. In fact, it is very difficult to describe the Nonino Company according to the usual standards. The primary product is poor and simple, grapes. The production standard – revolutionized in the Seventies by Giannola and Benito Nonino – is extremely high: each bottle, actually, is handmade, with a care we are no longer used to, and which cannot be reproduced on industrial scale. Just last year, the company turned 120 year old. And two months ago the Chamber of Representatives awarded Giannola Nonino the Italian Talent Award 2017. The management, today, is all female: Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta, Giannola and Benito's three daughters, have the position of managing directors. And also the employees are 90% women. Quality and the care for the product have turned their grappa into a sort of legend in the world of those who like strong drinks.

Quality without compromises: when, in the Eighties, Nonino launched the grappa obtained from the distillation of the whole grapes, named "ÙE" (which simply means 'grapes' in the language of Friuli), they sold it at the fabulous price of 350 thousand lire for a three quarters of a liter bottle. Then, in 2000, also their three daughters wanted to give their contribution to the story with "Gioiello", a distillate obtained from the distillation of pure honey. If we try to understand what this strange company is made of, we discover that it is a mixture of ancient artisanal tradition, of the art of living, of commercial expertise, of an almost maniacal love for their work, and of a kind of marketing among the most sophisticated and modern, certainly not as it is taught at school.

We might also say that this is a company with a high intelligence intensity: there is almost nothing else, in fact, between the primary product, grapes, and the finished product, except the *software*, the brain of the Noninos, their coordinated style, from the way they make grappa to the way they know how to promote it, giving it value in the world of beautiful and expensive products.

Centoveventi anni della Famiglia Nonino

The Noninos are the first extraordinary thing we meet. The appointment is in the old family distillery, in the outskirts of Percoto. If you get there on a foggy, rainy and windy day, as it happened to me, the 'factory' doesn't impress so much. Some shabby warehouses, cases, bottles, few people around. Even the village doesn't have a great impact, grey and a little sad, disconsolate, where spending a few hours seems to be enough. Giannola says: "Until 1973 we made common grappa, good, but common. In Benito's family they had been doing this job since the Nineteenth century. The first of the Noninos started with a distillery assembled on a cart: he traveled from house to house and distilled, he was paid with a little grappa. Then they got a little bigger, not too much. Until 1973 we sold only in Friuli: we went around, Bento and I, with our sets of samples and collected the orders". In the Seventies, the big leap: "I always read the newspapers – Giannola Nonino continues – and saw that the people no longer wanted to drink ordinary drinks, but, in practice, they asked for 'branded' drinks, produced with a certain kind of grapes, coming from a certain area, guaranteed. So I told myself: why don't we do the same also with grappa?". The experiment of single varietal grappa worked. "We decided to use the Picolit vine variety, the most valuable and the rarest – explains the entrepreneur -. We became crazy. In the end, however, there was a fabulous kind of grappa. With Benito we questioned: we had little, producing it cost a huge amount of money and work. Certainly we couldn't sell it in one-liter big bottles, as the grappa they give to the alpine troops. A friend of ours, an architect, suggested us a very nice bottle and so we decided to choose the quarter of a liter". The price, for that time, made more than one jump on the chair: "Still today I remember, it was 1973, and we asked 8,500 lire for a quarter. Everybody thought we were crazy. On the contrary it turned out well", Giannola observes. From Cinderella, therefore, Nonino grappa becomes a queen of distillates. And the company makes another strong choice: not to make spots on the traditional channels.

"Are you joking, publicity for Picolit grappa? No, no. However I went around for three years visiting the most important restaurants and hotels to make it known, with my most beautiful dresses (How many Armani and Valentino I have worn out!). Now they ask us to have it, but we don't have enough for everyone". It is a painstaking work, difficult, which is followed step by step by the entire family: "When there is the season of the delivery of the grapes, we are all out to control, to sell, and to buy". From single varietal grappa to 'ÙE': "We, here, have always made grappa, but we weren't able to make fruit distillates. We went to see in France, in Germany, everywhere. In the end we had some special machines built, following a project made by Benito. The result was a true delicacy. The bottle is made by Venini, alone it costs a fortune. But we couldn't sell such a product in a big bottle", Giannola concludes.

The irresistible ascent of the company based in Percoto (Udine): from an unknown distillery just at regional level to one of the symbols of excellence of the made in Italy in the world.

Centoveinti anni della Famiglia Nonino

PICOLIT A PRECIOUS VINE VARIETY

When Nonino aimed at making a more refined product, they chose the Picolit vine variety, the most precious. “In the end there was a fabulous kind of grappa, but it was little and expensive: so for the bottle we opted for the quarter of a liter”.

THE FEMALE MANAGEMENT OF THE COMPANY

Above (from left) Giannola Nonino with her daughters Elisabetta, Antonella and Cristina in the family distillery.

TRADITION AND NEW PRODUCTS

A turnover of 15 million euro

The Nonino, in 2016, had a turnover of about 14.4 million euro, 50% of which comes from the export (it is present in 72 countries). It has five artisanal distilleries, each with 12 stills.

The other route of marketing

By choice, the Nonino Company does not make traditional publicity but, since 1975, they have established and supported the Nonino Prize, to save the ancient autochthonous Friulian vine varieties that were dying out.