



Sisters Antonella, Elisabetta, and Cristina Nonino

MARTIN GOODSHUTTER/STOCK

The Women of the Grappa Revolution

Journalist Elizabeth Heath discovers how a family business first introduced the most Italian of spirits to the world

VISION, VINACCIA, AND A SERIES OF FIRSTS

Grappa is a strong, aromatic brandy made from *vinaccia*, or the grape pomace left over after pressing, including the skins, seeds, stems, and pulp that would otherwise be discarded. It was traditionally produced for and by farmers, or *contadini*, to help them shake off the cold and get a little warming boost to fortify them on long days in the fields.

The *vinaccia* that distilleries like Nonino would buy from local growers was always

If you were asked to name an Italian distilled spirit, you'd probably mention grappa. And the fact you'd even know what grappa is, that you'd sipped it from a delicate, bulb-shaped glass at an elegant bar, or that you'd even seen it for sale outside of Italy is all due to one family: the Noninos.

The family-run distillery that launched the "Grappa Revolution" – transforming it from what was once a "poor man's drink" to a premium spirit – is now run by a trio of sisters: Cristina, Antonella, and Elisabetta Nonino. Carrying on the traditions of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, the sisters are the fifth generation to lead the iconic Italian brand.

From their base in the mountainous Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of northern Italy, they ensure that the "revolution" continues to yield democratic results – grappa as a drink to be enjoyed and appreciated around the world, yet always crafted with respect to artisanal traditions and premium ingredients.

The Nonino distilleries are located in Borgo Nonino, in the heart of the Friulian vineyards



composed of a mix of grapes, with no distinction between varieties and never intended for discerning palates. But as Antonella recounts, it was a remarkable woman – her mother, Gianolla, when she was newly wed to Benito Nonino (himself the fourth generation of family distillers) – who first had the radical idea to elevate grappa from a merely utilitarian drink into a high-quality artisanal spirit. From that seed of an idea, the first-ever *monovitigno*, or single-varietal grappa, was born.

With Gianolla sourcing the *vinaccia* and marketing the product that Benito perfected in the distillery, the couple introduced the world to the first single-grape grappas, made from Picolit and later, Ribolla grapes, both historical varieties from Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Their efforts raised the profile of grappa to the level of fine wine or cognac, transforming it into a drink to be considered, appreciated, and talked about. Today, grappa is enjoyed as an after-dinner digestif, a warming nightcap, and even in cocktails (see box, right) – and it all started with Gianolla and Benito.

A FIFTH-GENERATION FAMILY AFFAIR

As the Nonino sisters grew up in Borgo Nonino, the rural compound where Nonino products are still made, the grappa business was simply an extension of family life. “When I was young,” recalls Antonella, “the family house, the distillery, and the office were all in the same courtyard.” The girls would shadow their *papà* in the distillery, watching, learning, and, when they were old enough, helping in the family business wherever they were needed. “We answered the phone; we organized the collection of the *vinaccia* from local growers,” Antonella says. She still recalls, together with her sisters, directing the long line of tractors driven by farmers bringing their grape pomace to be weighed and sold. “Even when we were in university, we were always home for the harvest. Work came first. So, it just became normal for us to be involved,” she says.

Later, as Nonino’s market presence became more international, the sisters took on more high-profile roles, including accompanying Gianolla, who doesn’t speak English, to international trade shows and events. “The



GRAPPA APPRECIATION 101

Antonella Nonino explains that grappa is best enjoyed the way you might enjoy a glass of fine wine. Grappa distilled from white grapes, like Sauvignon, Prosecco, or their signature Picolit, is best served cold, while grappa made from Merlot, Fragola, and other red grapes is best at room temperature.

Italians are most likely to enjoy grappa as an after-dinner *digestivo* (or digestif). But Antonella has been influential in promoting grappa as a key ingredient in cocktails. Her personal favorite is, appropriately, the Italiano, created by celebrated mixologists Monica Berg and Alex Kratena of London’s Tayēr + Elementary:

ITALIANO

2.5 cl (1 shot) of Grappa Nonino Monovitigno® Moscato
1.5 cl (1 tablespoon) Cordiale Neroli
8.5 cl (just under 3 ounces) Fever Tree Ginger Ale
1 oversized ice cube

Pour Grappa Nonino Monovitigno® Moscato and Cordiale Neroli into a tall tumbler with an ice cube. Stir the ingredients with a bar spoon, and finish with a top of Fever Tree Ginger Ale.

Nonino creates a vast range of cocktails and aperitifs



more we traveled with her, learned from her, and helped others cultivate an appreciation of grappa, the more we fell in love with the business,” says Antonella.

Today, Cristina looks after distillation alongside Benito. Elisabetta takes care of the financial and commercial side of things, and Antonella is responsible for communications, including overseeing the Nonino Prizes for literature and traditional agriculture as well as the company’s extensive charitable interests. “We help each other,” says Antonella. “And we each know enough about the others’ side of the business that we can sub for each other when needed.” Even Cristina’s daughter, sixth-generation

Francesca, is involved, running Nonino’s social media efforts.

More than 50 years after the “Grappa Revolution,” Nonino grappas and distillates are available in 85 countries, and include a range of single-grape grappas; grappas made from the entire grape, rather than just pomace; *amaros* (Italian herbal liqueurs); lighter *aperitivo* blends; and spirits made from honey, pears, and ginger. Gianolla and Benito are still involved in day-to-day affairs, but they’re happy to let their daughters lead Grappa Nonino into the future.

Despite the company’s now-global reach, Antonella says that the brand is respectful of its roots as an artisanal distillery. That dedication to high-quality, handcrafted spirits extends not just to distillation, she explains, but to a reverence for the traditions and cultural integrity of their region. “Our grappa is an art,” she says, “and it’s still made with the same passion that was transmitted from our parents to their daughters.” ●

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