

Register

Benito Nonino

Italy's 'father of grappa' whose family distillery elevated the uncouth, poor relation of wine into a premium beverage

Contrary to stereotype, Italian cooking and viticulture are dynamic and have evolved greatly in the past 50 years. Supposed staples such as tiramisu and panettone are quite recent inventions, while carbonara may have been imported during the war by US soldiers.

What drove change was Marshall aid and membership of the European Economic Community. These transformed Italy's economy in the 1950s and 1960s, creating a large middle class who could afford to eat out and wanted more sophisticated food when they did. So it was too with grappa. Historically it was the uncouth, poor relation of wine, but Benito Nonino and his family turned it, in their words, "from a Cinderella into the queen of spirits".

Grappa is made from fermenting the pressed skins, pips and stems of grapes, a residue known as pomace. Its origins lie in the Middle East and by the 14th century — before grain-based spirits were known — its manufacture was practised in what became its heartland in Italy, the Alpine regions. By the 19th century, when there were 200,000 distillers across the north, it was associated with the town of Bassano del Grappa, in the Veneto, and with neighbouring Friuli.

Much of the area was still under Austrian domination and pomace was what was left to labourers once landowners had claimed the grape juice for their tables. Nonino's great-grandfather, Orazio, was clerk of the works for a Hungarian noble family. He also operated a mobile still, with a cart and donkey carrying it to vineyards until he opened a distillery in 1897 at Ronchi di Percoto, northwest of Trieste.

For generations more, however, grappa would still remain a rough moonshine, containing up to 60 per cent alcohol by volume. It was typically taken as a digestive after heavy meals or as a bracing "correction" to one's coffee before work on chilly mornings.

This all changed at precisely noon on December 1, 1973. At that moment, Benito Nonino knew that his experiment had worked and that he had distilled



Benito Nonino with his wife, Giannola, and their daughters Elisabetta, Antonella and Cristina, who all work for the business

the first grappa made from only a single variety of grape. Sensibly, he had been listening to his wife, Giannola, whom he had married in 1962. She nurtured a deep regard for and understanding of local culture.

Pomace was customarily composed of a mixture of red and white grape skins, with the husks often collected when they had dried out. Giannola Nonino went to local farmers' wives and, knowing they were keen not to be dependent on handouts from their husbands, promised to pay them if they kept different kinds of skins separate and called her to collect them when they were still moist.

The Noninos focused on Picolit grapes, used to make dessert wine and in the 18th century a favourite of royal courts across Europe. By concentrating on a single variety, they were better able to control the quality of the premium product they envisaged creating,

with the distinctive taste of the fruit preserved.

The following year, Nonino made a single distillation from Ribolla grapes. Giannola knew that to get the *borghesi* to buy a drink that recalled the peasant identity many were trying to forget, it would have to look upmarket. She packaged it in bottles with silver stoppers wrapped in red thread and wrote to everyone influential she could think of to press samples on them.

Where Monovitigno Nonino led the way, soon other producers followed. In 1983, Benito doubled his number of stills from 12 to 24 and kept them going 24 hours a day. That year, he distilled 1,200 quintals — more than 11 and a half tonnes — of pomace. Then one day a car pulled up at the Noninos' farmhouse. Out stepped a chauffeur who ordered 48 bottles of grappa for his employer, signor Dolce Vita himself, Gianni Agnelli, the owner of Fiat.

Benito Nonino was born at Percoto in 1934. His name was bestowed on him by his father, Antonio, in honour of Italy's then leader, Mussolini. Fortunately, his mother, Silvia, had better judgment and after she was left a widow in the 1940s became the first woman in Italy to make grappa and manage a distillery. A fine cook, she used her knowledge of botanicals to improve the house *amaro*, or herbal liqueur. Benito's paternal grandfather, Vigi, had a similar reputation for resourcefulness, being admired locally for having saved his cows from the Austrian forces during the First World War by playing the troops with his grappa.

While fond of sweet treats, and of canoing, Benito was a man of reserved emotions and let his abilities speak for themselves in the still house. In 1984 he became the first to create a whole-grape distillate, which he named Ue.

As well as advancing grappa, the Noninos sought to preserve other tradi-

tions central to Friulian culture. In the mid-1970s, as they looked to distil other local grapes, they discovered that because they were not on the list of those regarded by the EEC as fundamental to wine-growing in the region, three varieties that had once been much-prized were no longer allowed to be cultivated. They were Schioppettino, a red grape almost wiped out by a phylloxera epidemic a century before, Pignolo, another red with dense bunches like the pinecones after which it was named, and Tazzelenghe. Giannola Nonino pestered European officials for several years until a decree was forthcoming that reversed the ban.

In similar fashion, the couple founded the International Nonino Literary Prize in 1975. It is awarded to writers whose work is rooted in and conserves their cultures, and on half a dozen occasions its perceptive judges have anticipated the approval of the Nobel prize committee by several years.

Giannola was appointed *cavaliere del lavoro* (the Italian equivalent of a dame) for her work in 1998, one of the first 25 women so to be honoured. By 2003, her husband's stills were producing more than one million litres of grappa annually, 20 per cent of it for export.

Key to that success was the growing involvement in the company of the couple's daughters, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta (there was a family rule that husbands were best excluded from it). Their contributions included, after a decade of research, discovering how to distil honey, a product they named Gioiello. Keeping the family hand on the tiller into a sixth generation, Benito's granddaughter Francesca now handles Nonino's social media as the "grappa influencer".

Though he had been using a wheelchair due to illness for some years, on the late afternoon of his life Benito asked to be taken to look around the distillery a final time.

Benito Nonino, distiller, was born on February 6, 1934. He died on July 7, 2024, aged 90

Tommy Cassidy

Newcastle and Northern Ireland midfielder who survived having the chaotic, hard-living superstar George Best as a room-mate

It was quite a way to mark your final international appearance. At the 1982 World Cup Northern Ireland were, astonishingly, beating the host nation Spain 1-0. But they were struggling, down to ten men after a sending-off and losing their key player Sammy McIlroy to injury. The manager, Billy Bingham, chose as his substitute Tommy Cassidy, 31, then of Burnley and a hugely experienced and canny midfielder who had played for many seasons at Newcastle United.

Cassidy helped steady the ship, preventing Spain from dominating midfield and using the ball intelligently to keep as much possession as possible. Northern Ireland held on. "At the final whistle," he recalled, "we just looked at each other for about ten seconds in amazement. We couldn't believe what we'd done."

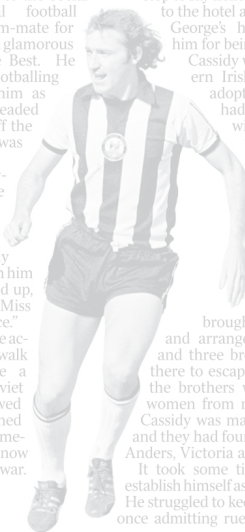
Cassidy's main memory of the day, however, was frustration as he had to delay celebrations while waiting with the winning goalscorer, Gerry Armstrong, to take a drugs test. "We were both so dehydrated that it took us an hour and a half to give a sample. We were sat under armed guards, next to FIFA doctors and officials, we tried and tried, drinking water, lager and even wine to help us. Gerry drank so much alcohol that he was a little bit drunk. He was singing *Danny Boy* and all sorts."

Cassidy had previously had unusually rich experience of the social side of international football through his role as room-mate for his fellow Belfast boy and glamorous celebrity player George Best. He hugely admired Best's footballing genius and described him as "the opposite of a big-headed superstar". Yet his life off the pitch as his fame grew was frequently chaotic.

"We were playing Portugal and by the time we landed he had every air hostess's number," Cassidy remembered in an interview with the *Daily Mail*. "I was rooming with him and three of them turned up, all at separate times. Miss World also called by once."

On another occasion he accompanied Best on a walk around Moscow before a game against the Soviet Union. "The KGB followed us. They were frightened someone might do something silly to George — now that would have started a war.

Cassidy playing for Newcastle in 1979



Everyone recognised him but he would stop to say hello. When we got back to the hotel a KGB officer shook George's hand and thanked him for being so respectful."

Cassidy was a proud Northern Irishman but also an adopted Geordie, having had a long association with Newcastle. He was born in Belfast in 1950 and became a successful young striker with Glentoran, scoring a hat-trick in a Northern Ireland Cup final in 1969.

The following year Newcastle brought him to Tyneside and arranged for his parents and three brothers to join him there to escape the Troubles. All the brothers went on to marry women from northeast England. Cassidy was married to Rosemary and they had four children, Jennifer, Anders, Victoria and Hannah.

It took some time for Cassidy to establish himself as a Newcastle player. He struggled to keep his weight down, once admitting ruefully to one of the

fitness coaches: "I found myself passing a Chinese restaurant on Saturday night and here I am, a pound and a half heavier."

Yet there was no doubting his ability as a midfielder who was never the speediest but used the ball well, creating opportunities for strikers such as Malcolm Macdonald. Cassidy, said Macdonald, "had wonderful skills and could glide over the grass when dribbling with the ball. He had great awareness of everything around him. He made so many goals for me."

Cassidy also scored goals of his own, notably a powerful shot from more than 30 yards against West Ham United, a beautifully controlled volley from the edge of the area against Queens Park Rangers and another long-range goal in a 3-1 win over Newcastle's great rivals Sunderland. That reinforced his reputation as a hero among fans, who also admired his wild hair and sideburns. These were, however, only brief moments of consolation as Newcastle failed to win trophies. Cassidy was on the losing side in the 1974 FA Cup final and 1976 League Cup final.

His international career, meanwhile, was marked by periods in and out of the Northern Ireland team after a debut in 1971. He scored one memorable goal, a winner against Scotland in 1974 and

won 24 caps, ending with the 1982 victory over Spain.

Cassidy's time at Newcastle had ended in 1980 when he surprised many by dropping into Division Three to join Burnley. In 1983 he moved to Apollon in Cyprus, where he also began a managerial career, but left after exposing corrupt payments to referees. Thereafter he managed Gateshead back in the northeast, and Glentoran, Ards and Sligo Rovers in Ireland. Returning to England he managed at Workington, Whitby Town and Blyth Spartans.

After retirement he worked in a sports shop and complained that modern football bored him. "I played with lads like Malcolm Macdonald and George Best and they would be horrified if we tried to play this bland style of football which seems to boil down to ball retention."

Cassidy made poignant visits to the Memory Café at Newcastle United, attended by fans suffering from dementia. Lately his own brain disorder worsened and the memory of spectacular goals, defiant wins and wild nights out slowly faded away.

Tommy Cassidy, footballer and manager, was born on November 18, 1950. He died of complications from Alzheimer's disease on August 2, 2024, aged 73

THE TIMES

Benito Nonino

Il 'padre della grappa' italiana la cui distilleria di famiglia ha elevato il parente rozzo e povero del vino a bevanda premium



Benito Nonino con la moglie Gianniola e le figlie Elisabetta, Antonella e Cristina, tutte che lavorano nell'azienda di famiglia.

Contrariamente agli stereotipi, la cucina e la viticoltura italiana sono dinamiche e si sono evolute notevolmente negli ultimi 50 anni. Si suppone che piatti base come il tiramisù e il panettone siano invenzioni piuttosto recenti, mentre la carbonara potrebbe essere stata importata durante la guerra dai soldati americani.

Ciò che ha guidato il cambiamento sono stati gli aiuti del Piano Marshall e l'adesione alla Comunità Economica Europea. Questi hanno trasformato l'economia italiana negli anni '50 e '60, creando una vasta classe media che poteva permettersi di mangiare fuori e, quando lo faceva, desiderava cibi più ricercati. È stato così anche per la grappa. Storicamente era il parente rozzo e povero del vino, ma Benito Nonino e la sua famiglia l'hanno trasformata, come dicono, “da Cenerentola a regina degli spiriti”.

La grappa si ottiene dalla fermentazione delle bucce, dei vinaccioli e dei raspi dell'uva, un residuo noto come vinaccia. Le sue origini risalgono al Medio Oriente e nel XIV secolo, prima che gli alcolici a base di cereali fossero conosciuti, la sua produzione veniva praticata in quello che divenne il cuore dell'Italia, le regioni alpine. Nel XIX secolo, quando nel nord si contavano 200.000 distillatori, veniva associata alla città di Bassano del Grappa, nel Veneto, e al vicino Friuli.

Gran parte della zona era ancora sotto la dominazione austriaca e le vinacce erano ciò che veniva lasciato ai braccianti una volta che i proprietari terrieri avevano ritirato il succo d'uva per le loro tavole. Il bisnonno di Nonino, Orazio, era sovrintendente presso una nobile famiglia ungherese. Operava anche un alambicco mobile, con un carro e un asino che lo trasportava nei vigneti finché non aprì una distilleria nel 1897 a Ronchi di Percoto, a nord-ovest di Trieste.

Per generazioni, tuttavia, la grappa sarebbe rimasta ancora una bevanda alcolica grezza, che conteneva fino al 60% di alcol per volume. Di solito veniva bevuta come digestivo dopo i pasti pesanti o come “correzione” tonificante al caffè prima del lavoro nelle mattine fredde.

Tutto questo cambiò esattamente a mezzogiorno del 1 dicembre 1973. In quel momento Benito Nonino seppe che il suo esperimento aveva funzionato e che aveva distillato la prima grappa ottenuta da un unico vitigno.

Sensatamente, aveva ascoltato sua moglie Giannola, che aveva sposato nel 1962. Lei nutriva profondo rispetto e comprensione per la cultura locale, inculcati in lei dal padre che era rientrato a casa in Friuli dopo aver avuto successo in Argentina.

La vinaccia era solitamente composta da una miscela di bucce di uva rossa e bianca, spesso raccolte dopo essere state asciugate. Giannola Nonino andò dalle mogli dei contadini della zona e, sapendo che volevano non essere dipendenti dalle elemosine dei mariti, promise loro di pagarle se avessero tenuto separati i diversi tipi di bucce e l'avessero a raccogliere quando erano ancora umide.

I Nonino si concentrarono sull'uva Picolit, utilizzata per produrre vino da dessert e nel XVIII secolo una delle preferite dalle corti reali di tutta Europa. Concentrandosi su un'unica varietà, erano in grado di controllare meglio la qualità del prodotto premium che intendevano creare, preservando il gusto distintivo del frutto.

L'anno successivo Nonino fece un'unica distillazione di uve Ribolla. Giannola sapeva che per convincere i borghesi a comprare una bevanda che richiamasse l'identità contadina che molti stavano cercando di dimenticare, avrebbe dovuto avere un aspetto esclusivo. La confezionò in bottiglie con tappi d'argento legati da un filo rosso e scrisse a tutte le persone influenti che le vennero in mente per far avere loro dei campioni.

Il Monovitigno Nonino aprì la strada, presto altri produttori la seguirono. Nel 1983, Benito raddoppiò il numero dei suoi alambicchi da 12 a 24 e li fece funzionare 24 ore al giorno. Quell'anno distillò 1.200 quintali – più di 11 tonnellate e mezza – di vinacce. Poi un giorno un'auto si fermò davanti all'azienda dei Nonino. Scese un autista che ordinò 48 bottiglie di grappa per il suo datore di lavoro, il signor Dolce Vita in persona, Gianni Agnelli, proprietario della Fiat.

Benito Nonino era nato a Percoto nel 1934. Il suo nome gli fu dato dal padre Antonio, in onore dell'allora leader italiano Mussolini. Per fortuna la madre Silvia ebbe più giudizio e, rimasta vedova negli anni Quaranta, divenne la prima donna in Italia a produrre grappa e a gestire una distilleria. Cuoca raffinata, utilizzò la sua conoscenza delle erbe per migliorare l'amaro della casa, o liquore alle erbe. Il nonno paterno di Benito, Vigi, aveva una pari reputazione di intraprendenza, essendo ammirato a livello locale per aver salvato le proprie mucche dalle forze austriache durante la prima guerra mondiale offrendo alle truppe con la sua grappa.

Amante dei dolci, della canoa e della bicicletta, Benito era un uomo dalle emozioni riservate e lasciava che le sue capacità parlassero da sole in distilleria. Nel 1984 fu il primo a creare un distillato di uva intera, che chiamò UE.

Oltre a far progredire la grappa, i Nonino cercarono di preservare altre tradizioni importanti della cultura friulana. A metà degli anni '70, mentre cercavano di distillare altre uve locali, scoprirono che,

non rientrando nell'elenco di quelle considerate fondamentali dalla CEE per la viticoltura della regione, tre varietà che un tempo erano state molto apprezzate non potevano più essere coltivate.

Erano lo Schioppettino, un'uva rossa quasi sterminata da un'epidemia di fillossera un secolo prima, il Pignolo, un altro rosso dai grappoli fitti come le pigne da cui prendeva il nome, e il Tazzelenghe. Giannola Nonino pressò i funzionari europei per diversi anni finché non venne emanato un decreto di revoca del divieto.

Allo stesso modo, nel 1975 la coppia fondò il Premio Internazionale Nonino di Letteratura. Viene assegnato a scrittori il cui lavoro è radicato e preserva la loro cultura, e in una mezza dozzina di occasioni i suoi perspicaci giudici hanno anticipato di diversi anni l'approvazione del comitato del premio Nobel.

Giannola è stata nominata cavaliere del lavoro (l'equivalente italiano di *dame*) nel 1998, una delle prime 25 donne a ricevere questa onorificenza. Nel 2003, gli alambicchi di suo marito producevano più di un milione di litri di grappa l'anno, il 20% dei quali destinato all'esportazione.

La chiave di quel successo è stata il crescente coinvolgimento nell'azienda delle figlie della coppia, Cristina, Antonella ed Elisabetta (c'era una regola familiare secondo cui era meglio escludere i mariti). Fra i loro contributi, dopo un decennio di ricerche, la scoperta di come distillare il miele, un prodotto che chiamarono Gioiello. Con la famiglia al timone fino alla sesta generazione, la nipote di Benito, Francesca, ora gestisce i social media di Nonino come "influencer della grappa".

Sebbene da alcuni anni fosse costretto su una sedia a rotelle a causa di una malattia, nel suo ultimo pomeriggio di vita Benito chiese di poter visitare per l'ultima volta la distilleria.

Benito Nonino, distillatore è nato il 6 febbraio 1934. È deceduto l'8 luglio 2024, all'età di 90 anni.