



Benito Nonino with his wife Giannola and their daughters Elisabetta, Antonella and Cristina, who all play a part in the family business

OBITUARY

Benito Nonino obituary: Italy's 'father of grappa'

Innovator whose distillery elevated the uncouth, poor relation of wine into a premium beverage

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The popular image of Italian cuisine is as the product of centuries of unchanged tradition. Nothing could be further from the truth. 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.

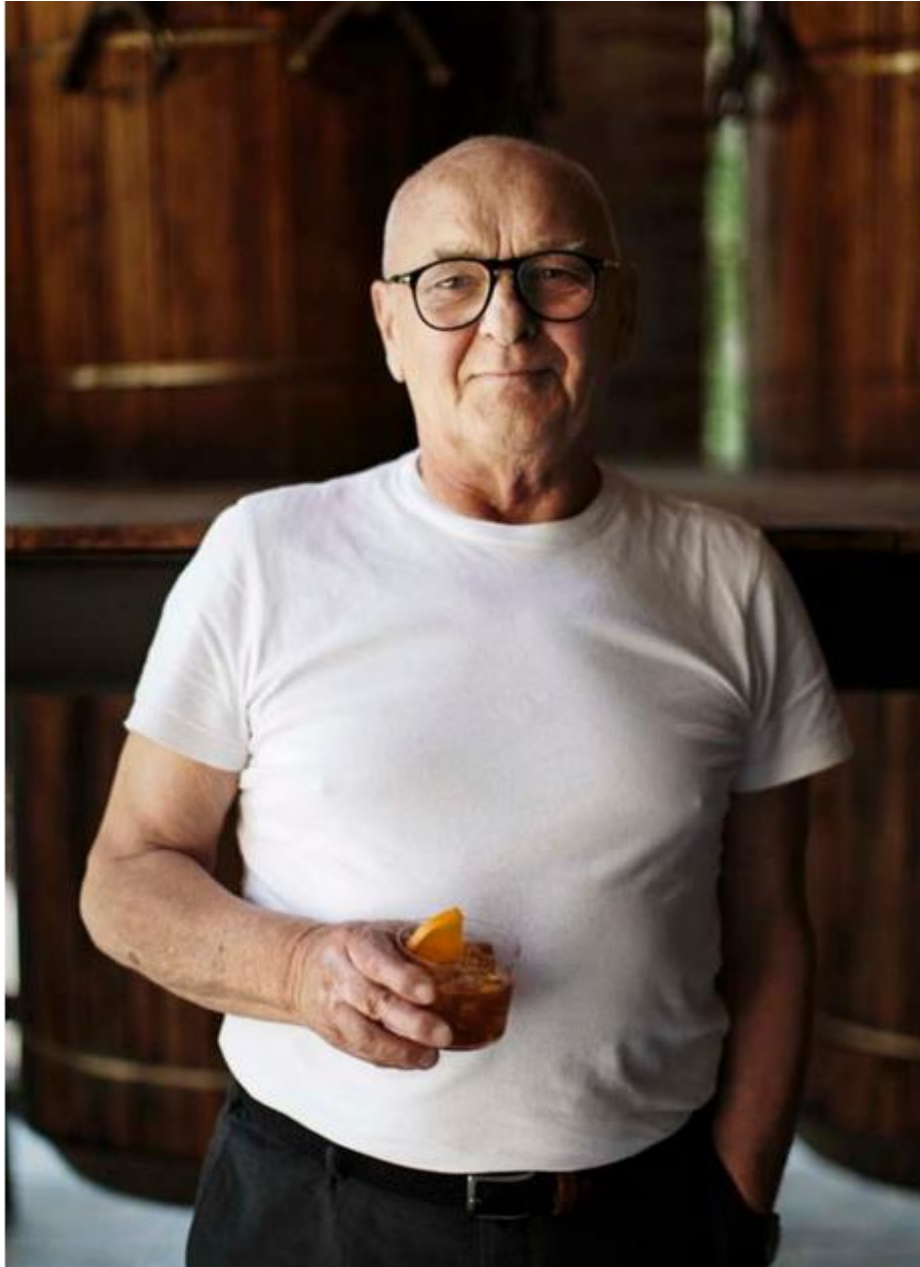


Benito Nonino, left, before his father's death in the 1940s

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 the first grappa made from only a single variety of grape.



Nonino was rightly proud of his business's success

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, instilled in her by a father who had returned home to Friuli after making good in Argentina.

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.



A selection of the company's products

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 plying the troops with his grappa.



Nonino played a hands-on role in the business

While fond of sweet treats, and of canoeing and cycling, 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 traditions 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 percipient judges have anticipated the approval of the Nobel prize committee by several years.

The winners of the prize, now regarded as one of the most prestigious in Italy, have included Ismail Kadare, VS Naipaul, William Trevor, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, John Banville and David Almond. Another longstanding friend was Peter Brook, the director, who in 1996 celebrated the centenary of the family business with a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Oh Les Beaux Jours*.

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 last 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