

# AN INTRODUCTION TO CHIANTI

## BACKGROUND:

### **Chianti Classico: Croce e Delizia**

Chianti Classico can be a fond dream or a horrid nightmare: There's no telling what's in the bottle. Price is no guarantee; tasting is the only option. The reasons for this state of affairs stretch back into the mists of time. Like Carmignano, the Chianti Classico region's special aptitude for producing fine wines was well known early on, and it too was listed in the edict with which Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici's established the boundaries of several wine producing regions in 1716 (Cosimo's edict is the first of its kind, the original *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*).

Jumping ahead in time, in the early 1850s Baron Bettino Ricasoli's young, beautiful wife attracted the attention of a courtier at a state ball. The next day he withdrew to his family's 11<sup>th</sup> century castle, Brolio. There he worked on his wines, developing a blend of Sangiovese (Tuscany's great red grape, also used in Brunello) and Canaiolo grapes that aged well and won medals at wine exhibitions. For wines to be drunk sooner, he added Malvasia del Chianti, a white grape, to the blend. Thus was born the Chianti we know today.

Alas, there were no laws to regulate it, and as soon as other Tuscan producers discovered the word "Chianti" would sell, they slapped it on their labels, regardless of whether their vineyards fell within the area originally listed by Cosimo or not. In 1924 a group of 33 producers banded together and established the Consorzio del Gallo Nero, whose symbol was a black rooster: Only those whose vineyards fell within the area defined by Cosimo could join, and then only if they met rigorous standards (first of which, the wine had to be red). Their number grew rapidly and now exceeds 600. Unfortunately there was nothing to stop producers who decided to forgo the rooster from producing plonk. And they did. In 1966 the Government established a set of regulations, called a DOC, for the Chianti region. For some reason, the commission adopted Ricasoli's formula for wines to be drunk young, and dictated that Chianti should contain 50 to 80% Sangiovese, 10 to 30% Canaiolo Nero, and 10 to 30% Malvasia and Trebbiano (white grapes), *calculated as percentages of vines in the vineyards*.

Though made with good intentions, the provision could not have come at a worse time: The tenant farmers who ran the estates were abandoning the fields for factory jobs, and many of the old owners were getting out. The new owners read the rules, and since Trebbiano vines (which Baron Ricasoli did *not* use) produce twice as much as most others, planted as much Trebbiano as they could, assuming that the more Chianti they made the more they would sell. Many were making what was nominally a red wine with 50% white grapes. The stuff didn't age well, didn't travel well, and wasn't well received. Prices plummeted and wineries went with them.

By 1970 some of the survivors, led by Antinori, realized they needed to take drastic measures to improve quality: They abandoned the formula and began to make table wines with just the red grapes, adding in some cases Cabernet or Merlot to improve the body and structure of the wine, and aging the wine in barriques (small oak barrels) to increase

its complexity. Thus were the Super Tuscans like Tignanello, a Cabernet-Sangiovese blend, born. The wines were enormously successful, and soon everyone was making them.

In 1984 the DOC commission drew up a new set of rules, and again missed a golden opportunity: It raised the allowed percentage of Sangiovese to 90, but continued to require 5% white grapes, "for the sake of tradition." The commission also allowed producers to use up to 10% non-traditional grapes (Cabernet, Merlot, etc.) - essentially accepting what was already common practice. The quality of the wines increased substantially, and things did look up for the better producers, many of whom stopped using white grapes at all. However, they continued to devote much energy to their Super Tuscans, which they were able to sell for much higher prices than their Chianti.

In an attempt to bring the Super Tuscans back into the fold, in 1995 the commission decreed that Chianti can be made from just Sangiovese, or Sangiovese and Canaiolo, or a mixture of the two and up to 15% non-traditional grapes. Whether the attempt will succeed remains to be seen: Some wineries are planning to relabel their Super Tuscans as their *riserve*, but many are not.

This, in a nutshell, is how things now stand in the Chianti Classico region. The region faces two major problems. One is that it is too large - there are lowlands, highlands, and dozens of soil types and geologic formations. Also, the variations in microclimate are considerable. Some people have suggested, since the entire region has been designated DOCG (a step beyond DOC), that subzones be established to recognize areas whose wines are especially good. One such zone would be the Conca D'Oro at Panzano, a south-facing basin, and another would be the hills that slope to the southeast in the township of Barberino Val D'Elsa. "My vineyards are in one of these zones, so it would be good for me," says Isole e Olena's Paolo De Marchi. But he feels that it's too soon for subzones, because there are often dramatic improvements in the wines when wineries change hands or hire new enologists - people are still learning how to draw the best from their land. The second problem is more philosophical, and perhaps more serious: It is very difficult to say what Chianti Classico *is* today. Is it a wine made just from Sangiovese? Or is it a wine made with Canaiolo and Sangiovese, following Ricasoli's formula for wines to be laid down? Is it a Sangiovese that has added to it Cabernet or Merlot? Or is it a red wine with 15% white grapes? All of these wines exist, and all are Chianti. However, there is an enormous difference between the austere elegance of a pure Sangiovese and the jazzy youth of a wine that contains a healthy percentage of Trebbiano.

The reactions of the producers themselves to this situation are mixed. On the one hand, one smiled and said, "I'll plant Cabernet when Chateau Latour plants Sangiovese" ; Monteverdine's Sergio Manetti went further, saying, "The use of these foreign grape varieties is a disgrace -- write that down -- that denatures Chianti!" On the other hand, Fontodi's Giovanni Manetti, whose Chianti Classico is made with just Sangiovese, said, "If I decided to experiment with non-traditional grapes in Bordeaux they'd make me tear them out. Here I can do what I want. I make Pinot Noir as a challenge, because it's difficult." In short, that same freedom that sometimes has negative effects also allows devoted winemakers to draw the best from their lands.

The end result of all this is that there is terrific variation among good Chianti Classicos. This is actually positive, because it means that you can select wines to match your

requirements. A Chianti Classico D'annata is the yearly vintage, a young wine that, depending on how it is made (red and white grapes, all red, barrel size, etc.), will go wonderfully with pasta, grilled white meat, salads, soups, and fried dishes of all kinds. A substantial Chianti Classico D'annata will even go well with steak. A Riserva, on the other hand, will go well with a roast or cheeses in its youth, and with age will mature into a meditation wine, the sort of rare treasure that's perfect with friends outside of a meal. Finally, there is Vinsanto, Tuscany's wine of welcome and conviviality made from white grapes (mostly Malvasia) picked and set to dry on mats until January, then pressed. The must remains in the barrel for several years, and when it emerges it's nectar fit for the gods.

The trick is to taste widely and remember what you liked.

**Technical Stuff:**

Chianti Classico is a red wine, produced in the townships of Castellina, Greve, Radda and Gaiole, and in parts of the townships of San Casciano, Tavarnelle, Barberino, Poggibonsi, and Castelnuovo Berardenga. The Wine is a red wine, made from a blend of grapes; though the discipline does lay down some general guidelines, producers are allowed considerable latitude:

Sangiovese up to 100%

Canaiolo Nero up to 10%

Malvasia del Chianti and Trebbiano up to 5%

Other red grape varieties, both local (colorino, mammolo, etc) and foreign (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, etc) up to 15%

The maximum allowable yield is 75 quintals/hectare, with a maximum yield into wine of 53 hectoliters/hectare (2750 bottles per acre). Riserva must be aged for 3 years from the January following the harvest, while the Chianti Classico D'annata can be released after about 14 months.

Good Food & Drink,  
Elisabetta