

# Reconsidering Chianti Classico

The world of wine is always in flux. A mere 60 years ago, locals in Chablis could ski down Les Clos in winter without touching a vine and Diamond Creek's Gravelly Meadow was a barren hillside. In Tuscany, it was only 25 years ago that Poggio di Sotto produced their first wine. Changes in trends, discoveries of plots, development of new techniques, and shifts in philosophy happen all the time. As sommeliers, we have a unique power to affect change in the wine world based on what we support and how we disseminate information.

It is easy to believe that our power rests solely in our ability to enable the success of existing wine. But we actually have the power to influence how wine is made, to encourage wine regions to make a fuller and more complete expression of what they have, and to promote greatness where it does not yet exist.

Enter Chianti Classico. A region with a dubious past and a serious image issue. A region that could sell a million \$10 bottles of wine before it could sell one \$100 bottle. A region that suffers from its relation to its motherland, with which it shares half its name. A region that has regulated itself in ways that run counter to the production of fine wine.

But fine wine Chianti Classico has. So here's the argument: that Chianti Classico is the most underexploited fine wine region in the world. It has the potential to be developed in a monumental way, but it has yet to be *realized*—either in terms of discovery or actualization.

It's not our fault, but there is something we can do about it.

## The Challenges of Branding Chianti Classico

---

"I Ate His Liver with Some Fava Beans and a Nice Chianti"

"We need a few more Chiantis on the list." "I'd like to order a bottle of Chianti." "We were just in Chianti for a week." Excluding final conclusions in blind tasting flights, when was the last time you said *Chianti Classico*? For decades in the US, the region has been lumped in with Chianti, which is known for cheap and cheery Italian red wine, most at home on a red-checked tablecloth with some spaghetti and meatballs. Having "Chianti" in its name has not done Chianti Classico any favors. Imagine if Barolo had been called Langhe Classico or Châteauneuf-du-Pape had been named Bas-Côtes du Rhône!

[Chianti Classico](#) and [Chianti](#) are separate DOCGs. Chianti Classico has stricter DOCG requirements for selection of grapes, time spent aging, and minimum alcohol than Chianti. But, more than anything,

Chianti Classico is a region where the wines take on the characteristics of the place.

In 1932, the appellation boundaries for Chianti were drawn (and drawn widely) by the Italian government. The way many producers of Chianti Classico tell it, Mussolini wanted any Sangiovese produced in Tuscany to be called Chianti. While this statement is perhaps a myth of the region, it reflects the worldview of those in Chianti Classico: that Chianti is not necessarily a wine of place, but just a style of wine. It's hard to argue with this. Exceptions exist, of course, but it tends to be the case, discounting Chianti from the world's fine wine regions. Chianti Classico's linguistic and historical ties to the region keep dragging it into the realm of Chianti, removing it in many people's minds from the registrar of fine wine regions.

## The Price Cap

Largely as a result of the aforementioned association, expensive Chianti Classico is hard to sell. Imagine a \$300 Brunello di Montalcino on a wine list in New York City. This is pretty average, maybe even affordable, for the region. This bottle sells, and it sells well. Now imagine a \$300 Chianti Classico on a wine list in New York City. Try. Try harder. Not only does this poor bottle collect dust in the cellar, it probably garners rude remarks like, "Three-hundred-dollar Chianti? Are you out of your mind?" The restaurant stops buying this wine, then the distributor stops buying it from the importer. It eventually goes on closeout so it can be sold next to its friends for less than \$100. The winery gets news from the importer that no one is buying their high-end single-vineyard Chianti Classico (even in New York City!) and that it's now being sold for \$65 next to something that comes out of the cellar in a fiasco.

What's that winery to do? Do they keep investing in this single vineyard? Keep the old vines planted, the yields low, the sorting meticulous? Do they vinify the wine lovingly and raise it for years in barrel and bottle in order to coax out the best possible expression, knowing that they can't sell it for a price that will support their work? Or do they plant young vines, blend their native grapes with flashier Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and get that wine on the market in a year's time and under \$20 wholesale? The usual choice is clear, and understandable.

## Sins of the Past (and Present)

The wines from Chianti Classico that command the highest prices, the most respect, and the greatest critical acclaim are, alas, not labeled as Chianti Classico. Tignanello, Flaccianello della Pieve, and Le Pergole Torte could all technically be released under the DOCG Chianti Classico. They meet the requirements—but they haven't always.

Antinori's Tignanello set the stage for the Sangiovese-based Super Tuscan. The first vintage was 1971, but in those days it was made exclusively from Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1978, when Antinori debuted Solaia (which is dominated by 80% Cabernet Sauvignon), Tignanello became a

Sangiovese-based Super Tuscan, with only a minority use of Cabernet grapes (usually around 20%). Tignanello rode the success of the Cabernet Sauvignon-based Super Tuscan, and proved that Sangiovese could be just as sexy.

Others followed suit, some for different reasons. It wasn't until 1993 that producers could make a Chianti Classico that was 100% Sangiovese. Before this, it was mandatory to blend in other red or white grapes. The producers who wanted to express a Chianti Classico that was 100% Sangiovese were not permitted to do so under the appellation. So instead, they released Super Tuscan, which already had a proven market. Montevertine first released Le Pergole Torte in 1977, Fontodi made Flaccionello della Pieve in 1981, and San Giusto a Rentennano had its first vintage of Percarlo in 1983. These wines proved that Chianti Classico is truly a fine wine region, demonstrating how exquisite the wines can be, how well they can age, and that they can command high prices. But without the name *Chianti Classico* on their labels, the rising tide did not lift any other ships. Instead, quality in the region became associated with a producer and a fantasy name, and not tied to any sense of regionality.

The sins of the regulation for Chianti Classico continue today with Gran Selezione. First initiated with the 2013 vintage, Gran Selezione has noble roots. The original idea was to offer a higher tier than Chianti Classico Riserva. These would be wines that spoke of their place of origin. They would be 100% Sangiovese and from a single vineyard, proudly displaying on their labels the communes from which they came (Greve, Panzano, Castelnuovo Berardenga, etc.). And perhaps one day, they would be established as such a beacon of quality for Chianti Classico that the likes of Pergole Torte and Flaccionello could be coaxed back under the wings of the DOCG.

Yet the execution of Chianti Classico Gran Selezione has fallen short of these lofty goals. Succumbing to political pressure, the Consorzio scaled back the requirements for Gran Selezione to allow wineries with unsellable high-end bottlings sitting in their cellars to retroactively label them as Gran Selezione in hopes of making them more attractive. The only requirements were that the wine spend 30 months aging before release (a mere 6 months more than Chianti Classico Riserva) and that all the fruit had to be estate grown. Commune of production could not be advertised on the label. Many quality producers are flirting with Gran Selezione, enchanted by the idea that the world could support a higher-end Chianti Classico, but many more don't feel the category does enough or does the right things to help cultivate that support.

## What's a Sommelier to Do?

---

### Divide and Conquer

First, stop conflating Chianti and Chianti Classico. Yes, it's already three syllables, so adding three more seems laborious. And yes, we love abbreviating things in this industry: *Why say Romanée-Saint-Vivant*

*when you can say RSV? Why say Cabernet Sauvignon when you can say Cab?*

But this is not an abbreviation: Chianti Classico refers to a completely different region, and when we conflate the two in our minds, in our speech, and on our wine lists, we do a disservice to Chianti Classico. So, if you need to abbreviate: CC. CCR can be Chianti Classico Riserva. CCGS is Chianti Classico Gran Selezione. Let's get these into our vocabulary rather than always resorting to Chianti, and let's describe the difference to our guests.

## Talk about Terroir

Sure, *terroir* is a word that's gotten overblown and deflated, now an impotent, saggy balloon in the wine industry. It's been so overused that it barely means anything anymore. But we know what it signifies—a wine of a place—and we know this is important. Just as we must separate Chianti from Chianti Classico, we can go further and separate Chianti Classico into its many different terroirs. The difference truly is remarkable. From the dark-fruited wines made in Panzano's Conca d'Oro, to the high-toned elegance of Radda, to plush and juicy wines of Castellina in Chianti, the region swings dramatically in topography, climate, and soil from one end to the other. As in any region, some of the communal delineations can be political, but there are undeniable distinctions across the region.

We must do for Chianti Classico what the villages of Beaujolais have done for themselves. To distance themselves from a region of insipid production (sound familiar?), these villages became appellations, making Morgon or Fleurie the largest word on the label, not Beaujolais. If Chianti Classico were talked about in terms of Greve, San Casciano, and Gaiole (and if one day they could go even further and put Lamole, Ruffoli, and Panzano on labels), the region could be thought about in terms of *terroir*, and not as just Sangiovese from Tuscany, as Chianti's legacy implies.

## Explore Older Vintages

Chianti Classico ages, as demonstrated by older vintages of Flaccionello, Pergole Torte, and Tignanello. But we rarely see older wines on the market labeled Chianti Classico. They are sold off young, usually at a low price, and there is no demand for wines with age. If we can approach our distributors for older vintages (they certainly exist) and show off to our guests and consumers how well these wines age, we can start creating the demand, and soon a secondary market.

With age, Chianti Classico becomes more savory and less harshly acidic, deeply expressive and seductively scented. A fascinating change occurs, even in the humblest of wines, with 8 to 15 years of age—and they are recklessly affordable.

## Support Price Differentiation

No one questions a wine list that has a \$500 bottle of Barolo next to a \$100 one. Many factors could justify the first wine's higher price: it comes from a single vineyard, it comes from a more prestigious vineyard site, it spends more time in barrel, it spends more time in bottle, it is from vineyards that see lower yields—and, of course, there is the allure of and demand for specific producers.

Chianti Classico has so long been associated with inexpensive and humble wines that this price discrepancy is surprising. People don't flip to this page in the wine list for a bottle to splurge on, as they do for Barolo and Brunello. Chianti Classico offers a better value at both the low and the high end than either of these regions, yet most consumers look to it only for the low end.

It is our job to make Chianti Classico sexy again. Hand-selling unique and obscure wines has become part of the job for the modern-day sommelier. If you can hand-sell a \$200 bottle of Corsican Nielluccio or Jurassic Savagnin, you can certainly sell a \$200 bottle of Chianti Classico. And, no offense to either of these wines, odds are the Chianti Classico is going to deliver more for the money.

## Identify Food Pairings

One of our most important jobs as sommeliers is to pair wine with food. Chianti Classico wants to make that easy for you. It makes everything taste better, and tastes better with just about any food you put in front of it. Think Cabernet Sauvignon is the best steak wine? Think Grüner Veltliner is the best pairing for crunchy and bitter vegetables? Think Greek wine is the best choice with olive oil-drenched cuisine? Think sheep's cheese is best with the wines of the Roussillon? Consider Chianti Classico as well, for all of these pairings. The more we can suggest it as a pairing for specific dishes, the more Chianti Classico will be in the lexicon of fine wine and food pairing, and the more it will be in the canon of fine wine.

## But Why?

---

Chianti Classico is a successful wine region, with a bustling economy sustained by the wine industry. There are castles and villas everywhere you look, with wine-centered tourism booming. It is truly one of the most beautiful places in the world, with excellent cuisine, luxurious lodgings, and an incredibly marketable name. Vintners may not be able to sell their wine at high prices, but they have no trouble selling their wine, and plenty of it, at lower prices.

The reason to support these wines, and to support them in a very specific fashion, is not to economically bolster the region, but rather to allow dozens of dedicated and determined producers to make the wine they want to make. It is in our interest as wine professionals, and it is a service to our guests and clients, to introduce more extraordinary wine to the world. We have the power to discover great wines hiding out of our view and, moreover, to encourage production of the masterpieces yet to be crafted.



**Cole Sisson** *over 3 years ago*

Well done.



**Maximilian Kast** *over 3 years ago*

Very compelling piece Jane. A lot of food for thought, particularly the idea of village dominant labels. Bravo!



**Benjamin Weathersby, CSS, CSW** *over 3 years ago*

What a great read!



**Nate Garn** *over 3 years ago*

Thank you! Thank you!



**Jane Lopes** *over 3 years ago*

**Raffaele Mastrovincenzo** I tend to agree with you -- I prefer Chianti Classico without Bordeaux varietals -- but the DOCG has always allowed them, so I don't think we can say that it's not a good example of the style (or ever the terroir). It's also pretty useful to have Tignanello up your sleeve when discussing the age-ability and merits of Chianti Classico.

▼ [View More](#)