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# Chianti Classico



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Vineyards of the World

**T**uscany: the name alone conjures up images of the timeless landscape with its forested hills, cypresses, villas and old farmhouses. It is impossible for a visitor to the region not to be enchanted by the ambience. As Oz Clarke put it so well: 'You can't go to Tuscany without wanting to be more like the Tuscans.' And it is in the very heart of Tuscany—between the ancient cities of Florence and Siena—that the most famous of the Italian wine regions, Chianti Classico, is to be found. In fact, there are another six zones in Tuscany entitled to use the name Chianti for their wines: Chianti Montalbano, Chianti Colli Fiorentini, Chianti Rufina, Colli Senesi, Colline Pisane and Colli Aretini. But, it is really Chianti Classico, followed closely by Chianti Rufina, which produces the wines of repute.

The Chianti Classico region is 40 km north-south by 25 km west-east. The hilly landscape is far from a viticultural monoculture, and the vineyards, interspersed with forests, olive orchards, sunflowers and so on, occupy just 10% of the total surface area. One reason is because the main grape varieties will only ripen satisfactorily on the best sites. The hills provide desirable aspects and cooling breezes: for example, Sangiovese is said to require a southerly aspect for reliable ripening.

Wine has been produced in the region for many centuries—the first recorded mention of the term Chianti applied to red

wine was in 1404. The first attempt at geographical delimitation was in 1716. Prior to the 1960s, vineyards, as we know them, were rare—vines were mixed with other crops, perhaps as single rows between plots used for other crops. Massive replanting took place in the 1960s and 1970s. There are 7,000 ha of vineyards entitled to Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) status.

Before the 19th century, it is likely that the typical red wine of the region was a blend of predominantly Canaiolo (red), with lesser contributions of Sangiovese, Mammolo and Marzemino (all red). In 1872, Baron Ricasoli recommended that Chianti Classico should be based on Sangiovese; however, it is likely that Canaiolo persisted as the major variety of the blend until the early 20th century. Subsequently, the DOC regulations of 1967 permitted inclusion of 10 to 30% Malvasia Bianca and Trebbiano (both white), apparently aimed at production of large volumes of fast-maturing, easy-drinking wine, often sold in the characteristic straw-covered bottles known as fiaschi. (Such bottles were obbligatorio as decorative items in the Italian restaurants of my youth). When Chianti Classico achieved DOCG status in 1984, the only change was the potential inclusion of up to 10% of non-traditional varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. For example, the Chianti Classico of renowned producer Isole e Olena comprises Sangiovese (90%), Canaiolo (8%) and Shiraz (2%). The regulations now allow Chianti Classico to be 100% Sangiovese (the minimum is 75%) with a maximum 5% of Canaiolo. The use of white varieties in the Riserva wine classification is likely to cease in the near future.

Sangiovese, like Pinot Noir, is less pigmented than many other red wine varieties—it is lower in acylated anthocyanins—and it is possible that Canaiolo was used in the blend to add colour. Malvasia Bianca, on the other hand, is said to add fragrance and to soften the palate. Also, because the other traditional red varieties reach maturity earlier than Sangiovese, this provided extra body to the wine in poor years. Today that role is more likely to be played by Cabernet Sauvignon or Shiraz than Canaiolo. Nevertheless, there are some producers who will argue that Canaiolo is essential for the typical character of a Chianti Classico.

Because the landscape is very undulating, the region is climatically very variable.

Altitude has a major influence on temperature and vineyards can be found from 250 to 600 m. However, Sangiovese is said to ripen most successfully when grown on sites lower than 380 m. Summers are hot and winters are cold; for example, MJT is 23.1°C (ranging from 24.0°C at 50 m to 22.0°C at 450 m) and CTL3 is 17.7°C. Autumn rainfall is critical: there is an inverse relationship between vintage rating and September rainfall. Average growing season (April to October) and September rainfall are 452 mm and 79 mm respectively. Hail and frost are the major problems. The most favoured soils are the calcareous marls (galestro), principally found in the central part of the region. In the north, clay soils are more common.

Row × vine spacing is 1.7 to 2.5 m × 0.75 to 1.0 m; newer vineyards tend to have the closer spacings. The trellis is a

VSP type with fruiting wire at 50 to 70 cm, two pairs of moveable foliage wires and a single fixed foliage wire at the top of the post at 110 to 140 cm. Sangiovese is normally trained to a unilateral cordon and pruned to one-node spurs. Pruning, generally by hand—although mechanical pre-pruning may be used—is relatively severe with retention of just 3 to 4 spurs per vine. In higher-yielding vineyards, at least 2 arched canes per vine may be used for all varieties. Shoot density may be as low as 5 to 6 per lineal m. Bunch thinning close to veraison is a standard practice to ensure maturity before autumn rains. Irrigation is not permitted on bearing vines. Budburst is in early to mid-April and harvest typically commences in mid-September (at low altitudes) to early October. The principal rootstocks are 420A and 3309 on deep soils and 110 Richter and 779 Paulsen on dry, calcareous soils.

In order to classify as Chianti Classico, the wine must have a minimum alcohol of 12% alcohol (12.5% for Riserva) and the yield must not exceed 8.5 t/ha (or 3 kg per vine). In addition, when a vineyard is planted, five years must elapse before its grapes can be used for Chianti Classico. Approximately 20% of production is used for Riverva wine (sourced from the best vineyards), which is aged in wood—both large and small oak—with a life expectancy of 10 years or more.

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Mean July temperature (MJT) and continentality (CTL): average of several meteorological stations in the region. Source: McKay et al. (1999)

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The Fonterutoli vineyard in south-west Chianti Classico.



Isole e Olena at the end of the 2003 season. Note the basal leaf defoliation caused by water stress.

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