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Chianti Steps Out of Its Straw Skirt

AN IDENTITY RENEWED Sangiovese grapes, which thrive in Tuscany, are the core of Chianti wines.

THE Chianti region in the hills of Tuscany is the spiritual home of the sangiovese grape. With its black cherry and violet aromas, its earthy mineral flavors, its lively acidity and its sometimes dusty tannins, sangiovese speaks directly from the Italian soul.

At least that's the idea. Unfortunately it has rarely worked out that way. Like a family constantly at odds, Chianti has seldom been able to present a unified face to the world, except, alas, for those straw bottles that were once emblematic of Italian wine.

A good deal of Chianti's troubles have been self-imposed, as Italian wine bureaucrats have veered wildly in the past 40 years trying to define and redefine what makes a Chianti, generally at the expense of sangiovese.

Nonetheless, the greatness of the sangiovese grape is winning out. In a tasting of 25 bottles from the Chianti Classico territory, the heartland of the Chianti region, the wine panel found many satisfying bottles. The good ones seemed to speak not only of the grape itself but of the Tuscan hills where sangiovese vines flourish as they do in few other places in the world.

For the tasting Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Charles Scicolone, wine director at I Trulli restaurant, and Gabrio Tosti di Valminuta, proprietor of De Vino, a largely Italian wine shop on the Lower East Side.

It's not often that the wine panel is of one mind, but we all agreed on how much we enjoyed these wines.

"I picked up the glass and smelled it and said, This is sangiovese," Charles said afterward, and Gabrio echoed his thoughts: "My mouth was tingling, and that's Tuscany."

Not that all the wines were alike. A few were clearly New World in style, with aggressive flavors of vanilla and oak from being stored in small barrels of new wood. We eliminated these, as they lacked any sense of regional identity.

A few more were eliminated because they tasted too much of international grapes like cabernet sauvignon, syrah or merlot, all legal in Chianti yet pointless in excess, unless the idea is to eliminate what makes these wines distinctive.

All on the panel would probably have said they liked traditional Chiantis best, but really, with Chianti, traditional is a meaningless word.

It has generally been a blended wine, made primarily of sangiovese but also with several other red grapes and even some white ones. In fact, the father of Chianti, Baron Bettino Ricasoli, who codified Chianti production methods in the mid-1800s, called for as much as 30 percent white grapes like trebbiano and malvasia.

More than a century later, as the rest of the wine world was modernizing its viticulture and cellar techniques, Italian bureaucrats clung to the old ways, enforcing the formula despite the large number of thin, unpleasant wines being produced.

In the 1970s many serious Tuscan winemakers began to direct their best efforts elsewhere, making wines with grapes or blends unsanctioned by the bureaucracy. These wines came to be known as super-Tuscans, and while some showed what Tuscany could do with cabernet sauvignon and the international grapes, others demonstrated what could be done only with sangiovese.

One of these was Sergio Manetti of Monteverdine, in the heart of the Chianti Classico region, who was so disgusted with the rules of Chianti that he simply withdrew from the denomination.

Today, I might consider Monteverdine the greatest Chianti Classico producer of all, except that it still does not call its wines Chianti, even though the current rules would let it.

The rules have changed frequently in the last 30 years. Since 2006, Chianti Classico has had to be at least 80 percent sangiovese. The remainder can be made up of indigenous grapes like canaiolo and colorino, or international varieties like cabernet, syrah or merlot.

Obviously, that leaves a lot of room for variation: a Chianti Classico can be 100 percent sangiovese, or it can contain 20 percent cabernet, which can dominate the sangiovese. But no longer can it contain white grapes.

For the tasting, we restricted ourselves to Chianti Classico, the historical Chianti zone. We focused on basic Chianti Classicos, ignoring the more expensive riservas, which I often find to be more oaky as a result of a misguided star treatment. We focused on the most recent vintage, 2005, a very good year, although we included some from '04, which was also very good.

Even so, we missed some excellent producers like Castell'in Villa, which has not yet released its '04, along with others whose wines we did not find, like Castello di Ama, Castello di Volpaia and Monsanto. Our clear favorite was the exemplary 2004 Fontodi, which had an almost brunello like intensity with classic sangiovese flavors, body and texture. The Fontodi is all sangiovese, with minimal new oak treatment.

Our No. 2 wine, the 2005 Querciabella, uses a little more new oak and is about 5 percent cabernet. While it has a little more polish, it nonetheless speaks with a clear Chianti Classico voice.

Badia a Coltibuono is the only producer with two wines on our list, both excellent values. The No. 3 Badia a Coltibuono is made with estate-grown grapes and is a benchmark Chianti Classico from the sangiovese point of view, with its cherry and violet aromas. The No. 4 Coltibuono, made from purchased grapes, is similar in style if a bit simpler, and at \$14 was our best value.

All the wines we liked showed the beauty of sangiovese. One disappointment was with a bottle of Isole e Olena, a well-regarded producer, which was flawed.

It's unlikely that the journey is over for Chianti Classico. The last two decades have seen too much turmoil and shape-shifting for the road ahead to be smooth. But it tastes as if Chianti Classico is heading in the right direction, and that is cause for celebration.

Tasting Report: The Hills Are Alive With the Scents of Sangiovese

Fontodi Chianti Classico 2004

\$25

Lovely flavors of cherry, flowers and earth; great intensity and length. (Vinifera Imports, Ronkonkoma, N.Y.)

Querciabella Chianti Classico 2005

\$25

Lively and spicy, with lingering flavors of cherries and violets. (Maisons Marques & Domaines, Oakland, Calif.)

Badia a Coltibuono Chianti Classico 2005

\$17

** 1/2

Lush aromas of violets and cherries; balanced and harmonious. (Coltibuono, Napa, Calif.)

BEST VALUE: Coltibuono Selezione RS Chianti Classico 2005

\$14

** 1/2

Light-bodied, bright and straightforward, with attractive floral and fruit flavors. (Coltibuono, Napa, Calif.)

Monte Bernardi Chianti Classico 2005

\$23

** 1/2

Balanced, with flavors of violets, cherries and a touch of oak. (USA Wine Imports, New York)

Fattoria Viticcio Chianti Classico 2005

\$16

** 1/2

Soft and a bit smoky, with balanced cherry and floral aromas and flavors. (Sherbrooke Cellars, White Plains)

Geografico Chianti Classico 2005

\$12

**

Lingering flavors of ripe cherries and flowers. (Monarchia Matt International, Armonk, N.Y.)

Montesecondo Chianti Classico 2004

\$23

**

Structured yet balanced, with spicy cherry and floral aromas. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

San Giusto a Rentennano Chianti Classico 2005

\$19

**

Full-bodied and lively, with earthy fruit flavors. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Fattoria di Felsina Chianti Classico 2005

\$23

**

Soft and straightforward, with peppery fruit flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)