

THE NEW FACE of CHIANTI

A project launched in the late 1980s has transformed the way grapes are grown in the Chianti Classico region and, as Simon Woods finds, the wines are now reaping the benefits

Travel south from Florence to Siena, and you pass through one of the most picturesque parts of Tuscany, all rolling hills, stunning castles dating from the time when the two cities were at war, olive trees and vines. Chianti has been produced in this rural idyll since the 13th century. But while it's one of the world's most famous wines, unfortunately it has also been one whose quality has undulated just as much as the landscape.



Today, the wine made in this region is labelled Chianti Classico, to set it apart from similarly styled wines made in other parts of Tuscany. But it hasn't always lived up to its 'classic' status – and the Italians have only themselves to blame. The backbone of the wine is the Sangiovese grape, the same one used for Brunello di Montalcino. However, it's cooler here than in Montalcino, and the wines are generally lighter in body and higher in acidity.

For this reason, producers developed a habit of adding small amounts of white grapes in less than perfect vintages to give a more user-friendly blend. So unfortunately, when the Italian authorities first drew up

the rules for production of Chianti Classico they stipulated that the wine had to include a proportion of white grapes.

When Chianti Classico became a DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) in 1967, and the rules still insisted that white grapes be used, many producers decided they'd had enough. So they bypassed the regulations and labelled their wines as 'vino da tavola', but rather than being humble table wines, these new cuvées were among the finest wines in Italy. Some were made from 100% Sangiovese, while others included French grapes – Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in particular. These grapes adapted well to the soils of Chianti Classico, and it wasn't uncommon for an estate to produce both a Sangiovese-based vino da tavola and another made entirely from Bordeaux varieties.

In the clamour for these so-called Super-Tuscans, Chianti Classico became something of a 'me-too' wine, with even the very best riservas unable to command anywhere near the price of the newcomers. Two initiatives saved the day. First, the rules were changed in the 1990s to allow Chianti Classico to be 100% Sangiovese, and to include small amounts of both Cabernet and Merlot in the blend. The IGT designation (Indicazione Geografica Tipica) was also introduced to bring the Super-Tuscans under some sort of appellation system – many are now labelled IGT Toscana, for example.



But second, and more important in the long run, was the initiation of the Chianti Classico 2000 project, which aimed to completely overhaul the way grapes were grown in the region. Where once the focus with

clones of Sangiovese had been to produce as much wine as possible, this new initiative sought to maximise quality by selecting the best-quality clones and matching them to the various soils in the region. Producers were encouraged to replant their vineyards with higher-quality vines, and to increase the number of plants grown per hectare – it's better to have a large number of vines each producing a small quantity of grapes, than a smaller number each producing masses of fruit.

As a result, today more than half the region's vineyards are under 15 years old, and the increased emphasis on quality in the vineyards is being reflected in the wines. Forget the pale reds of the past, Chianti Classico has evolved into a wine that combines the structure of Bordeaux with the aromatic intensity and complexity of Burgundy, infused with aromas of Tuscan herbs, and a slightly sour cherry and raspberry edge. And where 10 years ago producers would often look to Cabernet to add backbone or to Merlot for softness, now they're able to achieve similar results by growing a number of different clones of Sangiovese.



Classico character

Increased attention on the vineyard also means the characters of the nine different communes of the region are coming more to the fore. For some producers, such as Giovanni Maretti of Fontodi, there's a case to be made for moving beyond the Chianti Classico name and highlighting these communes. 'Our top wine, Flaccianello, is 100% Sangiovese and began life as a vino da tavola. Then it became an IGT, and with today's laws, I could label it Chianti Classico. However, what I would prefer to do is call it "Panzano" [after the area where it's from].'

But with the renewal of confidence in Chianti Classico not everyone feels the need for such a move. Today's Chianti Classicos and Chianti Classico Riservas – wines that have undergone extra ageing – are winning increasing fans worldwide. It's true that prices have risen, but quality has soared. If you think Chianti is something to wash down pasta, it's time to take another look at wines that are finally as stunning

as the landscape in which they're grown.

Producers to look out for

Castell'in Villa, Castello di Ama, Castello di Bossi, Castello di Brolio, Castello dei Rampolla, Felsina, Fonterutoli, Fontodi, Isole e Olena, Molino di Grace, **Monte Bernardi**, Querciabella, San Giusto a Rentennano.

Recommended vintages

Vintages to look out for are 2006, 2004 and 2001, plus – if you can find them – 1999, 1997 and 1995. Ones to be wary of are the cold, soggy 2002 and the torrid 2003, although as ever with less than favourable years, some good wines were made in both.