

THE POUR

Chianti Classico Riservas to Find Right Now

These longer-aged wines were once notable for being too oaky and powerful. Now, producers are letting the gorgeous purity of the sangiovese grape shine through.



By Eric Asimov

Oct. 18, 2024

I could not have imagined, 10 years ago, that I would be extolling the virtues of Chianti Classico Riserva. But times have changed and here I am, doing exactly that.

I had long been a huge fan of Chianti Classico. I still am. It's one of the world's most undervalued, underappreciated wines. But until recently I did not often enjoy the Riservas, Chianti Classico's denser, more structured, more expensive sibling.

Too often, it seemed, producers sought to justify the presumed higher status of the Riservas by subjecting the wines to what they saw other expensive wines around the world receiving: aging in small barrels of new French oak. This treatment gave the wines a flamboyant polish and sheen that in my mind overwhelmed the gorgeous purity of the sangiovese grape.

This was not a practice restricted to Tuscany, the home of Chianti Classico. All over the wine world in the 1990s and 2000s, producers imagined that their best wines had to be powerful and oaky. Finesse and subtlety were too often sacrificed for

muscle, brawn and ostentation. Wines like these were marked by garish winemaking practices of the cellar rather than the sense of place that comes from the vineyard.

For a long time, my advice was save your money. The less expensive wines, rarely subjected to the same heavy-handed regimen, were often much better.

But in the last decade, producers around the world have throttled back, softening their approach, letting vineyards and wines speak for themselves. The result has been a vast improvement. The greatness of wines like Chianti Classico Riserva, once concealed under layers of makeup, is now apparent. It's a wonderful thing. I found nine bottles from recent vintages that I highly recommend.

Let's clarify some of these terms. The Chianti Classico appellation includes three categories of wine. The first, Chianti Classico, is often referred to formally as Annata, or vintage, and informally as normale. These wines must be aged at least 12 months before they can be sold.

Riservas, the second, must be aged at least 24 months, including three months in bottles, before release. The third is Gran Selezione, which must be aged 30 months, including three in bottles, and can only be made from estate-grown fruit, not purchased grapes.

These three categories are often referred to as tiers in a quality pyramid, with Annatas at the bottom and Gran Seleziones on top. That's misleading. Wines in each category can be top quality, but they differ in the roles they play and in their prices.

The Annatas are often the most accessible. That is, they are delicious to drink when young, though they will improve with age. The Riservas and Gran Seleziones are progressively denser, more concentrated and structured, and generally require a few more years of aging than the Annatas before they become thoroughly enjoyable. They will also usually age and evolve for longer periods.

Which is best? It depends on the occasion. An Annata would be ideal in front of the TV with a pizza or pasta (nothing is better with cooked tomato sauces). You might prefer Riservas and Gran Seleziones, after sufficient aging, for special dinners with friends, which would call for more exalted dishes and wines. But it's not a rigid formula. Go with your gut and taste buds.

How much age do they need? It depends on the vintage and the style of the producer. Among the bottles I found, a 2020 Sa'etti from Monte Bernardi was delicious right now. But a 2019 Caparsino from Caparsa might be more enjoyable after another five years of aging.

Price of course will play a role. Producers will always charge the least for their Annatas and the most for Gran Seleziones, with the Riservas falling in the middle. But one producer's Annata might cost more than another's Riserva. It depends generally on the status of the producers and the demand for their wines.

One thing to note: Since the Gran Selezione category was introduced with the 2010 vintage, some have predicted that the Riserva category would decline as producers diverted their best grapes to Gran Seleziones, for which they could charge more.

I'm sure that's occurred. Not with every producer, but Riservas seem more difficult to find than they once were. Poring through retail sources, I found these nine bottles to recommend. I could not find some of my favorite bottles, like the superb I Fabbri Riserva. If you see it, snap it up. I would also highly recommend Riservas from Querciabella, Castello di Ama, San Giusto a Rentennano and Terreno.

Here are nine excellent Chianti Classico Riservas, in order of price.



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Lamole di Lamole Chianti Classico Riserva Lareale 2020, 14 percent, \$35

Lamole (pronounced LA-mo-lay) is a sub-zone within the commune of Greve-in-Chianti in Chianti Classico, where the high elevation encourages wines of finesse and elegance. This bottle, from Lamole di Lamole, is straight and to the point, a little more concentrated than a Chianti Classico normale and delightful to drink but simpler than some of the better bottles. (Santa Margherita U.S.A., Miami Beach)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Castello di Monsanto Chianti Classico Riserva 2019, 14 percent, \$40

This fragrant, medium-bodied wine comes from the Barberino Tavarnelle region on the western part of the appellation. It is fine, well-balanced and relatively lean, especially compared with wines from the south like the Fèlsina, but it's intense and lightly tannic. (MW Imports, White Plains, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Monte Bernardi Chianti Classico Riserva Sa'etta 2020, 13.5 percent, \$43

As Riservas go, this one is fairly easygoing. It's dense and concentrated but with light, fine tannins. It's pure, earthy and balanced, made entirely of sangiovese that was biodynamically farmed in the commune of Panzano. Like most wines from Monte Bernardi, this one is typically elegant with plenty of minerality. (T. Edward Wines, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Caparsa Chianti Classico Riserva Caparsino 2019, 13.5 percent, \$53

This 100 percent organically farmed sangiovese from Caparsa is superb. It's a bit old school, that is, dense, concentrated and tannic, but it is pure and expressive, with earthy, nuanced floral and mineral flavors. You can drink this bottle now, but it will continue to evolve and improve for at least a decade. (Artisan Wines, Norwalk, Conn.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Poggerino Chianti Classico Riserva Vigna Bugialla 2021, 14.5 percent, \$53

Poggerino farms biodynamically in high-altitude vineyards in Radda-in-Chianti. It's rich, concentrated and quite tannic, yet it is pure and beautifully aromatic, with plenty of energy. Give this bottle a few years before uncorking. (Fleet Street Wine Merchants, Moorestown, N.J.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Fèlsina Chianti Classico Riserva Rancia 2020, 14 percent, \$60

Fèlsina, in Castelnuovo Berardenga on the southern edge of the Chianti Classico zone, tends to produce denser, richer wines because the vineyards are lower in altitude and warmer. Yet they are still characteristically fine and focused. The 2020 Rancia, 100 percent sangiovese, is luscious and supple, fruity yet fine. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Val Delle Corti Chianti Classico Riserva 2019, 13.5 percent, \$64

This bright, gorgeous wine is made entirely of organically farmed sangiovese from vines grown at high altitude in Radda-in-Chianti. The altitude contributes to the wine's lightness and elegance. It's a classic example of intensity without weight. (PortoVino, Buffalo)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Istine Chianti Classico Riserva Levigne 2020, 13.5 percent, \$65

Angela Fronti of Istine is one of a vanguard of women who have taken over family estates that in earlier times habitually went to sons and sons-in-law. Her wines continue to get better and more distinctive each year. The Levigne is characteristically bright, vibrant and energetic, yet relatively light, elegant and gorgeously aromatic. (SoilAir Selection, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Monteraponi Chianti Classico Riserva Il Campitello 2019, 13.5 percent, \$84

From its first bottling in 2003, Monteraponi has become one of Chianti Classico's great estates. Each year Michele Briganti and Alessandra Deiana turn out brilliant wines, generous yet precise. The 2019 Il Campitello, 90 percent sangiovese and the rest a blend of canaiolo and colorino, all grown organically, is concentrated yet light on its feet and delicious to drink right now. (Grand Cru Selections, New York)

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