

Chianti Classico: Sangiovese at Its Most Elegant

High elevations and diverse soils give Chianti Classico its defining character: finesse



Harvesttime arrives at Antinori's Fattoria San Sano in Chianti Classico's Gaiole UGA. (Courtesy of Antinori)

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It's difficult to generalize about Chianti Classico. This large appellation's hidden valleys, high elevations, rocky slopes, sweeping vistas and diverse soil types yield multiple expressions of Sangiovese. It is in this part of

Tuscany that the grape is planted at the highest elevations on well-drained soils, with designated Chianti Classico vineyards encompassing less than 10% of the region's 184,000 acres.

Because Chianti Classico is located inland, close to Monti del Chianti, the climate is cooler and ripening occurs later, allowing ambient temperatures to retain acidity. This produces lighter-bodied wines that show finesse rather than power, offering a mix of fruit and savory elements. Despite their many differences, the wines share the same calling card: elegance.

Sangiovese is not a "fruity" grape, as can be said of Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot, but warmer vintages, thoughtful viticulture and meticulous winemaking emphasize its fruity aspects, mainly cherry along with strawberry, raspberry, black currant and plum. Sangiovese's fruit flavors are often enhanced by floral aromas of violet and rose. On the savory side, Mediterranean herbs such as juniper, lavender, eucalyptus, rosemary and thyme give depth and complexity, as do notes of eucalyptus, tobacco, olive, iron and earth. By nature, Sangiovese is light in color, tannic and high in acidity when grown at Chianti Classico's higher elevations, giving the wines freshness, vibrancy and the ability to age.

In 2014, the Chianti Classico consortium introduced a new category at the highest level of the quality pyramid: *gran selezione*. Wines with this designation must include estate-only grapes, either from a single vineyard or blended from various sites. This marks a significant development, since it moves Chianti Classico toward a vineyard-based classification system for its top-quality wines, away from its former system based on aging and multiple sources. Many estates are producing *gran selezione* from 100% Sangiovese with a vineyard-designated source.

Chianti Classico's vineyards, which are primarily Sangiovese, range from 825 to 1,980 feet in elevation, the sweet spot for the variety. A mix of soils—limestone, schist, clay and sandstone, some of them formed by the sedimentation of old sea beds—results in diverse *terroirs*. Schist (*galestro*) and hard limestone (*alberese*) are common, along with some sandstone as well as more recent alluvial deposits.

These combinations affect the body, acidity, aromas and flavors of the wines. Clay soils give fuller-bodied versions, while sandstone tends to yield more aromatic wines. The *galestro* and *alberese* versions are more angular, linear and well-structured. In general, higher elevations yield higher-acidity wines.

In 2021, the consortium introduced new geographical indications called *Unità Geografiche Aggiuntive* (UGAs). Similar to the *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* (MGAs) of Barolo and Barbaresco, yet each encompassing a much broader area, Chianti Classico's 11 UGAs are a step in the right direction, further consolidating the link between wine and place. Currently, UGAs are only allowed on the labels of *gran selezione* bottlings.

In many cases, the UGAs coincide with the administrative communes, yet there are some exceptions. The commune of Greve is divided into four UGAs (Greve, Montefioralle, Panzano and Lamole); Castelnuovo Berardenga is divided by its geographical entities into Castelnuovo Berardenga and Vagliagli; and the parts of Poggibonsi and Barberino Tavarnelle within Chianti Classico have been named the San Donato in Poggio UGA.

Because the UGAs are so large, it's impossible to generalize a style for each, with one exception: Lamole. The smallest UGA, with 235 acres of vines, Lamole boasts one soil type and mostly high-elevation vineyards. Its wines tend to be lighter in color, with supple tannins and elegant profiles.

A tasting of 19 producers from the Castellina UGA in November 2023 showed me just how difficult it is to find an identifying thread across these broad

geographical indications. The slope facing east toward Panzano is sparse in vineyards and mostly limestone. The western slope is open to the Elsa Valley and the Mediterranean beyond. Their styles tend to correspond with elevation.

The best way to taste the differences in Sangiovese from UGA to UGA, as well as from site to site, is within the portfolio of a single producer. From the 2021 vintage, Antinori introduced three new *gran selezione* made from 100% Sangiovese: Villa Cigliano from San Casciano, Buiano from Castellina and Fattoria San Sano from Gaiole. Despite each estate being planted with the same three Sangiovese clones, the wines are very different. In fact, Antinori planted these clones at its Montalcino and Montepulciano estates as well.

“The choice of using mostly our clones is based on the fact that they have shown great quality and consistency over the years and flexibility that allows them to give very good results, but different ‘styles’ in all the areas,” says Antinori CEO Renzo Cotarella. “As we have done in Chianti Classico with the *gran selezione*, we prefer a character coming from the site than the one coming from different [clonal] selections. We also have to consider that in any case, even with the same clones, the result is different because it is based on how the selection reacts in each single area.”



Laura Bianchi has made the wines at her family's Castello di Monsanto since 1989. (Courtesy of Castello di Monsanto)

Antinori's Villa Cigliano Gran Selezione bottling is a good example of this methodology, reflecting the characteristics of San Casciano, which consists primarily of alluvial soils, with elevations that range from 330 to 1,000 feet. This uniformity of relatively deep soils and lower-altitude vineyards results in Sangiovese that expresses black cherry and blackberry

fruit in a charming style, showing balance, fleshiness and rounded tannins.

Revealing greater purity and a juicy, intense profile, Buiano offers red fruit notes of cherry and raspberry, with floral accents. Fattoria San Sano, from vineyards at 1,230 to 1,475 feet, is racy and full of tension, featuring cherry, raspberry and floral flavors underlined by a mineral streak. The Radda UGA yields elegant, floral-scented Sangiovese, not only because of its high elevations, but also its cooler temperatures, due to its proximity to the Monti del Chianti. This is the home of two of Istine winery's historic *gran selezione*: Vigna Istine and Vigna Casanova dell'Aia. The former, from a steep, northfacing slope, is lighter and more bracing; the latter shows more breadth and structure due to its clay soils. Vigna Cavarchione, from the neighboring UGA of Gaiole, shows more density.

Querciabella, located in Greve, had already begun a sitespecific project before the introduction of the UGA system and the *gran selezione* category. Winemaker Manfred Ing was hired to launch the concept, which began with the 2010 vintage. "The UGA concept filters through everything we do at Querciabella," he says. "I think we are making better wines because of it."

With the 2021 vintage, Querciabella released three *gran selezione*. The SA-LA is pure Sangiovese from Lamole,

what Ing calls “the ballerina,” showing finesse and freshness, with floral and orange peel notes. The Radda bottling is perfumed, offering violet, black cherry and black currant flavors that are elegant yet intense, while the Greve is full of rich black cherry and blackberry fruit, backed by a dense, vibrant structure.

Although the different styles of Sangiovese in Chianti Classico are influenced by geology, soil, elevation and weather, each of these wines shows that the signature of the producer is always a factor as well. It’s a reminder that for fans of Sangiovese, the chance for exploration is seemingly endless.

Chianti Classico DOCG

Vineyard Acreage: 17,784

History: Originally a subzone of the Chianti DOC, which was established in 1967 and raised to DOCG status in 1984, Chianti Classico was recognized as its own separate DOCG in 1996

Categories (Pricing): Annata (\$20–\$35), riserva (\$25–\$50), *gran selezione* (\$50–\$300)

Varietal Composition: Minimum 80% Sangiovese (common local name: Sangiovetto); beginning in 2027, *gran selezione* will require minimum 90% Sangiovese