

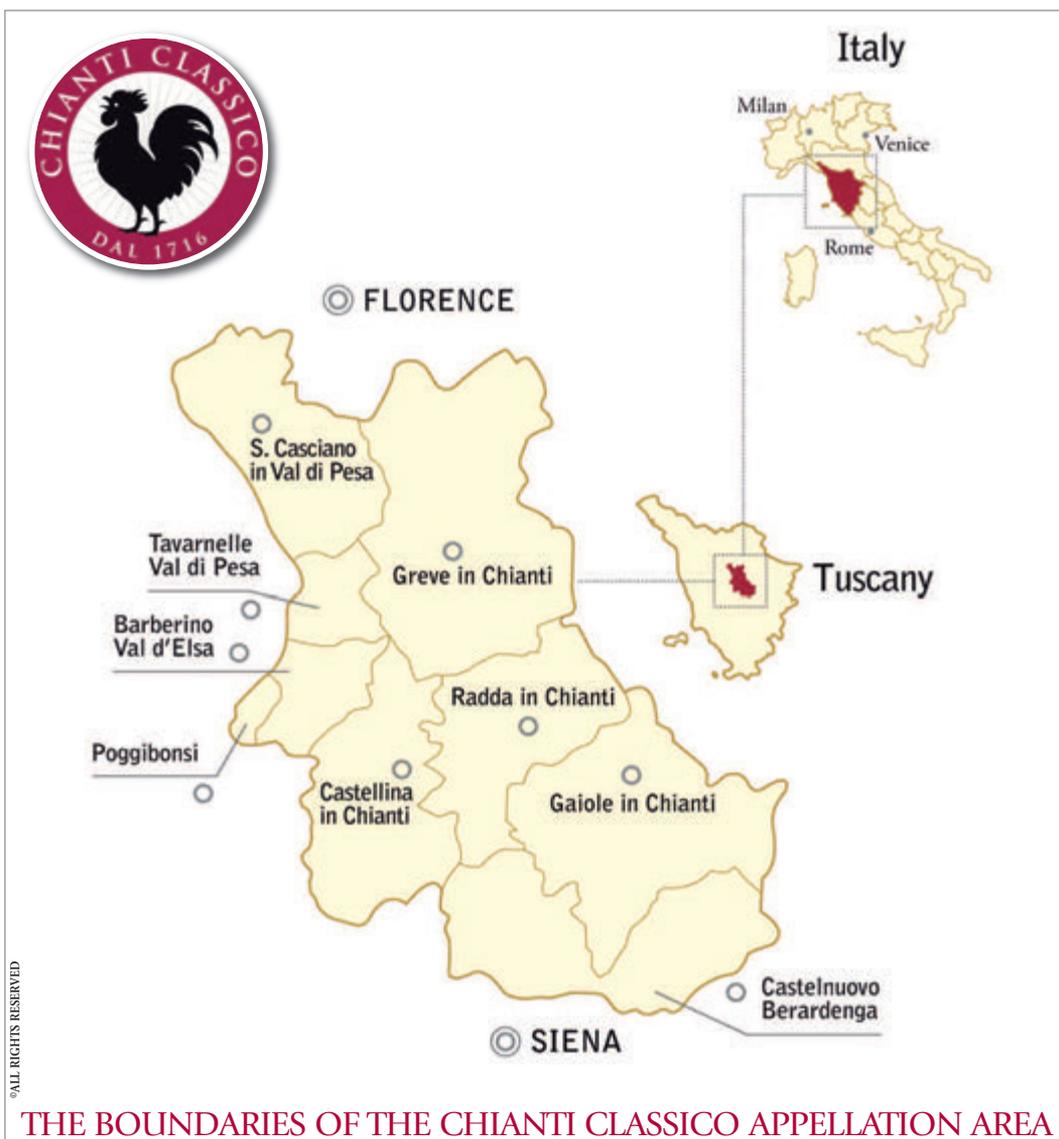
Chianti Classico is back in the limelight

The Anteprema Chianti Collection has witnessed a series of new developments this year. The new Chianti Classico DOCG symbol, the traditional rooster, has been revamped in a way that epitomises producers' newly-found determination to rejoin the world's select circle of fine wines. The rooster is no longer wandering aimlessly but putting its best foot forward with newly groomed plumage against a pale-coloured, bright background that shows off its best side.

BY DELPHINE VEISSIÈRE

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Energy and pride are key to this latest sea-change within the Chianti Classico appellation, as much in terms of image as production specifications. New voices are speaking out thanks to the drive of newly-elected Consortium chair Sergio Zingarelli of Rocca delle Maciè and young entrepreneurs like Michele Zonin of Castello d'Albola who intend to engage with connoisseurs of Chianti Classico.

The message is clear: do not mistake Chianti Classico - which has a different production area and rules and above all portrays idiosyncratic characteristics - for basic Chianti. The superlative Sangiovese grown near Florence and as far as Sienna are infinitely more interesting than the well-structured, muscular and highly oaked red wines that one might expect. Whether its no less prestigious neighbours like it or not, the Chianti Classico rooster can now feature on bottle necks or at the top of the back label as a representative and guardian of the prestigious Sangiovese's

CASTELLINUZZA E PIUCA ESTATE IN GREVE IN CHIANTI

original home. As Sergio Zingarelli points out, the *gallo nero* is more than just a distinctive quality seal, it now embodies "a sense of belonging for the appellation, cementing the relationship between its wines, its *terroir* and its producers".

CHIANTI CLASSICO DOCG AND THE SUPER TUSCANS: A NEW BALANCE OF POWER

Just like classified Bordeaux, the prominent names in the famous village of Bolgheri often lead the way for the finest collections of premium wines whilst Chianti conveys the image of a simple, cheap wine presented in its round bottle known as a *fiasco*. And yet,

Chianti's wine tradition is much older. The oldest written evidence describing Sangiovese, still called *Sangioghetto* ('Sangiovetto' in Chianti Classico) and described as an infallible grape variety producing juicy, well-structured red wines, dates back to 1590 with Gianvettorino Soderini's book, 'Trattato sulla coltivazione delle viti'. Typically, Chianti Classico refers to the heart of the appellation, the original home of the Chianti style. Conversely, the term Chianti refers to wines made throughout Tuscany, based on more flexible production rules. The name Chianti was introduced in the 15th century and represents the area between Florence and Sienna and, from west to east, the area between the village of Poggibonsi and Gaiole. In 1716, Cosimo III de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, awarded it appellation status. In 1984, Chianti Classico became a DOCG, making it one of Italy's most prestigious appellations.

The Chianti Classico appellation is divided into nine separate vineyards: San Casciano in Val di Pesa, Greve in Chianti, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Barberino Val d'Elsa, Poggibonsi, Radda in Chianti, Castellina in Chianti, Gaiolo in Chianti and Castelnuovo Berardenga. From the 2010 vintage, which is already on sale, the Chianti Classico DOCG classification pyramid gained an extra tier with the advent of a new category, superior in quality to the traditional *annata* and *riserva*: Chianti Classico *Gran Selezione* which according to Sergio Zingarelli should account for 5 to 7% of production and is primarily intended for export. Currently, 80% of Chianti Classico wines are bought overseas (primarily in the United States: 28%; Germany: 12%; and Canada: 7%), with *riserva*, soon to be joined by *gran selezione*, even more likely to be exported. The *gran selezione* label will only be granted when the wines are bottled by the company that also owns the vineyard and the winery. The wines will need to mature for at least 30 months after the harvest date compared with the intermediary level *riserva* which must be cellared for at least 24 months. For Chianti Classico *riserva*, after the next harvest, producers will also have to state whether the wines will be labelled as basic *annata* or set aside as *riserva*. The first Chianti Classico *gran selezione* 2010 will be released in June 2013.

As evidenced by the unfortunate events that have surrounded Montalcino in the past, the slippery slope is never far away. By 2008, the number of producers within the appellation had risen from 33 to 600 after it was promoted to DOCG, including approximately 350 bottling companies that are not all local, and the two large co-operative wineries, Grevepesa in Greve and Agricoltori del Chianti Geografico in Gaiole. The area under vine also expanded significantly from the end of the 1960s onwards, reaching a plateau between 2000 and 2009 due to research into clonal selection which improved



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**SERGIO ZINGARELLI,
CHAIRMAN OF THE CHIANTI CLASSICO
WINE CONSORTIUM**



QUALITY FACTORS

the quality of the fruit entering Chianti Classico wines. The clones currently used (compared with the *Rio clone* planted in the 1960s and 70s) are less productive and yield better quality and more balanced wines. Only the red appellations Sagrantino di Montefalco in Umbria and Montepulciano in Tuscany have devoted as much attention to clonal selection. The new consortium's determination to position Chianti Classico as one of the finest wines in the world includes improvements in the vineyard; these are considered to be one of the keys to entering the realms of the world's *serious* wines. It remains to be seen whether wine makers will place greater emphasis on sense of place and expressing a house style, or solely on eliciting vintage variation.

Focusing purely on the 2011 vintage, it can already be described as elegant, well-balanced and showing lots of personality. I was pleasantly surprised by the classic, elegant style of the Bibbiano de Castellina in Chianti estate after tasting the Chianti Classico Bibbiano and the Bibbiano Montornello 2011 which was intense and fruity with a touch of herbs. The palate shows great character: it is silky, full and savoury, tannic and long. Marchesi Antinori Pèppoli showed great classicism: well-balanced and concentrated with a clean, nicely defined palate, no aggressive tannins and an aftertaste of cinnamon. In addition to the Isole e Olene estate, which is always very elegant and pure, Monteraponi de Radda in Chianti was fairly intriguing with its off-the-beaten-track style: clean, almost harsh and austere as revealed by the excellent vibrant and unusual 2009



THE REVAMPED, TRADITIONAL "BLACK ROOSTER" LOGO THAT SYMBOLISES THE CHIANTI CLASSICO DOCG



MARCHESI ANTINORI AND HIS VERY FAMOUS CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA DOCG



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Chianti Classico Riserva, whereas the Castellinuzza e Piuca is, in my opinion, the major discovery of the Antepima Chianti Classico 2013.

2010 EMBODIES THE EXCELLENCE OF CHIANTI CLASSICO DOCG

2010 was an excellent vintage yielding wines that are both intense and concentrated on the nose and express consistent, profound forcefulness on the palate; for the estates that made the greatest impression on me, this precluded any brutality or quest for excessive structure in the wines. The estates I most enjoyed are: Castello di Brolio-Barone Ricasoli, Fontodi and Il Molino di Grace for the 2010 *riserva*. Also of note is the excellent Chianti Classico by Il Castello di Cencio-I Massi, which reveals flowers (violet, iris), a balsamic note and even aromatic plants (linden, eucalyptus, mint) and tea leaf. These particular Chianti Classico boast wonderful freshness and minerality. The finish is occasionally slightly oaky but generally long, without the oxidative notes of mild spices, beeswax and caramel. Some 2010 Chianti Classico showed lots of toast with aromas of roasted coffee obscuring the fruit - like the Castello di Monsanto and the Castello di Radda - whilst others showed huge concentration driven by dried fruits (hazelnut) and cooked plum flesh such as Castello di Ama, Capannelle (Riserva 2010), thus demonstrating an early-maturing style.

In fact, the 2009 and 2008 vintages already show pronounced tertiary aromas, bordering on cep mushroom and black truffle or even clove. I particularly enjoyed the 2009 Il Molino di Grace and the imposing, well-integrated style of the Torracchia di Presura - Il Tarocco estate, whilst the intense clove and medicinal herb nose aromatics of the 2009 San Felice-Riserva il Felice came as a surprise considering the relative youth of the wine. One memorable 2007 Chianti Classico riserva was Il Molino di Grace with its excellent nose aromatics showing black cherry framed by Bourbon vanilla and scents of incense.

The 2012 vintage was as hot and challenging as the previous year and required drastic decisions by producers to try and lower potential alcohol content to under 16° prior to fermentation. Some producers sorted grapes by hand whilst others increased the rate of picking by using machines. It is still early days for comparing the 2012 vintage to 2011. One of the features of 2012 was significant water stress in August which slowed down the vine's growth cycle. September was wet, which proved excellent for slow-maturing grapes such as Sangiovese but fairly detrimental for Merlot which represents the 15% of international grape varieties allowed into the Chianti Classico blend. Fortunately, since 1996, Chianti Classico wines can be made entirely from Sangiovese.

BETWEEN TRADITION AND EXCELLENCE: MARCHESE ANTINORI AND CASTELLINUZZA E PIUCA

It would be impossible not to mention the Marchesi Antinori family, Tuscany's most important wine dynasty which has been growing wines since 1385, spanning 26 generations: it makes mostly Chianti Classico, Montalcino, Montepulciano, Cortona, Maremma, Bolgheri and Colli Fiorentini. Piero Antinori is one of the greatest ambassadors of Italian wines world wide, including those from his native region of Chianti Classico. During my visit to Bargino, where Antinori's new winery has just been opened, I tasted three vintages of Marchese Antinori Chianti Classico DOCG, the 2001, 2004 and 2007 *riserva* wines. Even though the standard is excellent, the 2001 vintage flirts with an international rendition of the appellation, showing strong oak influence compared with the 2004 and 2007 vintages which unfurl wonderful, harmonious fruit defined by well-integrated minerality and freshness. The 2001 Marchese Antinori Riserva is already extremely evolved, driven by mushroom, dried plum and hot spices which do not though obscure notes of wisteria and herbs.

The 2004 Marchese Antinori Riserva shows a more reticent nose on first pour, focusing on cherry, mild spices (cinnamon), a trace of



PIERO ANTINORI WITH HIS THREE DAUGHTERS

black pepper and violet. The palate is well-defined, fresh and elegant with a focused finish showing substantial length. The tannins are well-integrated and oak takes a back seat. The 2007 Marchese Antinori Riserva is excellent and reflects the culmination of a change in style designed to reveal a greater sense of place. Elegant and concentrated, driven by fresh cherry pulp, wild strawberries and blackcurrant, the palate is velvety, long and elegant with flavours of dried plum that stay subtle. It is enjoyable now but will cellar for several years. Whilst much younger, the Castellinuzza e Piuca estate was one of the best wines at the tasting, particularly its 2011 Chianti Classico DOCG - with its scents of violet, cherry, iris and wonderful minerality and texture on the palate - and its 2010 Chianti Classico DOCG, which is floral and fruity with tannins that are still fresh and hold the promise of substantial ageability.

With the introduction of new production rules - one of the primary requirements being longer ageing periods in the traditional oak casks used in Chianti Classico DOCG - the excellent 2010 vintage will include the new 'gran selezione' category due to be released next June. It brings with it the promise of harmonious wines with less angular, more supple and melted tannins as well as a fruit extravaganza centring mostly on cherry rather than red fruit such as strawberry and cooked prune, which are the hallmark features of challenging, hot years. The Chianti Classico DOCG wines from the northern part of the appellation (Lamole and Greve in Chianti) show extremely archetypal characteristics in this vintage: they are elegant, clean, floral and mineral, showcasing fruit pulp whereas the Chianti Classico wines from the South (Castelnuovo Berardengo and Castellina in Chianti) promise to be powerful, well-structured wines driven more by cooked plum and liquorice with tertiary aromas (cep mushroom) mid-palate and interesting ageing potential; because of this they are unlikely to evolve significantly over the next three years.