



BY JIM CLARKE

# CHIANTI 101

**T**homas Jefferson, World War II soldiers, Hannibal Lecter: all appreciated a good Chianti. While Chianti has long been popular in the U.S.—Americans drink more than a quarter of Chianti’s annual production—it sometimes faces a Rodney Dangerfield-like lack of respect.

It’s their own fault. The question that Chianti has never settled on is whether it’s a brand, or a region. Many large producers push for the easy brand recognition to move cheaper, often rustic wine; more premium producers, particularly in Chianti Classico, argue for a terroir-based wine, as shown by the recent push to officially recognize the DOCG’s subzones. It’s a hard slog—getting lazy Americans to simply remember to say “Classico” is challenge enough—but many top producers are forging ahead.

In any case, Chianti continues to work on the shelf, and at the table. Outlets with stretched service staff can rely on the Chianti name to sell itself with many of their customers, and venues with a more hands-on approach can recommend a well-aged boutique example with confidence. Whether you treat it as a workhorse or a thoroughbred, Chianti, as a whole, adapts with equanimity.

## WHERE IT’S MADE

Tuscany; the bulk of the Chianti region stretches from Florence down past Siena.



However, it’s important to distinguish between the Chianti DOCG and the Chianti Classico DOCG; the latter, home to higher quality wines and a longer pedigree, is smaller, confined to a set of hills between those two cities.

The larger Chianti zone is sub-divided into seven other zones, which are beginning to distinguish themselves.

## GRAPES:

Sangiovese reigns supreme; Chianti, alongside Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, is the grape’s most famous home. Chianti DOCG wines must contain a minimum of 70% Sangiovese; international varieties (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, etc.) are permitted, as are local varieties like Canaiolo Nero, Colorino, and nota-

◀ Chianti Classico is effectively the center of the Chianti region, which in fact is now also further demarcated into subzones. The most important subzones are Rufina, Colli Senesi and Colli Fiorentini; others, seen less frequently in the U.S., include Colline Pisane, Colli Aretini, Montalbano and Montespertoli  
ABOVE: Like many Tuscan estates today, Tenuta di Nozzole makes IGT Toscana wine as well as DOCG Chianti Classico, Riserva and Gran Selezione wines.

bly, the whites Malvasia del Chianti and Trebbiano Toscano.

Chianti Classico calls for a minimum 80% of Sangiovese and also allows other local and international varieties, but no white varieties.

While the addition of international varieties, first permitted in 1996, meant Chianti could make darker colored, riper, rounder wines in the so-called “international style,” many producers feel even small additions of varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot overwhelm the character of Sangiovese, and are turning toward 100% Sangiovese wines or blends with only small amounts of the traditional varieties Colorino and Canaiolo.

**CHIANTI** | **CLASSICO**  
**70%** | **80%**

MINIMUM PERCENTAGE OF  
SANGIOVESE GRAPES REQUIRED

### HISTORY:

Early mentions of Chianti, both as a region and as a wine, go back to at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1716 Cosimo III de

### TERMS TO KNOW

**RISERVA:** indicates a minimum of two years aging before release.

**GRAN SELEZIONE:** Introduced in 2014, this new category requires longer aging—30 months—and must be made with estate fruit. Unofficially these wines represent single-vineyard “crus,” expressly because of the extra attention given to the wines.

**SUPERIORE:** Only used for the Chianti DOCG; indicates a minimum alcohol of 12.5% (rarely relevant today, since few Chiantis come in below this).

**GOVERNO:** indicates wine went through an additional fermentation on dried grapes, similar to Valpolicella Ripasso. Done to strengthen the wine and kick off malolactic fermentation.



Sangiovese is a workhorse grape all over Tuscany; clones of the variety also drive the character of Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, legislated that four villages define the official production zone (all four lie within the Classico region today). Late in the following century, Barone Ricasoli would articulate a preferred blend for the wines, placing Sangiovese firmly at the core of Chianti wines.

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian government in effect allowed Chianti to be defined as a style, not a region; the Chianti Classico consortium came together as a direct reaction against the new law. Regulations tightened in 1984, when Chianti and Chianti Classico became DOCGs, and again in 1996, when, among other changes, yield requirements were tightened and white grapes were no longer required in the blend.

### SELLING POINTS

**By-the-Glass:** Most wines from centuries-old, classic regions come in at high price points, but many highly-regarded Chiantis, and even Chianti Classicos, are available at by-the-glass prices.



**Pairings:** Typically lighter bodied, with firm acidity and tannins, Chiantis are quite flexible at the table. While the tannins can be too much for seafood, Chianti is a red that stands up to even red meat without being too full-bodied or heavy, lending itself to summer grilling, for example. They work well with many vegetables (mushrooms, eggplants, etc.) and of course, the acidity makes it great with tomato sauces and pizza.

**Ageability:** For novice drinkers who want to take their first steps toward understanding aged wine, Chianti Classico or Chianti Rufina can make a great, affordable starting point.

### FUN FACTS

Once upon a time, the **fiasco**, a straw-wrapped flask, facilitated transport of Chianti to market by wagon, as there were no navigable waterways until one reached Florence. Only in 1969 did Bordeaux-style bottles surpassed the fiasco in use



Unlike many classic wine regions, Chianti Classico is **not densely planted with vines**; the region 177,500 acres, but less of a tenth of that is actually vineyards.

The **Black Rooster** on Chianti Classico bottles was originally the symbol of the Lega del Chianti, comprised of the towns Castellina, Radda, and Gaiole. The Chianti Classico Consortium began using it as their trademark in 1924.



**Three soil types dominate Chianti:**

- Galestro (friable clay schist)
- Albarese (marl)
- Macigno (sandstone)