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Report #56 Chianti Classico: Exciting Times

Introduction



Chianti Classico is one of Italy's finest wines. Its production zone is the picturesque hills of Tuscany where the magnificent Sangiovese grape thrives. Several Sangiovese-based wines are made in Tuscany, including the renowned Brunello di Montalcino, but Chianti Classico stands out for its quality, character, and affordability.

In recent years the producers of the Chianti Classico appellation have taken numerous steps to continuously improve their vineyards and wines. In recent years the producers of the Chianti Classico have introduced a new, top quality wine category called Gran Selezione, to more prominently showcase the region's best wines. These and other improvements are reflected in growing sales, up 8 percent in 2015 alone. Over 100 countries now import Chianti Classico, with the US the single largest consumer, importing 35 percent of total Chianti Classico production in 2015.

In our first report on Chianti Classico, Report #15 *The Wines of Chianti Classico*, we observed that the Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico had adopted quality-enhancing changes in production rules, including eliminating white varieties from the blend. In addition, its Chianti Classico 2000 project had identified several promising Sangiovese clones as well as better viticultural practices. In the current report we assess the impact of these changes on wine quality and, also, explore the numerous other improvements being made in the vineyard and the cellar.

In the vineyard, we find that high density replantings of vineyards to new clones and massale selection of the best vines and organic farming are improving fruit quality. In the winery, winemakers are using gravity flow, gentle punch downs, ambient yeasts, vineyard block specific fermentations, and in generally treating wine with greater sensitivity to fruit characteristics in order to conserve fresh aromas and flavors. They're also using fewer new bar-

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riques and returning to larger format casks for aging. A growing number of vintners are also forgoing the use of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to highlight Sangiovese and indigenous blending varieties. The result of all these improvements in the vineyard and the winery have contributed to wines that have more finesse and freshness and less aggressive tannins.

In recent years there has been a growing appreciation among the producers in Chianti Classico of the uniqueness of its sub-regions and micro-climates for producing distinctive wines. In recognition of these differences, the better Tuscan restaurants already list Chianti Classico wines by their provenance. Hence, one objective of the current report is to provide an in-depth understanding of the differ-

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ent wine regions and their contributions to the quality and diversity of Chianti Classico. We summarize what's known about the terroir, the producers, and the wines of the major wine-producing communes of Chianti Classico.

In the final section of the report we profile the key producers and exporters of Chianti Classico, organized by sub-region. We also provide extensive tasting notes and ratings of about 200 wines from the 2010-2014 vintages tasted for this report, including Gran Selezione wines and single vineyard (cru) wines. These tastings help us in exploring the question of "what next" for the Consorzio and for Chianti Classico to continue the region's quality improvements and to raise its image consistent with the very high quality, Sangiovese-based wines being produced.

Improved vineyards and precise vineyard management, attentive winemaking, judicious use of oak, a renewed focus on Sangiovese, a new super high quality wine category, increasing numbers of single vineyard wines, and now serious attention being paid to sub-regional appellations: these are indeed exciting times for Chianti Classico!

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