

# CHIANTI AND ITS GRAPES

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*Borgo di Ama*

Chianti, with 'Ciao', 'Pizza' and 'Piano', is one of the most internationally recognizable Italian words. Most people (not all, mind) even know how to pronounce it, despite the temptation, following English rules of orthography, to say 'chee-anty' rather than 'kee-anty' (or, more accurately, 'kyan-ty'). But how many of us really know what it is?

Oh it's a red wine, we know that. From Tuscany – yes yes, most of us know that. Made mainly with the Sangiovese grape – the wine-savvy amongst us know that.

But there's plenty more to know. The location and the origin of the name, for example, the latter referring to a geographical area in the hills north of Siena and south of Florence, Latin name *Ager Clantius*, later *Kiantis*, embracing the central Tuscan communes of Radda, Castellina and Gaiole. In an important development, in the early 18th century, Grand Duke Cosimo III of Tuscany included Chianti – now including the commune of Greve – as one of four wine production areas in his famous *Bando*, probably the world's first declaration of delineated quality wine production zones.

By the early 20th century 'Chianti' had established its credentials as a wine, not perhaps of consistently high quality, but of recognizable name enjoying a certain success in the market-place, while other peripheral Tuscan wines, made in a similar way, struggled to establish themselves. They solved this problem very simply by hijacking the name 'Chianti' and in some cases tacking it on to their own name – e.g Chianti

Colli Fiorentini, Chianti Rufina, Chianti Colli Senesi. As a sop to the original Chianti the authorities allowed the addition of the word 'Classico' to that of 'Chianti', including in the newly constructed 'Chianti Classico', in whole or in part, such communes as San Casciano Val di Pesa, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Barberino Val d'Elsa, Poggibonsi and, to the south and east, Castelnuovo Berardenga.

As indicated previously the main grape for Chianti was and always had been Sangiovese; but Chianti was conceived as a blended wine, in particular by the 19th century Baron Bettino Ricasoli of Castello di Brolio in the commune of Gaiole. Baron Bettino, apart from being sometime Prime Minister of Italy, was the 'father of modern Chianti', recommending that Sangiovese be supplemented by judicious and variable amounts of other indigenous Tuscan grape varieties, including, in the case of quaffing wines as distinct from wines for laying down, white ones. The reason was – and is – that Sangiovese, while being at its best a grape of great character, was/is a notoriously difficult variety, uneven of ripening from one vintage to the next not to say one row or even bunch to the next. In some cases it might be deficient, or too abundant, in grape sugar; in others it might lack colour; in others acidity – or it might be too acidic, or too tannic, or not tannic enough, or have green tannins. It was/is, in its many forms (sub-varieties, biotypes, clones), and under various names (Brunello, Prugnolo Gentile, Morellino to cite the best-known) the dominant grape variety of Tuscany, but it was/is far from the case that Sangiovese was suitable for every site, or even every part-of-site.

It was, at least partly, in the spirit of blending that a new phenomenon began to emerge in 'Chiantishire' in the 1970s and more particularly the 1980s. It was thought, by forward thinkers of traditional renown, like the Antinoris or Frescobaldis, that rather than compensate for Sangiovese's shortcomings by using traditional Tuscan varieties as defective as Sangiovese itself, it might be an idea, at least in subsidiary role, to use grapes which had proved their quality and breeding elsewhere in the world, notably in France – the wine-world's undisputed heavyweight champion at the 2/3 mark of the 20th century: varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and (later) Syrah, which came to be known as 'internationals', while the wines they informed came, from the 1980s on, to be known as 'SuperTuscans'.

It was a good idea, probably right for its time. But it had the major disadvantage that the 'internationals', with their strong signature aromas and structures, tended to detract from or even overwhelm the subtle, characteristic perfumes of the native Tuscan wine, especially when combined with lashings of new French and American oak. By the middle of the noughties, however generously the pundits scored them out of 100, consumers were proving reluctant to part with large sums of money for the somewhat contrived SuperTuscans. But by now, too, the Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah grapes were in the ground, they had to be tended to, vinified and sold somehow. And they were burrowed into the laws of Chianti Classico and the other Chiantis who had inherited 'internationalisation' by trickle-down from the SuperTuscans.<sup>1</sup>



Sangiovese



Meanwhile, from the late 80s, the difficulties of Sangiovese were being addressed. Various were the clonal research programmes to which Tuscany's favourite son was subjected, the most famous and probably most effective being the Chianti Classico 2000 project (under the aegis of the Chianti Classico consortium) which studied not only clones but also other aspects of viticulture like plant density, canopy management, rootstock matching etc. Sangiovese was shedding its negativity, it was no longer necessary to internationalise. It was going to take time, and hard work, but the far-seeing realised that the future lay in Tuscan grapes making wine of uniquely Tuscan character.

Today, Chianti is not necessarily a blended wine; more and more producers are accepting the relatively recently offered option of using (the much improved) Sangiovese at 100%, usually in a mix of clones or massal selection derivatives. But insofar as Sangiovese is deemed as needing correction in one department or another, the process increasingly involves the use of one or more of the native grapes of Tuscan style.

The most commonly employed indigenous back-up grape in Chiantiland is Canaiolo Nero or Black Canaiolo, an ancient variety (aka *vitis vinifera etrusca*) once much more prominent than today but still, in the right circumstances, capable of blending well with Sangiovese, delivering floral perfume and ease of drinking thanks to soft tannins and good acidity. In the 20th century Canaiolo fell steeply from grace, being removed or dying out from numerous vineyards, where it existed as part of a field-blend; but it retained favour with certain influential academics and oenologists and subsequently growers, and today its star, though still low, is in the ascendant.

Sangiovese, at least in its more venerable incarnations, is notorious for its weakness of colour, a defect Merlot and especially inky Cabernet deal with easily. But the ampelographical armoury of Tuscany has a candidate in the form of the aptly-named Colorino. Actually a number of tenuously related grapes share that name, the most commonly found of which is Colorino del Valdarno. Other grapes, unrelated to the Colorinos but having a similar effect on colour, exist in the form of Abrusco, Abrostine and Ancellotta – the point being that there is no shortage of indigenous Tuscan vine-material for purposes of colour deepening and fixing. It is

merely a question of finding out by trial and error which one works best in a given context.

Ciliegiolo (from *ciliegia* meaning cherry, either because the ripe berry resembles a cherry or because the grape/wine smells of cherries) is another profoundly Tuscan variety of good colour and flavour-intensity. Indeed it is the one capable of delivering the highest quality varietally, vying in that respect with Sangiovese itself, to which DNA tests suggest that it is closely related. Its sole defect is that, being a late ripener, it tends to fall short of full maturity in the relatively cool autumns of mid-Tuscany, preferring the greater warmth of that southwestern section of the region called Maremma. Still, it may have an important part to play as global warming proceeds.<sup>2</sup>



*Copia di Paesaggio del Chianti*

Mammolo, from the word meaning violet, is a historic variety used less in Chiantiland than in Montepulciano (the zone), but which in the right conditions can add subtlety of perfume and elegance, if little in the way of colour, to a blend. Malvasia Nera di Brindisi, presumably of Puglian origin, is not widely to be found in Tuscan vineyards, its wine having an unfortunate tendency to oxidise early, but it is found in certain high-quality Sangiovese-based wines such as Castellare's I Sodi di San Niccolò.

The white varieties, Trebbiano Toscano and Malvasia del Chianti, are no longer a legal constituent of Chianti Classico, although they will be allowed up to the 2015 vintage in basic Chianti. Personally I see no reason why

they should not remain part of this simple quaffer, a wine costing little and destined for early consumption, Trebbiano bringing fresh acidity and lots of juicy if neutral fruit, while the white Malvasia adds a bit to the aromatics.

After so many thousands of years of uninterrupted viticulture it would be surprising if there were not still other central Italian grape varieties and sub-varieties capable of gracing a Tuscan blend – as a trip through obscure vineyards with perhaps the greatest living expert on Tuscan viticulture, Roberto Bandinelli of the University of Florence, makes clear. One name that springs to mind is 'Montepulciano' (the grape), but to explore that avenue would take us well beyond the remit of this article. Suffice it to emphasize, very firmly, that Tuscan Sangiovese in the 21st century does not need help from Bordeaux or the Rhone, and the sooner the law recognizes that fact, the better.<sup>3</sup>



#### Notes

- 1 According to current legislation, 'Chianti Classico' may contain, other than Sangiovese, up to 20% "red-skinned grapes suitable for cultivation in the Tuscan region" while plain 'Chianti' may contain 25 to 30%. These grapes are unspecified in the Chianti Classico disciplinare, but that they include Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah, as well as various indigenous Tuscans, is stated elsewhere.
- 2 Ian d'Agata, whose excellent book called *Native Wine Grapes of Italy* I have gratefully consulted for this article, lays out the arguments for Sangiovese being an offspring of Ciliegiolo (Vouillamoz et al; Bergamini et al) then sets against them the arguments for the reverse (Di Vecchi Staraz et al; Cipriani et al). I think we can safely conclude that the jury is out on the matter, and that the most we can affirm is that there is a parent-offspring relationship of some sort. In my personal and highly unscientific view we can't even affirm that.
- 3 In early 2014 Chianti Classico introduced a new top level of quality wine, beyond Riserva, called 'Gran Selezione'. The aim was to establish an official category for what had been called, unofficially, 'SuperTuscan'. Long story, no time, but let's just say that 'Great Selection' is a great waste of an opportunity to purge Chianti Classico, and by extension Chianti, of non-indigenous varieties.