

Chianti Classico DOCG

Charles Scicolone (May 20, 2008)



The wines of the Gallo Nero

Last month I went to a wine event entitled, The Tuscan Nose, Chianti Classico's Unique Sniff & Savor Tasting. The tasting included a unique sensory experience, the essence of Chianti Classico, 27 different aromas isolated and re-created by the Italian perfumer Lorenzo Villoresi. These aromas represent scents not only in the wine it self, but also in the terroir, such as black cherry, raspberry, blackberry, tomato leaf, violets, black pepper ,etc, etc. These are the aromas that can be found in the wines.

There are eight Chianti zones in Tuscany. The biggest, oldest, and the one that may produce the best wine is the Chianti Classico zone. It is called Classico because of it is the oldest zone of the region and it is in the center of the region. The Chianti Classico zone, a very large area between Florence and Siena, includes all the territories of the communes of Castellina in Chianti, Gaiole, Greve, and Radda in Chianti and parts of Barberino Val d'Elsa, Castlenuovo Berardegna, Poggibonsi, San Casciano Val di Pesa and Tavarnelle Val di Pesa.

In 1924, 33 producers get together in Radda in Chianti and founded a consortium to defend and promote Chianti Classico wine and its symbol of origin, the black rooster.

This symbol has always appeared on the bottles of Chianti Classico produced by consortium members. Not all of the producers of Chianti Classico belonged to the consortium and only members were able to use the black rooster on their bottles. In 2005, however, the black rooster became the emblem of the entire Chianti Classical zone.

The Chianti Classico Consortium had the words Gallo Nero printed over the head of the rooster on the neck label of all of its bottles. A few years ago the Gallo winery in California sued the Consortium and won the case. The words were removed from the label.

The black rooster symbol has origins in both the history and legends of Chianti. It was depicted in a painting by Giorgio Vasari on the ceiling of the Salone del Cinquecento in the Palazzo



Vecchio in Florence to indicate the military league of Chianti. There is also the legend of the Black Rooster. Florence and Siena in the Middle Ages were always fighting each another over land. The leaders of the rival cities decided to have a horse race to determine the boundary lines. A rider would depart from the capital of each republic and the border would be drawn at the point where the horsemen met. They would set out at dawn by the crowing of a rooster. Siena picked a white rooster and Florence a black rooster. The night before, the black rooster was not fed. It awoke early and the Florentine rider almost reached the gates of Siena before encountering the other rider. The rest is history.

Baron Bettino Ricasoli in the middle of 19 century devised the formula for making Chianti Classico: Sangiovese with such native varieties as Canaiolo and Colorino. Two white grapes had to be included, Trebbiano and Malvasia. It could not be 100% Sangiovese. Many producers back then used the governo method. Ten percent of the grapes (Canaiolo) were dried and then added to the wine. I believe that there is only one producer today, Querciavalle, that still uses this method.

Over the years the percentages and the grapes have changed. Currently, the percentage of Sangiovese is 80% to 100%. Native varieties such as Canaioio and Colorino or foreign ones including Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot can be added up to 20%. As of the 2006 vintage, the white grapes are no longer allowed.

Chianti Classico can be aged in wood, steel tanks or glass lined cement tanks; the normale is aged for one year before it is released. The riserva must be aged at least two years and an additional three months in bottle and have an alcohol content of at least 12.5% before it can be released. The riserva is a wine that can age for a number of years. The riserva had a gold circle around the black rooster but that stopped in 2005.

As part of the Tuscan Nose event, a seminar on Chianti Classico was hosted by Mario Pallanti, the president of the Chianti Classico Consortium and the owner and winemaker at Castello di Ama. The other host was David Lynch, former Wine Director of Babbo restaurant. The seminar was entitled, Chianti Classico Terrior: A Taste Map Exploring The Zones Of The Chianti Classico DOCG. They led an interesting discussion on this topic. I felt compelled to ask the question, "How can wines containing 20% foreign grapes, aged in barriques and made with modern technology to have an international style still be called Chianti Classico?" A lively discussion followed with no satisfactory



answer given. Some wine makers in Chianti today are struggling with this question.

At the seminar, nine wines from the different Chianti Classico zones were tasted. My favorites were:

Tenuta di Lilliano 2006 (Castellina in Chianti) 80% Sangiovese, 20% Canaiolo, Colorino and Merlot, (\$20).

Felsina 2006 (Castelnuovo Berardenga) 100% Sangiovese (\$23).

Isole e Olena 2006 (Barberino Val d'Elsa) 80% Sangiovese, 15% Canaiolo 5% other grapes (\$23).

Castello di Ama 2005 (Gaiole in Chianti) 80% Sangiovese, 8% Canaiolo, Malvasia Nera and Merlot (\$40).

At the full tasting, 40 producers presented their wines. I was impressed with the overall quality of the wines. Here are a few more of my favorites:

Badia a Coltibuono 2004 Riserva, (Gaiole in Chianti), 90% Sangiovese, 10% Canaiolo, (\$33). I have been drinking wines from this producer since the 1978 when I first visited the winery.

Castell'In Villa, Riserva 2003, (Castelnuovo Berardenga) 100% Sangiovese (\$30). This is a very traditional winery that makes wines that can last for 20 years or more.

Ruffino Riserva Ducale Oro, 2004. (\$45) Sangiovese and a small amount of other varieties. In the past this winery only used native grapes and the governo method. A few years ago I had a Ducale Oro 1947. The wine was 57 years old at the time and in perfect condition. They have changed their methods but still make good wine. Look for older bottles if you can find them.



Cecchi normale 2006(Castellina in Chianti) (\$15) 85% Sangiovese and 15% Colorino and Caniolo was showing very well.

Also showing well was the Dievole La Vendemmia 2005 which is 90% Sangiovese and 10% other Tuscan grapes (\$15),

When I arrived in Alba for the Barolo and Barbaresco tasting, I was told the sad news that Romano Levi had passed away on May 1. In Italy they post the death notice on the walls around the town. On his he was called grappista angelica, the angelic grappa-maker. He was in my opinion the greatest grappa maker in Italy. For more information on Romano Levi see my earlier article on Grappa.

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