

## Chianti ups the ante

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The 2006 vintage of Chianti Classico brings us wine lovers something to celebrate - and not just that so many of the wines taste good. This is the first year that white wine grapes have been outlawed from this, the quintessential wine of Tuscany, the land of olives, vines, cypresses and, at this time of year, thousands of holidaymakers.

Putting white wine grapes in red wine is not quite as bizarre as it sounds. In some cases there are sound reasons for including a few green-skinned grapes along with the purple. In Côte Rôtie in the Rhône Valley, for instance, there is a long-standing tradition of co-fermenting a small proportion of pale Viognier grapes with the Syrah to make the wine taste smoother and stabilise the pigment of the red grapes. Copies of this recipe were all the rage in Australia a few years ago and Shiraz/Viognier has become a staple offering there.

But the white grapes that once routinely diluted Chianti, including that from its Chianti Classico heartland between Florence and Siena, were there for a much less noble reason than Viognier is to be found in Marcel Guigal's seductive La Mouline, my favourite Côte Rôtie. The requirement that Chianti contain between 10 and 30 per cent of white grapes was written into the original 1967 DOC (Italy's answer to Appellation Contrôlée) regulations for the entirely expedient reason that it provided a convenient use for the substantial proportion of pale-skinned grapes then planted in the zone. Some of them were Malvasia, an ancient Greek variety with real character that is today dried to make Vin Santo, Tuscany's sweet wine treasure. But the great majority of white wine grapes that used to go into Chianti, blanching its colour and diluting its flavour, were the most basic sort of Trebbiano whose wine is generally near-flavourless and best distilled, as it is in France's Cognac district where it is known as Ugni Blanc.

In the 1970s and 1980s Chianti was typically a vapid, tart, only-just-red wine. The flurry of plantings of the main red wine grape Sangiovese that followed Chianti's accession to DOC status were mainly of poor quality clones, selected for quantity not quality, and the substantial proportion of white grapes that had to go into every wine only exacerbated Chianti's poor reputation. Things improved a little, however, in 1984 when Chianti Classico was promoted from DOC status to DOCG. The white grapes requirement was reduced to between two and six per cent.

In the late 20th century the most glamorously fashionable grape varieties in Tuscany, and much of Italy, were imports from France: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, sometimes Syrah. Ambitious Tuscan growers made haste to plant these so that they could make their own versions of the so-called Supertuscans, reds that were not encumbered by the stuffy old DOC regulations requiring precise proportions of white grapes with the traditional Sangiovese backbone and such other local red grapes as Canaiolo and Colorino.

These Supertuscans, made in the image of the super-successful Sassicaia, a sort of claret from the Tuscan coast, were put on the market at prices wildly more than boring old Chianti Classico. In some of the flashier cases, these Supertuscans tasted as though new French oak barrels had been an even more important an ingredient in them than the grapes. Italian winemakers and their many fans seemed to have all but forgotten Sangiovese, Tuscany's signature indigenous vine variety.

But since the mid-1990s the tide has been turning. Thanks to much more careful selection of Sangiovese plant material, much more skilled viticulture and in some cases a return to the large, well-seasoned casks in which Chianti was traditionally and more subtly matured, the quality of Chianti Classico has soared.

In line with the worldwide trend towards revering the local rather than the imported, particularly as far as food and drink are concerned, Chianti is once more enjoying the spotlight of fashion. Initially it was the special late bottlings, the Riservas, that received the most rapturous attention but now

many of the regular bottlings, of which 2006 is the latest vintage on the market, are highly recommendable wines. The 2004 vintage was also very good but the rainy 2005 less so. Even better, some of the delicious 2006s I tasted in a line-up of 30 or so recently sell for under £10/\$20 a bottle. Riservas may be for drinking at between five and 10 years old but most regular Chianti Classico is delightful at two to four years old and the best wines labelled simply Chianti can provide lovely, healthy, simple drinking even younger than this.

Chianti may occasionally be called the Bordeaux of Italy but the structure of the wines is very different from any French wine. Polish and suavity play little part in Chianti's appeal. A good Chianti is very definitely an agricultural product. It suggests farmland, sometimes even a farmyard. There's a hint of autumn mulch or sometimes prunes, and there should always be some distinctively tangy freshness and bite - even a slight but appetising bitterness. One of Chianti's great attributes is how digestible it can be. It complements rather than clobbers food.

In light of the recent brouhaha about the Sangiovese-purity of some Brunellos, the modern lawmakers, those who have at last outlawed white grapes from Chianti, must now be congratulating themselves that they retained the option of allowing a small proportion of non-traditional red grapes to be blended with Sangiovese and other local varieties.

I found that several of the wines I liked best in my recent tasting of current Chianti Classicos contained about five per cent of the fleshy Merlot grape, arguably a better complement to Sangiovese's muscular frame than Cabernet.

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