



OVERVIEW

In 1716, the grand duke of Tuscany made a proclamation defining the zone of production for the best wines in his domain. The primary wine region he described was Chianti, at that time made in four towns south of his home base in Florence. Chianti was a well-respected wine long before that, and it has remained one of Italy's most recognizable labels for more than three centuries. But that's not to say it hasn't undergone some changes. If Grand Duke Cosimo III were to return today, he would recognize his Chianti as what is now Chianti Classico DOCG, a denomination comprising parts of nine communes but based primarily on the four towns he had named. But he would be surprised to see how big Chianti has grown, with a large swath of territory all around Chianti Classico that makes up Chianti DOCG. Chances are, too, that Cosimo would be pleasantly surprised at how much better the wines are these days.

Chianti and Chianti Classico are two separate but forever-linked denominations that make similar wines. The wines were traditionally a blend of several grape varieties, both red and white. Nowadays, almost all are still blends, but they lean more heavily on Sangiovese than they once did, and white grapes are not a significant ingredient (Chianti DOCG still allows up to 10% white varieties). Chianti Classico is the original zone and has some of the best terroir (which is why it was the original zone). The area is relatively large, 30 miles long between the southern suburbs of Florence and the northern reaches of Siena and 10-12 miles wide. The wines of Chianti Classico DOCG require a minimum of 80% Sangiovese, or as they like to call it, Sangiovetto. Aging for the standard wine is 1 year, while wines labeled Riserva age for at least 2 years and a Gran Selezione for 2½ years plus. Wood aging is common, but is not required.

Chianti DOCG is much larger than the Chianti Classico denomination it encircles. Although very irregular in shape, it stretches nearly 90 miles from northwest to southeast. Wines can be blended from widely spaced vineyards, but there are also seven subzones for wines grown in certain parts of the larger Chianti denomination. Of these, the best-known are Colli Senesi (the hills of Siena) in the south and Rufina (pronounced ROO-fee-na) in the northeast. The Rufina area was another spot that Grand Duke Cosimo singled out as fine wine territory in 1716. Chianti DOCG wines in general have a minimum threshold of 70% Sangiovese, with minimal aging for the regular wine and 2 years for the Riserva (Chianti does not use the Gran Selezione level). Some of the subzones have higher standards;

Rufina, for example, requires 6 months of barrel aging for its Riservas. Also in this area, the two Chianti red-wine denominations have identical siblings for sweet dessert wine: Vin Santo del Chianti DOC and Vin Santo del Chianti Classico DOC. Vin Santo is one of the more familiar examples of an Italian specialty: dried-grape wines. It is made from grapes that are harvested, then dried for weeks or months to lower the water content, and then sealed into small wooden casks. With minimal oxygen and an overabundance of sugar, fermentation takes place slowly and fitfully over a period of years. When the casks are finally opened, the result is a rich, sweet wine of medium to high alcohol, ideal for a treat after dinner.