

Let's Drink and Learn About: Sangiovese

Introduction: Americans drink more wine from Italy than from any other foreign country. This is partly because there is so much of it available (Italy always ranks either #1 or #2 in production, ahead or behind France), however it also has a lot to do with the Italian wine culture: easy to drink and food-friendly. Italian wines run the gamut from cheap Pinot Grigio to high-end styles like Amarone and Brunello di Montalcino. However, partly due to its sheer diversity, Italian wine sometimes gets a reputation for poor quality.

Sangiovese: A vigorous and hearty vine that easily tends to overproduction, this is in many ways the opposite of the Pinot Noir grape we discussed last time. As a result, it is widely planted both in Italy (where it makes up 10% of production) and abroad (it has become one of the most popular non-French grapes planted in California).

Sangiovese is sometimes describes as a chameleon, due to its ability to express alternatively as light and fruit-forward, or heavy, tannic, and “rustic.” A lot of this, frankly, is due to blending. The increasing use of Cabernet Sauvignon as a blending grape has helped to bulk up Sangiovese wine, giving it a heavier flavor profile than was once traditional. On its own, Sangiovese is generally described as having tart fruit flavors, such as sour cherry and red plum. “Rustic” Sangioveses, those aged longer in oak or blended with Cab, will additionally take on flavors like cigar box, leather, even herbs like thyme or oregano.

For food pairings, there's nothing that pairs better with Italian food. Pasta with meat sauce, pizza, osso bucco, anything heavy enough to call for a red wine calls for Sangiovese.

Italian regional distinctions: Most European countries have a 3-tier system of geographic classification. Certain regions will be noted as the highest quality regions, known in Italy as Controlled and Guaranteed Designation of Origin or DOCG. Below that is Controlled Designation of Origin or DOC. At the bottom is IGT/IGP (if within a geographic area), or “vino da tavola” (if from multiple regions, or for older wines predating the creation of the IGT/IGP).

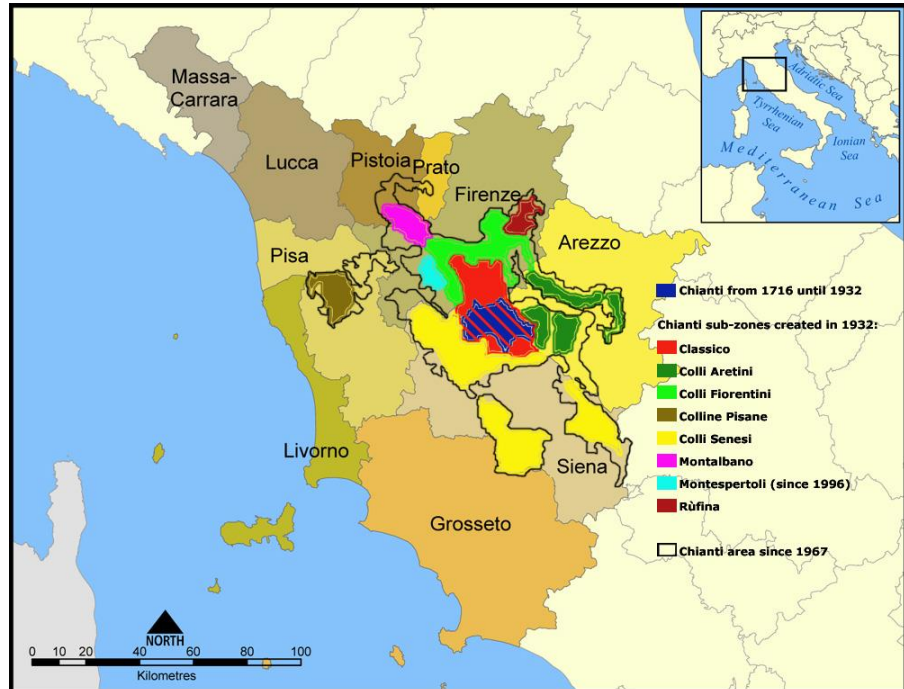
DOCG Chianti Classico: Comprising roughly the region between Florence and Siena, this was once the entirety of the old DOC Chianti. In the old days, “Chianti” wines were required by law to be made of 70-90% Sangiovese, with the rest consisting of Malvasia and Trebbiano (two rather tasteless white wine grapes). These old-style Chiantis were often sold in a squat bottle wrapped in wicker called a “fiasco.”

Mercifully, the authorities eventually reformed the laws, and now permit Chianti Classico to be made of 75-100% Sangiovese, up to 10% Canaiolo, and up to 20% any combination of other red grapes. White wine is now prohibited as a blending grape.



[Zoom In](#)

Chianti Classico is distinguished today by a black rooster on the region label (around the neck), commemorating an old conflict between Florence and Tuscany, and is normally sold in Bordeaux-style bottles instead of the old fiascos.



DOCG Chianti, and other sub-regions:

To capitalize on the popularity of Chianti, the Italian government has designated ever-larger areas as “Chianti.” They have also created a number of sub-regions with “Chianti” in the name (e.g., “Chianti Colli Senesi”). Generally these are less prestigious than Chianti Classico.

DOCGs Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano: These are two small regions to the south of Chianti, each of which has its own clone of Sangiovese (originally thought to be unique varieties), which are considered to be heartier, more suitable for barrel-aging, and capable of more “earthy” wines. Brunello di Montalcino was the first DOCG ever designated, and is still considered the more prestigious of the two. Brunello must be 100% Sangiovese (no blending) and aged for at least 2 years in oak (traditionally in large Slovenian oak barrels called “bottes”) and at least 4 months in the bottle before sale. Vino Nobile is a bit closer to Chianti: at least 70% Sangiovese, up to 20% Canaiolo, up to 20% other red grapes. Minimum age is 2 years, at least 1 in oak. Both Brunello and Vino Nobile will continue to improve for a solid decade, and are much more age-able than most Chianti. Lower-end wines from these regions, with less ageing, are called “Rossos” (as in, “Rosso di Montalcino”).

Note: Vino Nobile di Montepulciano should not be confused with Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, which is a completely different wine from a different region in Italy.

IGT Toscana: Called “Super Tuscans,” this category comprises anything from Tuscany which is not at least 70% Sangiovese. Often they are wines made with French grapes (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, etc.), with or without a smaller amount of Sangiovese in the blend. Super Tuscans can be superbly made and incredibly expensive, or mass-market and cheap, or anywhere in between.