

# THE GREAT REDS OF TUSCANY

If you are new to Italian wines, you might be overwhelmed by all the choices and not sure what to buy or order with your meal. Wines are produced throughout Italy, with over 400 varietals of grapes, but Tuscany is one of the richest areas and the most prolific in all of Europe because of its broad range of internationally recognized wines. From award-winning dry whites to full-bodied reds and sweet wines, all are produced in Tuscany. While volumes could be written on the wines of Italy, I will focus on our local region as your beginners guide to finding and enjoying Tuscan wines. We will cover red wines in Part 1, and whites, Vin Santo and sparkling wines in Part 2.

The most important stamp a wine can have is its quality assurance rating. The ratings for high quality wines are: D.O.C., which means “controlled designation of origin”; D.O.C.G., which adds “guaranteed” to the quality assurance and is the highest rating. This classification has many requirements and restrictions regarding the growing, bottling and aging of wine; I.G.T., “typical geographic indication”. I.G.T. may include non-Italian grapes like Merlot and Chardonnay and may encompass an entire growing region. This classification began in the 1990’s.

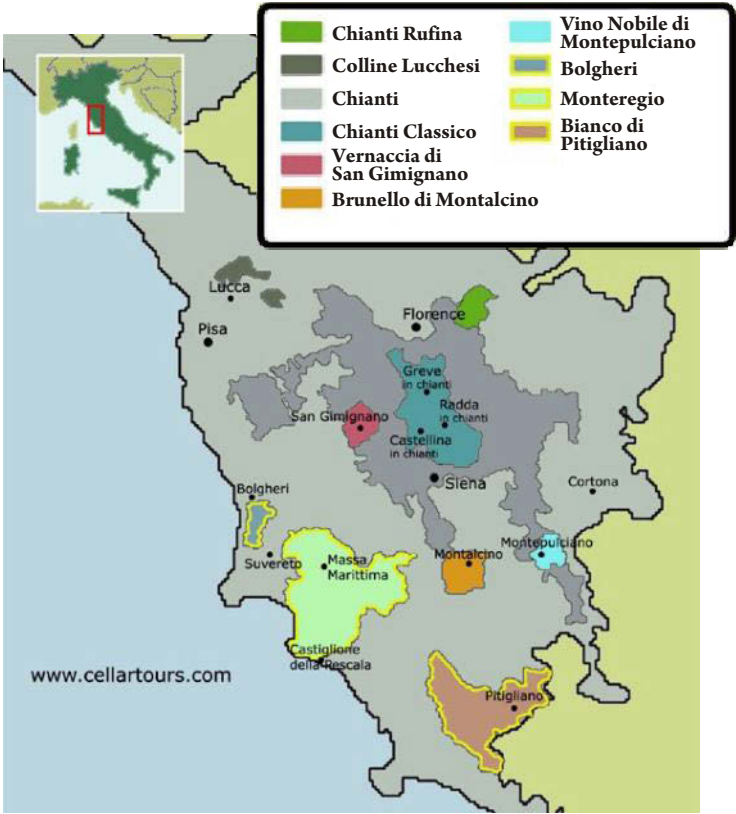
You may also see “biodynamic agriculture” mentioned on the labels. This concept introduced in the 1920s was more than just organic farming, it was the “mystical” blending of science and spirituality, an alternative to the impersonal industrialization that was becoming prominent. About one-sixth of farms in the Lucca area are practicing biodynamic viticulture, one of the highest concentrations in Italy. The producers are reaping the rewards and earning the highest recognition for their wines. Characteristics of this type of farming include homeopathic pest and disease deterrents, handmade fertilizer called Preparation 500 (cow manure stuffed into a female cow horn, buried deep underground for an entire winter), foot-stomping or hand-squeezing grapes for gentler handling, aging in smaller barrels, and of course, paying homage to the land and nature. Everything in perfect harmony.

The most renowned grapes grown in Tuscany are Sangiovese, used predominantly in Chianti wines but also blended with other grapes for full-bodied reds. The Chianti Classico region covers an area of about 260 square kilometers between Florence and Siena and includes Castellina in Chianti, Gaiole in Chianti, Greve in Chianti and Radda in Chianti, along with Impruneta, San Casciano Val di Pesa, Tavernelle Val di Pesa, Barberino Val d’Elsa and Poggibonsi.

There is a legend that explains how the Chianti region was divided between Siena and Florence and how the iconic Black Rooster was born: *Red wine had been produced in this area since around 1000 A.D. and Florence and Siena long feuded over rights to this region. Finally, around 1200, they agreed to end the feud with a competition. Horsemen were to depart from the rival cities at the crow of a rooster. Wherever they met would determine the boundary lines and settle the dispute once and for all. While the Senesi chose a well-fed white rooster, the cunning Florentines chose a starving black rooster. On the day of the event, the white rooster dutifully crowed at sunrise, but the poor hungry black rooster had begun to crow long before, thus giving the Florentine rider a considerable advantage. The Senese horseman didn’t get very far and borders were established with the greater region now belonging to Florence.*

– from **The Legend of the Black Rooster** by Terry Sullivan  
A fun story to share. The icon is a proud designation and represents the strict government regulations for Chianti Classico. The requirements for Chianti Classico are 70-80% Sangiovese, leaving the other 20-30% to be chosen from Colorino, Canaiolo and Malvasia grapes depending on the vintner. It’s often called the “Taste of Italy”. Almost all the tasting notes and characteristics can be smelled while walking through a fresh Italian market: sour cherries, red fruits, dried oregano, bitter herbs, aged sweet balsamic, dry salami, espresso, sweet tobacco smoke. Some notes are more prevalent than others but all are complex and full bodied.

- Some of the most noteworthy Chianti Classico producers are:
1. Barone Ricasoli Castello di Brolio, Italy’s historic winery par excellence. Barone Ricasoli is considered to be the fourth longest-lived company in the world and the second in the wine industry. It is the oldest winery in Italy and the name has been linked to wine since 1141. Baron Bettino Ricasoli created the original Chianti recipe in 1872. It was composed of 70% Sangiovese, 15% Canaiolo and 15% Malvasia Bianca.
  2. Querciabella has embraced the biodynamic farming method and uses 100% Sangiovese in its Chianti Classico.
  3. Antinori is a 600-year-old wine-producing family. Look for Pèppoli Chianti Classico and Villa Antinori Chianti Classico Riserva. It’s worth a visit to see the Antinori Art Project.
  4. Casa Brancaia makes splendid Chianti Classico in Castellina in Chianti, Radda in Chianti and Maremma region.



5. Castello di Ama is an award-winning Chianti Classico and worth a visit to see the art installations that are beautifully woven throughout the property.
6. Tenuta San Vito produces Darno Chianti Colli Fiorentini D.O.C.G. and San Vito Chianti D.O.C.G.

You will discover many more Chianti Classico producers on your journey in the region and I’m sure, all will be memorable.

The most famous grape grown in Italy is a sub-varietal or clone of the Sangiovese, more commonly called “Grosso” or “Brunello”. The word means “brownish” and is the color of the grape when harvested. In 1860, chemist and wine maker Clementi Santi tried aging the Brunello wines for 4-5 years, a process common in France but unexplored in Italy, ultimately creating the “king of Italian red wines”. Italian Brunellos have won many awards throughout the world. Aged a minimum of 5 years, they are ready at 10 but can be held up to 30 years. A Brunello wine should have a very intense and lingering fragrance; earthy, almost musky, with fresh wood, berries, and a light note of vanilla and jam. Notable must-try producers of Brunello in and around Montalcino are:

1. Biondi Santi – The birthplace of Sangiovese Grosso in 1860, awarded a silver medal in 1865 (Clementi Santi’s legacy). In

1980, Brunello di Montalcino was the first wine to be awarded the D.O.C.G. standard, establishing its place in the national and international markets. Here you can find bottles of Brunello from 1888 and learn about the fascinating history of the oldest Brunello producer. At an international auction, a 1964 Biondi Santi Tenuta il Greppo Riserva sold for 14,000 euros, the highest price ever paid for an Italian wine.

2. Castiglion del Bosco, established in the 1100s, one of the first producers of Brunello di Montalcino. The grounds have been completely restored and include guest suites.
3. Valdicava – Brunello di Montalcino
4. Case Basse – Soldera Brunello di Montalcino
5. Casanova di Neri – Cerretalto Sangiovese Grosso
6. Santa Giulia – Brunello di Montalcino

Brunellos are expensive, but with over 300 producers, you should be able to find an excellent vintage in your price range.

There are many other full-bodied, award-winning Italian red wines that fall into the category of SUPER TUSCANS. These are wines that supersede the Italian wine law. The term began in 1970s to describe Tuscan wines made with grapes that did not meet appellation law (i.e., D.O.C., D.O.C.G.). Heralded producers like Antinori and San Guido took a bold stand against the system, creating high-priced, exceptional, high quality wines using unsanctioned grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. A few of the other big red and Super Tuscan wines are:

1. Salcheto Winery, Montepulciano, known for their Sangiovese wines – Salco 2089, Riserva and Nobile.
2. Tenuta San Guido – Bolgheri – the famous Sassicaia.
3. Máté Winery – Montalcino, known for their Brunellos along with wonderful Syrahs, Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignon.
4. Pellegrini della Seta – Vagliagli, Terra di Seta Chianti Classico is most popular. This winery is Kosher certified.
5. Capezzana – Carmignano. Artifacts show this property dates back to 804 A.D. and produced wine and olive oil. The Rothschilds and relations of the Medici were owners of the property over the years. Most known for their Barco Reale D.O.C., Villa Capezzana D.O.C.G., and Trefiano D.O.C.G.
6. Tenuta di Valgiano. Tenuta di Valgiano Colline Lucchesi D.O.C.
7. Le Macchiole – Bolgheri, Livorno. Paleo Rosso 100% Cabernet Franc, I.G.T.

Enjoy your new discoveries, tours and tastings and if you have the time, many of the wineries have lovely accommodations available for a short stay. In Part 2 next month, we will explore the broad range of white wines, Vin Santo and sparkling wines throughout Tuscany. Cheers!

– by Valencia Wolf

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