

Evolution in Chianti Classico

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Gran Selezione and New Labeling Terms

For a three-century-old denomination, a lot has been going on in [Chianti Classico](#) lately. Much of the activity follows from a major scientific study known as [Chianti Classico 2000](#), which spent 16 years (1987–2003) doing experiments in the vineyards to determine what “best practices” means in central Tuscany. That project led to significant advances in viticulture that continue to be implemented as vineyards are replanted.



More recently, the consorzio has turned its attention to ways of getting the word out about the improvements in Chianti Classico wines. “The discussion has been going on for some years trying to figure out the best way to communicate the high quality our territory is expressing,” observes Stefano Capurso, director of sales and marketing for Barone Ricasoli. This has led to last year’s introduction of Gran Selezione and to discussions about creating more specific zones within the Chianti Classico denomination. Italian Wine Central asked some prominent Chianti Classico producers for their thoughts on these developments.

Gran Selezione

In early 2014, the [Chianti Classico consorzio](#) unveiled a new addition to the denomination’s quality pyramid above the Riserva level, called [Gran Selezione](#). The general idea was to promote quality in the area by grouping some of the best and most ageable Chianti Classico wines into a prominent new category with a unique name to show that Chianti Classico is once again worthy of being compared to Barolo, Brunello, and other highly respected Italian wines.



The concept had enough support to gain approval, although there were many consorzio members who were opposed to adding this new category or who wanted it to be differently defined. As Giovanna Stianti, the matriarch of Castello di Volpaia, says, “It was decided to create a Gran Selezione [category] that made everyone happy.” Naturally, that means that no one was entirely happy with it.

Opposition to Gran Selezione has been based on a few primary issues. The first is the opinion that it generates more confusion than it solves by adding a new level. “In our view,” says Alessandro Cellai of Castellare di Castellina, “it does nothing to elevate the image of Chianti Classico but rather creates new confusion in the market.” As Tim Grace of Il Molino di Grace puts it: “Importers, distributors, and other wine professionals are not exactly begging for new SKUs.”

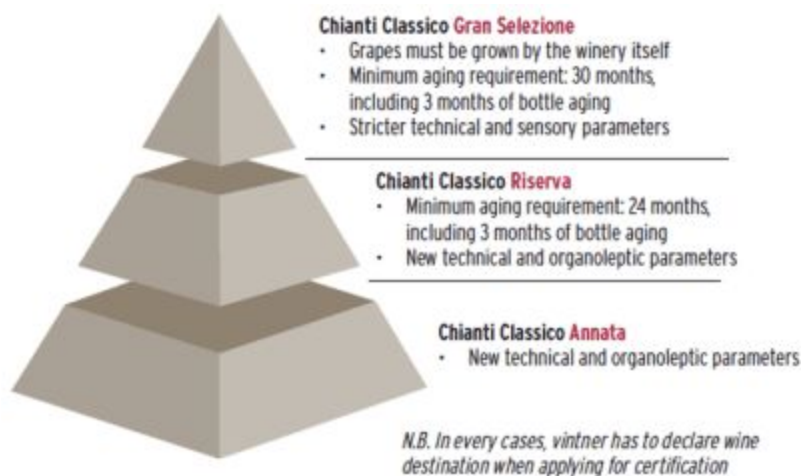
A related issue is that “it isn’t defined clearly enough as to how [a Gran Selezione] is different from a Riserva,” according to Roberto Stucchi of Badia a Coltibuono. Cellai agrees that Gran Selezione

“overshadows the great work that has been done over the years by companies like Castellare who have invested a lot in the quality of their Riserva”; he instead wanted to “adjust the parameters of the Riserva so as to force producers who wanted to make this designation to increase the quality.” Simone Coccia, the owner of Castellinuzza e Piuca in Lamole, feels that the introduction of Gran Selezione “served mainly to put on the market lots of Riservas that wineries already had in the cellar.”

As Coccia notes, the criteria that separate Gran Selezione from other categories “were primarily chemical.” Angela Fronti, the winemaker at Istine, dislikes the fact that so many Gran Selezione producers feel the need to include Bordeaux varieties to comply with the organoleptic

and chemical characteristics required. “For me,” she says, “it is not representative of the denomination [especially] now that many of us are finally focusing on indigenous grapes.”

Another objection to the Gran Selezione category as it currently stands is that it is not sufficiently connected to the land. Gran Selezione’s most important distinction from the normale and riserva categories is that it requires the wine to be made entirely from “estate-grown” fruit—defined as being from vineyards owned *or controlled* by the winery. There is, however, no requirement that the vineyards be located

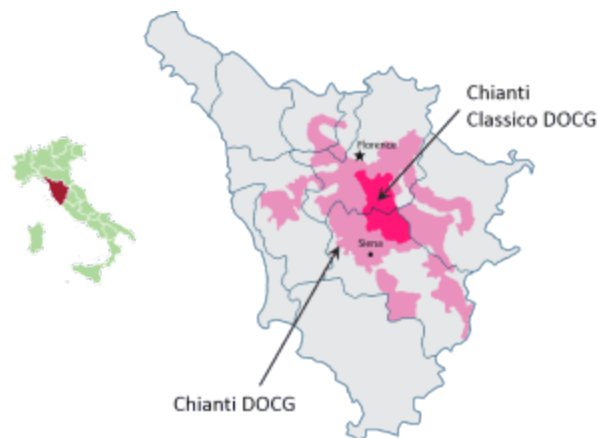


around the winery or that they be contiguous with one another, so it is possible for Gran Selezione’s grapes to come from numerous parcels leased by the winery in far-flung corners of the denomination. This means that “estate-grown” Gran Selezione wines continue to say much more about the producer than about the personality of the estate or local area. Furthermore, as Giovanni Poggiali of Fèlsina points out, this definition of estate-grown diminishes the significance of those wineries that have a long history of making wines solely from their own surrounding vineyards.

“I was, and I am, firmly convinced that we must emphasize the estate-grown-grape wines and their link with the territory,” declares Tommaso Marrocchesi Marzi, owner of Bibbiano. This is the sentiment behind the push for allowing local place-names to be included on Chianti Classico labels—the next agenda item for the consorzio after their June elections.

Menzioni Geografiche

With Gran Selezione now a fait accompli for more than a year, attention turns to the next topic for debate: whether or not to begin a subdivision of Chianti Classico by introducing *menzioni geografiche aggiuntive*—additional geographical notations—to the labeling rules. A



few other denominations, most notably Barolo and Barbaresco, have already done this, permitting wineries to label their wines with the names of small sections of the denominations that are highly specific as to the location of the vineyard. In Chianti Classico, the project is unlikely to be as zealous as the Piemonte examples, with just a few menzioni for starters rather than scores of them, but they would nevertheless allow distinct areas within Chianti Classico to begin to build their own identity and following in the market.

This idea of *zonazione* is not new and has been discussed at the consorzio for years as a way of promoting quality and transparency, but it was tabled in order to get Gran Selezione going. This June, the Chianti Classico consorzio is electing a new board and president, and among their first challenges will be a decision on whether and how to implement zonation.

“The consorzio is finally addressing this idea, which has been an old battle of mine and of other producers since the early ‘90s,” writes Badia a Coltibuono’s Stucchi, an outspoken proponent of zonation.

Chianti Classico, he emphasizes, “is too large and diverse to remain locked in the current DOCG regulations, which make no distinction between the extremely diverse expressions of Sangiovese in its original territory.”

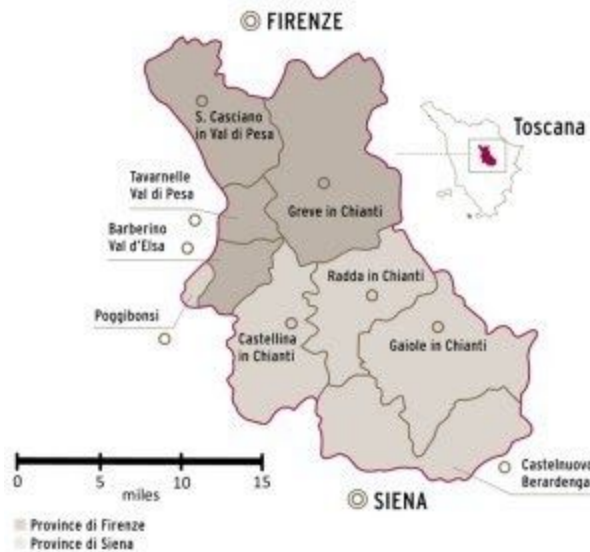
There appears to be considerable support among producers for acknowledgment of smaller areas within Chianti Classico, regardless of their stance on Gran Selezione. “Certainly [Gran Selezione is] a positive response in terms of reputation and communication,” Bibbiano’s Marzi concedes, “but the appellation should complete the job with the introduction of the *menzioni geografiche*.” “Chianti Classico is a fairly heterogeneous territory where you have significant differences between one area and another,” says Castellare’s Cellai. Tim Grace agrees: “Terroir matters. It is one antidote for what I think is an ever-increasing homogeneity in wine.”

If there is a stumbling block, it might be in deciding how many *menzioni* there should be. If they were the size of those in Barolo (which is divided into 181), Chianti Classico could have something like 500 *menzioni*, but no one is thinking in those terms. Most producers who responded envision starting with a division along commune boundaries, meaning the nine communes that are entirely or partially within the

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Chianti Classico denomination (Barberino, Castellina, Castelnuovo Berardenga, Gaiole, Greve, Poggibonsi, Radda, San Casciano, and Tavarnelle). “I would start with the nine *comuni*,” Stucchi suggests, “then open the field to the possibility of submentions such as Panzano, Monti, [and] Lamole.”

This idea of starting with the existing administrative regions and then slowly drilling down to smaller areas is a strategy that is frequently expressed. Brolio, Ama, and Vagliagli are three more *frazioni* that might be considered. Volpaia’s Stianti is less convinced of the logic of those divisions, however. “We were thinking of a ‘scientific zonation’ that would identify the specific characteristics of soils, microclimates, and wine produced”—research that she admits would require decades of work. Without such “analytical data that can support a zonation conducted on a scientific basis . . . it is therefore a zonation of administrative bases that, in our opinion, does not make much sense.”



Istine’s Fronti sums up the situation well: “I think [zonation is] important, very difficult, and not that fundamental. Important, because every day we talk about the differences in elevations, expositions, etc., and there are detectable differences. Difficult, because the reality of Chianti Classico is that it is very fragmented; if municipalities are used, they would not be very representative, but using *frazioni* would be too fragmented and dispersed. Not fundamental, because identifying geographical differences also depends on the production style, the soils, and the grape varieties. . . . These conditions being equal, you cannot locate regional differences.”

Il Molino di Grace is located in Panzano, a small village in the middle of Chianti Classico that has taken unilateral steps to promote its own identity, including getting permission to use a unique symbol on the back label of Panzano wines. “We are the first in Italy to place in our by-laws that every producer of Chianti Classico in Panzano must farm organically and be sourced from the area (Panzano) itself,” Grace points out. His neighbor Michael Schmelzer of Montebernardi makes Panzano’s case for distinctiveness, noting that the village has some of the highest elevations, steepest slopes, and rockiest soils in Chianti

Classico. This is the type of profile that many producers and consumers alike could make sense of on a label.

In some ways, zonation can resolve one of the main complaints about Gran Selezione—that the “estate” of the estate-grown wine can be from all over Chianti Classico. A Gran Selezione with a specific enough *menzione* could translate into what most people think of when they think “estate grown.”

Market Reaction

Has Chianti Classico been successful in creating some excitement in the marketplace with Gran Selezione? It is unclear as of yet. At the official West Coast debut of Gran Selezione in San Francisco in May—more than a year after the category went on sale—it was clear that many in the trade remain ill-informed about this new quality level, although the full room for the seminar at least showed a decent amount of interest.



Nick Poletto, director of education for importer Kobrand, describes traveling around the country to do presentations for almost 2,000 distributor sales reps in the past year and says that “less than 1% had any idea about this new category.” Despite representing Kobrand’s La

Forra and other Gran Selezione wines, the reps “had no idea the category existed, that La Forra was one of them, nor what it all meant.” In Poletto’s estimation, “Only Italian wine aficionados [and] specialty stores/restaurants have any knowledge of this category. Even less understand it.”

Importer Oliver McCrum is forthright: “I have found no interest in Gran Selezione, as yet at least. . . . I do not expect the category to raise the profile of [Chianti Classico] or increase sales.” On the other hand, McCrum praised the idea of zonation, saying that the “general tendency now in Italy is for classic appellations to subdivide officially or unofficially into ‘sub-zones,’ as has happened in Barolo and as seems to be happening in Brunello (and perhaps on Etna). In my view this is a very good thing; it allows a specificity of marketing . . . and is useful to the consumer.”

Chris Zanzarella, brand manager for Luiano with Opici Wines, was a bit more optimistic, expressing his opinion that excitement about Gran Selezione was evident among sales reps “once we educated them on and explained it to them,” but agreeing that awareness was “still lacking with consumers.” His sentiments make a good case for the importance of [wine education](#) for both the trade and the public.

Among Chianti Classico producers themselves, impressions of the success of Gran Selezione vary. Grace and Marzi report increased sales and seem happy with results so far. Capurso at Ricasoli says it’s too soon to tell how the new category will perform, while Stianti was satisfied with the category “even if the high price has not led to large sales volumes.” Cellai, on the other hand, was not enthusiastic. “I believe that [Gran Selezione] does not serve to increase the image of Chianti Classico. Perhaps the price, but it remains to be seen whether customers will be willing to pay more for the same wine,” referring to wines that were Riservas until last year but are now being marketed as Gran Selezione.

The Way Ahead

The way ahead for Chianti Classico is to continue to move ahead, not to backtrack. As Giovanna Stianti observes, “Gran Selezione and



zonation are bringing back the spotlight and curiosity about the world of Chianti Classico. For that alone, I believe that they are two important actions that can give new focus to our wines.” Roberto Stucchi added that defining menzioni for Chianti Classico “would help give a better geographical definition to the area, would help distinguish [Chianti Classico] from Chianti, and would make for a much more interesting communication about the extreme diversity of this area.”

Tim Grace was not a proponent of Gran Selezione when it was being debated, but has come to embrace it. “Now that it is a reality,” he says, “I think we must make this successful. We cannot embark on such a major undertaking and have it fail.” In Grace’s opinion now, “I believe—if marketed correctly—Gran Selezione will be good for all Chianti Classico producers. The reality is, the category needs an upgrade.

This is because there is a disconnect between

the high-quality wines what many producers make and the public perception of Chianti Classico, that seems stuck in 1970. I can’t think of a better way to upgrade the image of Chianti Classico in general than from the high end. At the end of the day, I view Gran Selezione as a way to—very rightfully—raise the best of Chianti Classico into the conversation of the very best of Italian wine.”