

Weinakademiker thesis abstract

by Wouter Aalst,
WSET number
15040426

Chianti Classico: Re-shaping its identity

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2019 I visited the Chianti Classico region. A conversation with the winemaker of Castello della Paneretta inspired me to research this region and its challenges in greater detail.

Research question: How can producers and the Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico give Chianti Classico a more recognizable identity towards consumers?

For my research, I travelled the region to interview winemakers and journalists. Some interviews proceeded by video conference due to the coronavirus pandemic. Literary research involving books and articles was conducted for additional context and information.

2. History

Chianti is famous for being the world's first delimited wine region since 1716. The Chianti region was dramatically expanded by the fascist regime in 1932. What is known today as Chianti Classico roughly represents the original Chianti zone before the expansion.

In 1872, Bettino Ricasoli 'invented' the Chianti recipe. He argued for a Sangiovese-dominated wine with a proportion of white grapes in the blend, if the wine was intended to be consumed young. This recipe became the blueprint for legislation when Chianti became a DOC in 1967, thereby excluding 100% Sangiovese wines. This led to the rise of so-called 'Super Tuscans'; wines that failed to comply with Chianti rules were consequently labelled as table wines.

Once Chianti Classico became a separate DOCG in 1996, the average quality of the wines began to improve. This followed a period in the 70s and 80s when Chianti was being bottled in the 'fiasco' flask. These wines were generally thin and of poor quality.

3. Sangiovese

The Sangiovese grape is Italy's most-planted grape variety. As of 2008, all Chianti Classico wines must contain at least 80% Sangiovese. A growing proportion of small Chianti Classico producers uses 100% Sangiovese. Although quality producers agree that Sangiovese is a transparent variety, able to reflect a sense of place in the wine, most big firms continue to blend with international grape varieties.

4. The Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico

The Consorzio is the governing body of Chianti Classico wines. A member's vote is weighted based on the output volume of their operation. As a result, big firms dominate the vote. The Erga Omnes authorisation dictates that the Consorzio covers non-members as well, as long as

it represents at least 40% of growers and 66% of the total output volume. Many small producers feel left out of the decision-making process, and rightfully so. Some of them have resorted to avoiding the Chianti Classico label altogether. Others are looking to join forces with other small producers in order to leave the Consorzio.

5. Chianti Classico Gran Selezione

This new top of the quality pyramid has caused a lot of unrest among Chianti Classico producers. The Consorzio has been promoting this category at full force, bringing Gran Selezione wines to a higher price point in the market than they had been able to with the Riserva category. The president of the Consorzio, Giovanni Manetti, has proposed new regulations for the Gran Selezione category intended to exclude international varieties. In addition, he wants to implement the ability to label subzones for the top category only.

The Italian government recently granted the outer Chianti zones permission to create a Gran Selezione category of their own. This will create a lot of confusion amongst consumers, who are already struggling to see the difference between Chianti and Chianti Classico as it is. Distinguishing between the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione and Chianti Gran Selezione categories may prove even more difficult.

6. Zonification

Zonification has been a disputed topic for many years now. The Consorzio wants to reserve the use of communal subzones on the label for the Gran Selezione category only. Since no more than 30% of producers actually makes Gran Selezione, the impact should be limited. Others argue that zonification should be open to all quality levels. There may be a role to play here for the growers' associations of some of the communes within Chianti Classico. A more radical approach of the subzones is to let go of the 'Classico' suffix and simply refer to all Chianti regions as 'Chianti'. This argument is substantiated by the idea that the confusion between Chianti and Chianti Classico is already irreversible.

7. Conclusion

This research paper concludes with three recommendations for exploring policies aimed at reducing the confusion that so many stakeholders talk about;

1. Chianti

It is recommended to investigate in greater detail the possibility of merging all Chianti subzones and Chianti Classico into a single new Chianti DOC appellation.

2. International varieties and subzones

It would be a powerful and clear statement towards the market if international varieties were banned from all quality levels in the Chianti (Classico) pyramid. All quality levels should be allowed to use subzones on the label.

3. Erga Omnes

The Erga Omnes status is virtually impossible to break, but such an achievement would facilitate the creation of a more recognizable identity towards consumers.

The aim must be to create a wine of quality with a distinct identity. All the right ingredients are in place: Sangiovese grapes, the accommodating microclimates of the region and a growing group of ambitious winemakers ready to execute.