

TUSCANY ITALY'S KINGDOM OF WINE

Wine terms can be confusing.

One of the most common questions comes by way of Italy's Chianti region. One of Italy's most popular and largest productions is Chianti wine.

Most people know it and most have probably experienced this dry red wine. By Italian wine law, Chianti wine has to have 75 to 100 percent of a grape called Sangiovese. This major grapevine is grown throughout Italy, but its home is Tuscany, the birthplace of three of Italy's most important red wines: Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. All three are made from the Tuscany-grown Sangiovese grape. Some of these wines even border each other.

So, how can one grape make three distinctly different red wines? Tuscany is a virtual kingdom of different variations of this grape. Grape clones of Sangiovese will change and mutate according to macroclimates. Science shows this particular grapevine is indeed special and can be quite different not only a hill away but in adjacent plants. The Italian wine industry has had a research study grant since 1987 on differing Sangiovese grape clones. The study was still running as of 2005 because the darn grape keeps reinventing itself.

The top three Sangiovese clones are Sangiovese of Chianti; Brunello, the clone for Brunello di Montalcino; and Prugnolo, the vine favorite for over more than centuries with the Catholic Vatican Church and appropriately called Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. Vino Nobile di Montepulciano wine was also Thomas Jefferson's most favored red wine, which he drank on his European travels and later served at the White House.

The wine question I hear most often: Are there three levels to Chianti - Chianti, Chianti Classico and Chianti Riserva?

Answer: True, false and true.

For Chianti to be the real deal, it needs to be at least 75 percent Sangiovese and made in Tuscany. Then and only then can it be called Chianti. Chianti riserva is more structured, elegant and age-worthy than Chianti. By law, Riservas are also grown and produced in Tuscany and aged at least two years in wood and three months in bottle. Some years no riservas are made, although every year Chianti Classico wines are made. The reason Chianti Classico does not fit into this hierarchy is that it is a region, not a level, in Tuscany. The Tuscan Chianti wine region has eight sub-regions. All these sub-regions reside within Tuscany and grow Sangiovese. The Classico region - perhaps the most famous sub-region - is located between Florence and the ancient walled city of Siena along one of the world's most beautiful roads, Chiantigiana. Chianti Rufina, another very popular region, can on any given year make just as stunning wines as Chianti Classico.

2003 **Vignamaggio Terre di Prenzano Chianti Classico**, retail \$16. This estate-grown wine is situated in the heart of the Chianti Classico on hills between Florence and Siena at 1,300 feet above sea level. Robust, dried black plum flavor with a refreshing finish that would be food-friendly with tomato salads, sauces or anything tomato. As a food twist, try with fish tacos and grilled fish except oily ones as salmon.



More about Andy Andresky: Owner of the 1776 restaurant in Crystal Lake, Andresky has written about wine for the NorthWest News Group since 1999. He is a wine consultant for area businesses and teaches wine tasting and appreciation classes. He is the co-host of the cable television show "Wine Talk," and also is a board member of the McHenry County Health Department.

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