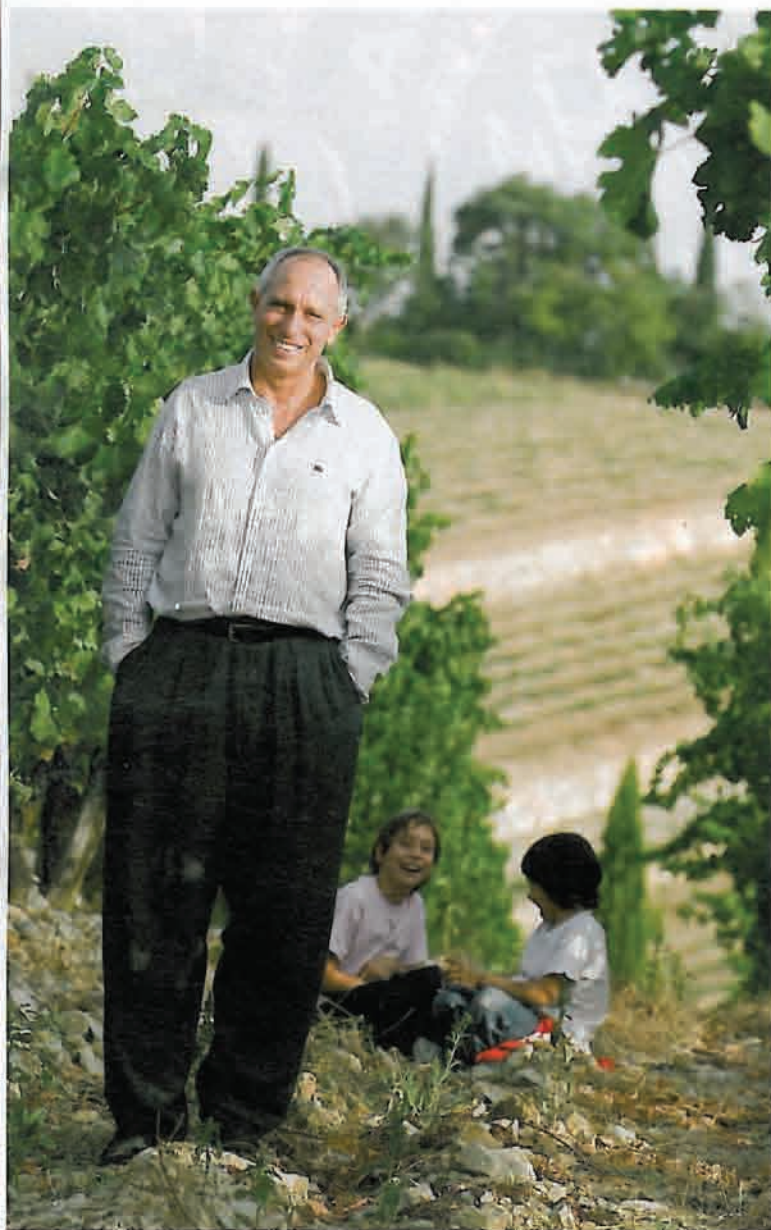


CHIANTI CLASSICO: FOUNTAIN OF TUSCAN INNOVATION

I have a soft spot for Chianti, particularly Chianti Classico. Maybe it's the numerous fine bottles I've consumed over the years, but after visiting the region, my feeling was reinforced by its beauty. It's difficult not to be impressed by the rugged countryside, with its ridges and



Marco Pallanti of Castello di Ama was one of 2007's top achievers, crafting a classic-rated Chianti Classico from vineyards high in the hills near the village of Gaiole.

valleys, dense forests, vineyard vistas and ageless stone buildings.

Along with Brunello di Montalcino, Chianti Classico and some of its neighboring DOCGs render Tuscany's finest expressions of Sangiovese. In general, Chiantis are more elegant and racy than Brunellos.

Unlike Brunello, however, Chianti has gone beyond Sangiovese and has been the major source of innovation within Tuscany, particularly from the historic Classico zone. For example, the original "super Tuscan"—wines such as San Felice's Vigorello (1968) and Antinori's Tignanello (1970), which defied both the traditions and the regulations—arose from these hills.

Chianti Classico stretches over several communes, and the soil types, elevations and exposures vary dramatically, so it's difficult to describe the wines based on their DOCG designation alone. I find wines from the higher elevations (1,300 feet to 1,600 feet) to be more perfumed and elegant. Versions from the sandy soils in the southern part of the appellation can also be aromatic. Lower elevations tend to produce more robust wines, especially where they have more clay in the soil.

QUICK FACTS

CHIANTI

Important DOC(G)s: Chianti Classico DOCG, 17,784 acres; Chianti DOCG 25,935 acres (includes Colli Aretini, Colli Fiorentini, Montalbano, Montespertoli, Colline Pisane, Rufina and Colle Senesi)

Grape varieties: Sangiovese, Canaiolo, Colorino, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and others

Best recent vintages: 2007 (94 points); 2006 (93); 2001 (92)

But style also depends on the goals of the producer. The wines of Fontodi and Il Molino di Grace, although sourced from sites near each other in Panzano, couldn't be more different. The Conca d'Oro, or "golden shell," where Giovanni Manetti of Fontodi farms nearly 200 acres of vines, yields rich, ripe wines with focused fruit flavors. Il Molino di Grace is just on the other side of the ridge. Under the guidance of enologist Franco Bernabei, its wines are perfumed, elegant and beautifully balanced.

The 2009 vintage, a warm year, is the most current available for Chianti and Chianti Classico. The wines show ripe fruit and soft structures. Until I taste more wines, I give 2009 a preliminary rating of 88–91 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. The 2007s are also ripe, yet possess more power and structure. By contrast, 2008 (89 points) was a cooler year; these Chiantis are higher in acidity, leaner in profile and tight, yet there's an elegance and freshness to them that I find appealing. There are still a few 2006s available, a vintage that fielded dense, structured Chiantis at the top level.

Judging from the 170 Chiantis I tasted this year, '07 is the best of the four recent vintages. I give it 94 points, a slight edge over 2006 (93 points; a downgrade based on the *riservas* I recently tasted).

Castello di Ama's Chianti Classico Vigneto La Casuccia 2007 (95, \$200) and Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista 2007 (93, \$200) demonstrate the balance, intensity and beauty of the vintage. Ama's impressive vineyards are well-situated at or near the top of the ridge in the commune of Gaiole, reaching 1,650 feet in elevation.

INDICAZIONE GEOGRAFICA TIPICA (IGT): THE CATCHALL CATEGORY

Also of note is the Castello di Ama Toscana L'Apparita 2007 (94, \$200), which is 100 percent Merlot. These wines come from the heart of Chianti Classico, but because they are not dominated by Sangiovese (the minimum allowed is 80 percent), they are labeled as IGT.