

## Daily Dish

THE INSIDE SCOOP ON FOOD IN LOS ANGELES

Chianti, in the same league with the world's top red wines, gets a new designation



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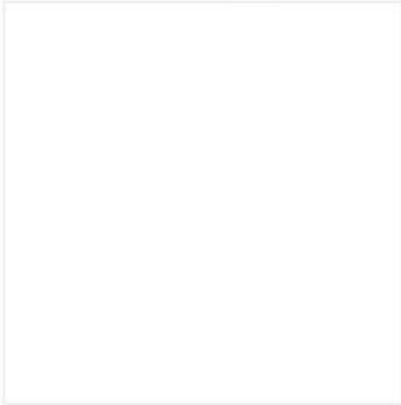
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Those Tuscan hills are alive with Chianti-bound grapes. (Massimo Sestini / September 27, 2002)

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By S. Irene Virbila

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As anybody who follows Italian wine knows, the quality strides made in Tuscany's Chianti Classico region in the last few decades have been enormous. No longer just the default house wine at red sauce Italian restaurants or pizza joints, the best bottles can hold their own against some of the world's top red wines -- and in fact have a strong presence at high-end Italian and Cal-Med restaurants.

But come May, shopping for a nice little Chianti for dinner may become more complicated. That's when the first wines from a new category of Chianti Classico called Gran Selezione will start showing up on the shelves of wine shops.

Perhaps in order to blow away the last vestiges of the embarrassing old-school image of straw-wrapped bottles of indifferent wine, the [Consortium of Chianti Classico](#) has added a new quality designation letting us know that the wine is made exclusively from a wine estate's own grapes grown in its best vineyards and that the wine has aged a minimum of 30 months.

There has been much debate over the years about this new category and to my mind it's not exactly a brilliant move by the consortium. We already have two designations for Chianti Classico: Annata (the year's vintage) or Riserva, which is aged longer. Do you really need one more category above Riserva? Why add one more layer to an already complex situation?

The whole idea seems counterintuitive. For most wine lovers, the most important factor in choosing a Chianti Classico is the name of the estate or wine producer, not whether it's a Riserva or the new Gran Selezione.

Sometimes you want a basic Chianti Classico, something fresh and juicy with bright flavors of cherries from estates such as Badia a Coltibuono, Querciabella or Casa Emma. At other times a full-bodied, more complex Riserva, perhaps from Castello di Monsanto, Castello di Ama or Riecine, or the single vineyard "Rancia" from Felsina, is required.

But do you really need one more category above Riserva? Many of the top wines from the region, such as Antinori's Tignanello, Fontodi's Flaccianello or Felsina's Fontalloro, are not even labeled Chianti Classico, a situation that goes back to a time when wines made from 100% Sangiovese or the so-called Super Tuscans (Cabernet, Merlot or Syrah only sometimes blended with Sangiovese), didn't fit the consortium's rules.



By the time changes were made to include the highly lauded 100% Sangiovese wines, their fame was so great producers didn't need to flaunt that little black rooster on the label.

The question is how many wine estates will take advantage of the new category. Some, at least, will be making a grand tour to debut the new Gran Selezione category in May in the U.S. These include Castello di Ama, Castello di Fonterutoli and Vigna del Sorbo from Fontodi.

Bottom line: Whichever level of Chianti Classico you buy, these Sangiovese-based wines are beautiful matches with food. Choose a regular bottling for pasta e fagioli, salumi, pasta with duck ragu or meat sauce, even a pizza. A Riserva goes well with grilled meats (think *bistecca* or lamb chops). And that Gran Selezione? Well, you can pour that with an *arista* (pork loin roasted with fennel and garlic) or maybe that wild boar roaming the back hills.

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