

STEVEN SPURRIER



En primeur: could Chianti take over from the Médoc?

Here's a prediction for you – by the beginning of the next decade, Chianti Classico will be replacing Médoc in many a wine lover's cellar. The simple reason is that Chianti Classico is still vineyard-driven, while Médoc has become market-driven. The result is wines with energy and individuality on the one hand and semi-standardised concentration on the other.

Such were my thoughts during the week that followed Vinexpo, spent in the centre of the region at Nittardi, between Castellina and Panzano in Chianti. This period saw the last flourish of the most drawn-out *en primeur* campaign in history. Having gone deeply into 2006 Médocs, a vintage I admire, just a handful of tastings convinced me that the 2006 Chianti Classicos have as much, if not more, to offer.

Such a revolution in quality is very recent and, given that the wine of Chianti dates from the 14th century, it has, remarkably, been achieved in the space of a single generation. The first time the international spotlight fell on Tuscany was with the creation of Sassicaia in the late 1960s, then Tignanello in the early 1970s, Ornellaia and Solaia in the 1980s – all Supertuscans using Bordeaux varieties. By the 1990s, the market was flooded. Sold as *vini da tavola*, these wines were vastly more expensive than Chianti Classico, thus denigrating the historic wine still further. A new direction was desperately needed and if this was to be based on Sangiovese, it was vineyards that needed changing, not cellars.

Cellar management had improved greatly since the mid 1980s, but since 1992, attention has moved to more than half of the 10,000ha (hectares) of Chianti

Classico which have been replanted. This programme, backed by the Universities of Florence and Siena, has encouraged high-density planting (5,000–7,000 plants/ha as opposed to the traditional 2–2,500); clonal selection based on long-term research rather than casual purchases from local nurseries; precise identification of the zones most suitable to the Sangiovese grape; and clearer ideas about which grapes best compliment it. The combination of these elements has eliminated Sangiovese's negative characteristics of late ripening, excessive acidity and rough tannins. Tighter

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controls by the consorzios Gallo Nero and Vino Chianti Classico – whose recent merger now covers 600 estates producing 35 million bottles – have reduced yields to an average 55hl/ha, similar to that of Cabernet Sauvignon in the Médoc.

A major turning point was the launch by the Mazzei family of Castello di Fonterutoli in 1995. Prior to this vintage, the Mazzeis made two IGT wines, a 50/50 Sangiovese-Merlot blend named Siepe, which they retained, and a 100% Sangiovese named Ser Lapo, which they did not. Apart from the single-vineyard Siepe, their finest Sangiovese was now destined for their Castello 'grand vin'

label, their 'second wine' being labelled simply Fonterutoli. This concept was swiftly copied and a pattern began to appear of three wines: a non-Riserva Chianti from a recent vintage, a Riserva (although this was dropped from most labels) from an older vintage and an IGT Supertuscan. The price of the Castello (Riserva) wine was usually more than double that of the younger version, and that of the IGT half as much again. In the enotecas this summer, the prices for Fonterutoli were €14 for the 2004, €30 for the Castello 2001 and €50 for Siepe 2003 – all good value for money given their great vineyard quality.

At 10,000ha, Chianti Classico is 2,000 ha smaller than the Médoc, and it is rare to find single estates with over 50ha under vine. But, thanks to the Fonterutoli initiative, their structure shows marked similarities to Médoc, right down to the small oak barrels that have increasingly replaced the Hungarian *foudres*. Yet up to now, there have been no group promotional activities by such communes as Greve, Radda and Castellina, and even the best wines have not been offered *en primeur*. Change is afoot, for 12 years ago the Unione Viticoltori di Panzano was created to promote the specific regional style. Under the chairmanship of Giovanni Manetti of Fontodi, all 18 estates are members, including Rampolla, La Massa, Villa Cafaggio and Monte Bernardi, to a total of 300 hectares. There is an annual wine fair in September, a presence at the trade show ProWein in Düsseldorf and the number of vineyards that are already organic/biodynamic (50%) is expanding every year. Inevitably, other communes will follow this lead.

As for *en primeur*, Chianti Classico has an impressive track record of superb vintages – 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006 – to show that 10 years' ageing is just a start. If the 2006s are offered pre-release, count me in. **D**

Look out for our special section on the wines of Chianti Classico in next month's issue.

Steven Spurrier is *Decanter's* consultant editor, and a renowned taster

WHAT STEVEN'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

LOIRE CABERNET FRANCS

2005 was, of course, a superb year for most red wines in France and the vintage was a rare triumph for the Loire Valley's Cabernet Franc. Recent bottles of the two best Saumur

Champignys, Domaine Filliatreau (£8.65, Yapp Brothers) and Domaine des Roches Neuves (£8.19, Caves de Pyrene), have been absolute bliss. Their explosive fruit will be further enhanced if served chilled.