



NOTES FROM THE FIELD



BACKGROUND INFO

Gardens for the Medici family. In it, he churned milk, egg yolks, and Malvasia wine over ice creating the first milk-based gelato. These days, gelaterias are ubiquitous in Tuscany. Stand-by flavors like nocciola (hazelnut), stracciatella (chocolate-specked vanilla) and frutta de bosco (berries of the forest) are joined by seasonal ones like fig, blood orange, and apricot.

Wine

Tuscany produces some excellent DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) wines and six of Italy's DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) offerings. Wines with the first designation are crafted with certain specifications (such as grape type); the added 'G' of the second label signifies wines that meet those criteria as well as pass several government-established tests. A regular DOC label can elevate to DOCG after five years of consistent excellence. Beyond these designations there are specific labels used to further distinguish and laud certain wines, such as Riserva, applied to DOC or DOCG, meaning the wine has been aged for a specific amount of time. All of these designations are simply benchmark labels. There are plenty of Tuscan wines that defy classification, or, in the case of vino da tavola (table wine) have producers who choose not to adhere to the specific regulations.

Most Tuscan wines are comprised of the region's signature grape, Sangiovese, which forms the basis of the traditional reds, like Chianti, Brunello, Vino Nobile and Carmignano. The best Tuscan wines are red; the whites have never been an equal match though admittedly there are some good ones, most notably the DOCG Vernaccia di San Gimignano and Montecarlo from outside of Lucca. Still, it is the robust reds that are most closely linked with Tuscan vineyards, and Chianti is regarded as the heart of the wine region.

Once regarded as a bit scrappy and rough, Chianti (DOCG) is now better appreciated in and out of Italy. Chianti is comprised of four different grapes—two red (Sangiovese and Canaiolo) and two white (Malvasia and Trebbiano), and can range from rustic table wines to elegant, age-worthy reds. The varietals hail from seven distinct zones scattered throughout central Tuscany, of which Chianti Classico, tucked between Siena and Florence, is the most famous. A powerful consortium of producers tightly manage and control the wines from here, labeling the neck of deserving vintages with the infamous gallo nero (black rooster). But not all winemakers are part of the consortium, so don't assume that a bottle lacking a black rooster is therefore no good.

Brunello di Montalcino, one of Tuscany's more famous DOCGs, hails from the dry, chalky hills south of Siena. Rich and well-balanced, Brunellos are usually made from their namesake or Sangiovese Grosso grapes and represent some of Italy's most prized wines. Top producers include Poggio Antico, Castello Banfi, Cerbaiona, and Altesino.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano (DOCG) is also illustrious, with wines coming from neighboring vineyard-studded hills in the same region. This elegant and rich red is comprised mostly of a Sangiovese-like grape called Prugnolo Gentile. Top producers include Bindella, Fassati, and Poliziano.

Tuscany's dessert wine, Vin Santo, is sweet, aromatic and golden, crafted from semi-dried Malvasia or Trebbiano grapes, sometimes a combo of the two. The grapes are dried on straw mats or hung from rafters before being pressed and sealed in barrels for three years or more. Badia a Coltibuono, Castello di Ama, Castellare, and Isole e Olena all produce delicious versions of this holy wine.