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Chianti Classico: The Search for Tuscany's Noblest Wine

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(Sintesi)

In the late nineteenth century wine producers and merchants throughout Tuscany began to industrialize the production of wine branded as “*Chianti*” during the same period that the legal principle of protecting agricultural products (including those of the vine) bearing a geographic designation of origin began to take root – first in the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property of 1883 and then in the Madrid Agreement for the Repression of False or Deceptive Indications of Source on Goods of 1891. The debate over Chianti’s borders began to intensify in this context and would ultimately shape the early evolution of Italian wine law around the legal construct of *vino tipico* (i.e., enological typicity vs. typicity of place). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *guerra* (war) over Chianti’s borders became a subject of intense commercial, political, and legal debate. The merchants, politicians, and scholars of Tuscany zealously analyzed and argued the question of *What is Chianti?*

In 1906 the Georgofili Academy, honoring its historic mission to serve as a forum for leading thinkers in the field of agriculture, sponsored a competition for a practical manual or handbook (*Vade-mecum*) for wine merchants in the region of Chianti. Torquato Guarducci, an engineer by training, authored the winning submission in this competition. In contrast with the other entrant, Antonio Casabianca, who defined enological Chianti as restricted to the historic borders of the medieval Lega del Chianti, Guarducci relied on geographic, geologic, and historic factors for defining Chianti as a wine region. He based his geographic definition of Chianti on the work of Emanuele Repetti, the

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author of the authoritative, multi-volume encyclopedic dictionary on Tuscan geography and history from the mid-nineteenth century. According to Guarducci, enological Chianti essentially stretched from the township of Greve south to the historic townships of Castellina, Radda, and Gaiole, and their surrounding growing areas. Remarkably, this definition of Chianti (and the map produced in the volume of Guarducci's manuscript published in 1909) was consistent with the delimitation of Chianti in Cosimo III de' Medici's groundbreaking 1716 *bando* (decree) that created the first legal appellations of origin for wine in the world.

In our book, *Chianti Classico: The Search for Tuscany's Noblest Wine* (University of California Press, 2016), we analyze Chianti from multiple perspectives: historical, political, geographic, geological, ampelographic, socio-economic, enological, and cultural. In our quest to understand Chianti within the larger context of the evolution of agriculture in Tuscany, we came upon an unknown Florentine named Girolamo di ser Bastiano Gatteschi da Firenzuola (Girolamo da Firenzuola) and his seemingly little-known manuscript about agriculture from 1552. We learned that Luigi Fiacchi (also known as Clasio), a Tuscan abbot, poet, and philologist, in 1803 gave a lecture at the Georgofili Academy (and at one of Florence's other prestigious academies, La Colombaria) regarding the unpublished manuscript which Girolamo da Firenzuola had written on the "noblest art" of agriculture. In his lecture, Fiacchi described how Firenzuola's manuscript, *Sopra la agricoltura*, was in his estimation the most important treatise on the agrarian sciences that had ever been written in Tuscany. Fiacchi explained that its author, in contrast with other celebrated Tuscan authors such as Vettori, Davanzati, and Soderini, presented an entire system of agriculture that was based directly on his personal and practical experience tending vines, making wine, grafting fruit trees, and designing gardens. In Fiacchi's words this manuscript was "still buried miserably in the shadows of shameful oblivion". Our research led us first to the National Central Library of Florence and then to the Laurentian Library in pursuit of a copy of Firenzuola's original manuscript. We were deeply curious about what Firenzuola had written about the state of viticulture and enology at the height of the Florentine Renaissance. We were especially interested in learning what Firenzuola could tell us about the evolution of Chianti as a vinicultural region. And so, it was with amazement that we read Chapter 6 of book 2 of Firenzuola's treatise titled "[how to] make a precious wine". According to Firenzuola, "precious wine" was made using the vine variety Sangiovese (Sangiovese) that was grown in mountainous and rocky locations – such as Lucolena, Montescalari, Lamole, Panzano, Radda, and Civitella – from old

vines in dedicated vineyards. In other words, in 1552 Firenzuola singled out a Sangiovese-predominant wine hailing from specialized old vineyards in the high hills of Chianti or close to the Chianti Mountains as the precious wine of Florence (compared with a Canaiolo-predominant *vermiglio* from tree-trained vines cultivated by sharecroppers using a form of *coltura promiscua* (polyculture) outside of these areas in Chianti). Firenzuola's mid-sixteenth century treatise sets forth a definition of enological Chianti that is essentially consistent with the core elements of the definition of Chianti in Cosimo III's 1716 *bando*, Repetti's mid-nineteenth century *Dizionario*, Guarducci's early-twentieth century *Il Chianti Vinicolo*, and Giovanni Rezoagli's mid-twentieth century *Il Chianti*.

In this respect, Girolamo da Firenzuola was an early pioneer of Chianti – to be followed by Bettino Ricasoli in the mid-nineteenth century. Bettino Ricasoli is historically credited with singling out Sangiovese as Chianti's noble variety – and for dedicating himself to the improvement of viticultural and enological practices in order to produce the highest quality wine for export. To this end, Bettino Ricasoli traveled to the celebrated wine regions of France and devised a Chianti blend using Sangiovese as its premier varietal, together with other Tuscan native varieties. Ricasoli's lifelong goal was for the wines of Brolio Chianti to compete with the best French wines on the British market.

In the long tradition of Tuscan enology (dating to at least the period of Firenzuola), Tuscans have long esteemed French wines and have devised blends of native and/or French vine varieties using French viticultural and enological techniques to approximate the organoleptic qualities of esteemed French wines. After the Second World War when Chianti's future as a vinicultural region remained in doubt, the French model proved to be the foundation for several forward-thinking wine producers to build a high-profile presence on the global market. Giacomo Tachis, the chief enologist for the Antinori company, personified this quest par excellence. In contrast with Bettino Ricasoli, Tachis embraced Bordeaux vine varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to blend with Sangiovese in wines which earned a reputation for quality and flair under a new marketing banner called *Super Tuscans*. The Super Tuscan moniker enabled these wine estates to overcome the marketing challenges associated with the name *Chianti* – whose reputation had been diluted (and tarnished) since the early twentieth century. And yet, during this very period there were wine experts and master tasters such as Giulio Gambelli who dedicated themselves to Chianti's native variety, Sangiovese, and its most authentic vinous expression. Tirelessly working for estates in Chianti such as Ormanni, Lilliano, Bibbiano, Rodano, Cacciano, San Feli-

ce, and Monteverdine (to name a few), Gambelli influenced a new generation of wine producers and consulting enologists who themselves became dedicated to creating a new class of 100% Sangiovese “*Super Chianti*” wines which would come to redefine Chianti Classico as one of Tuscany and Italy’s elite wine regions. In this regard Gambelli’s influence can be traced directly back to the experiences and ideas of Girolamo da Firenzuola, perhaps Chianti’s earliest and least celebrated champion of all.

In our own search for the true Chianti, we have been privileged to study the work of learned scholars, noble landowners, tireless producers, and humble winegrowers who in their own ways have passionately preserved and promoted Chianti Classico as an iconic wine region. It has been our honor to tell the story of the true Chianti – a land which has long deserved to be known by its own name.