

ABSTRACT

The Chianti Classico region constitutes the very heart of the Tuscan wine industry. In 2016, the region celebrated its 300th anniversary. It was initially demarcated to produce quality wine. However, throughout the centuries the region has been getting a rather negative image, associated with bulk wine and fiasco baskets. Over the last two decades the quality of the viticulture and the winemaking has improved immensely. The region is now in a positive flow and during the last few years export sales have been slightly on the rise. Despite this success a number of important issues will still have to be tackled so as to reach the top of the wine world. The producers' views regarding their most important grape, Sangiovese, are quite at variance with one another. The lack of one single identity makes it difficult for the consumer to understand what the region actually stands for.

The aim of my research is to investigate whether today Sangiovese may not possess the qualities to define the very identity of the region and hence provide transparency to the consumer. To investigate the relationship between Sangiovese and Chianti Classico I use as guiding principle the quality concept of the terroir. Relying on the literature, the interviews (with oenologists, producers and specialists) and reviews by renowned wine critics I have obtained an overall picture so as to reach a conclusion.

The results of my study show that in the past it was quite difficult to make 100% Sangiovese wines possessing a decent quality. The most significant factor here was the climate which was too cool to allow for the phenological ripening of the grape. To lessen the stingy edges the idea arose in the Chianti Classico region to blend these grapes with local varieties (Ricasoli 1872). Because of WWII, the Tuscan tenure system and the lack of knowledge on the part of the farmers the viniculture focused solely on high-yields until well into the 20th century. Also this view stressed Sangiovese's inferior aspects. Only since the 1970's could emphasis have been placed on quality thanks to the Zeitgeist of the day, the knowledge of the first consultants and the more modern wine technology. Because of the cool climate and its past many consultants considered the grape mediocre and difficult to handle and, therefore, also opted for blends. Preference was given to international varieties in order to create the style and taste that at the time were in vogue and appreciated worldwide.

It is only at the beginning of the 21st century that Sangiovese is being considered in the Chianti Classico region as a potentially first-class grape. It could also be made as monocepage within its own appellation since 1996. To pursue quality by using the terroir of the region might become the philosophy of the producers when all the factors which such a concept creates, were met. The Chianti Classico 2000 project, an elaborate 16-year-long investigation, saw to it that viticulture knowledge about Sangiovese significantly increased. Wrong vineyard locations from the past were replanted under optimal conditions taking into account climate, soil and exposure. The planting now happened with the correct density (5000vi/ha), with the correct rootstock choice dependent on environment (420 A, 775 Paulsen and 110R) and with crops between and around the vines. Also, seven extra quality clones (CCL2000/1 – CCL2000/7) were added to the existing list. All these viticultural changes reduced vigour and limited the yields and should be also one of the conditions to achieve high terroir expression.

Because of the favourable effect of the climate change our improved knowledge has manifested itself in 100% Sangiovese wines during the past decade. Whereas in the past the temperature in the region was too cool, the rise in temperature revealed itself as a blessing for Sangiovese to achieve phenolic ripeness. The large diurnal range sees to it that at the end of the growing season this process takes place slowly and in cool conditions. This should be the 2nd important condition to achieve high terroir expression. In the Chianti Classico region it is, on average, not only cooler but the diurnal range during the growing season is in certain locations, like in Radda and Gaiole in Chianti, also significant larger than in other Tuscan wine regions. These big differences between day and night temperatures (caused by high altitudes, the impact of mountains and forests typical for the region) create conditions which are found nowhere else.

Sangiovese is extremely sensitive to the environment and is able to reflect fluctuations in various expressions without losing quality. In times when the consumer inquires about terroir and authenticity one must admit that today all factors, necessary to determine this very quality concept of terroir, are present to make great and unique 100% Sangiovese wines. There is an interaction involving improved knowledge about Sangiovese, its viticulture model, the wine technology and the impact of climate on soil (Galestro and Albarese) which would seem to be appropriate for the grape (low fertility and high calcium carbonate). All these aspects allow for the expression of terroir which is particularly appreciated by many wine critics. Over the last two decades 70% of the vineyards have been replanted and many producers started applying organic and/or biodynamic principles only in 2016. Added to this, the increase of the practical experience of the producers and the favourable effect of climate change on locations which today are still cool, will serve to further enhance the quality of this expression in the future.

The main future challenge for the Consorzio Chianti Classico is to convince all producers of the view that the quality of the wine is defined by its great terroir and authenticity. This can solely be achieved through 100% Sangiovese wines or through blends with only a small percentage of local varieties. Still, international varieties eclipse this expression. They create a style that doesn't fit into this philosophy and rather belong to the IGT category of the region. In this way Chianti Classico may create a single, clear identity and appeal to a specific market sector for which there will always be an interest in the future.