

The Chianti region
of Tuscany.



Under the Tuscan sun.

Venture beyond Tuscany's popular towns of Florence and Siena to discover another world of long-standing wineries, picture-perfect accommodation and culinary delights.

By CAROLINE HAMILTON

A good Chianti smells and tastes like Italy: dried oregano, balsamic vinegar, salami and espresso. The colour is ruby red and the flavour is harmonic, dry and slightly tannic, with an intense aroma.

Although Chianti can be made anywhere among eight subzones in Tuscany, the truest examples come from the Chianti Classico zone – the name given to the small territory of 71,000 hectares between Florence and Siena. This is the stuff of holiday daydreams: terracotta-roofed towns, wine-soaked dinners and patchworks of vineyards covering the hillsides.

In among these rolling hills, there are plenty of impressive wines ready to be enjoyed, but don't expect kitschy straw-wrapped bottles. This is Chianti Classico territory, where the region's warm climate, clay-based soils and the know-how of second- and third-generation winemakers are producing excellent, nuanced wines and yielding more than a few unexpected treasures. Think luxury farm-stays, delicious delis and some contemporary art that's worth a detour. For the visitor, the Chianti Classico zone represents a great opportunity to discover the true heart of Tuscan wine and culture. Wines from this region bear the trademark of the Gallo Nero (the black rooster) and must have been grown, pressed, preserved, aged and bottled within the zone. The region's association with high-quality wines is the result of a truly ancient tradition. Wine has been produced here since Etruscan times, but Cosimo III de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, was responsible for the denomination of Chianti Classico in 1716.

Back then, a traditional Chianti Classico would have been a blend that contained 70 per cent sangiovese along with a mix of canaiolo, trebbiano, malvasia, cabernet sauvignon and merlot. These days, however, the minimum proportion of sangiovese grapes must be 80 per cent and there's a current strong movement to



return to the use of the ancient local variety known as colorino, along with an eco-responsible trend towards organic and biodynamic cultivation.

When planning an itinerary, consider getting away from the main cities of Florence or Siena, instead choosing accommodation in one of the seven small villages in the zone. Those picture-perfect winding hills look great, but also take some time to negotiate in a rental car, so rather than ferrying back and forth each day, make the most of the time and the landscape by staying nestled among the vines. There are literally hundreds of wineries to visit in the Chianti Classico territory, so travelling at an unhurried pace is recommended.

The little hilltop village of Castellina in Chianti is home to the Cecchi winery, a family-run business with deep roots in the zone. Villa Cerna is the family's original estate, with vineyards that have been producing grapes for almost 1000 years. The label's origins began in 1893 when the family patriarch, Luigi Cecchi, a professional wine taster, realised the potential to craft truly special wines in the local territory. Together with the help of his son Cesare, Luigi created the winery. Today the Cecchi family manages several estates throughout Tuscany. "We are fortunate here," says Cecchi's hospitality manager Isotta Santini. "We have a very positive market position and the right climate – rough soils and just enough water."

For a location so celebrated for its beauty, visitors to the area are often surprised by how untamed they find the landscape. The vines draw their resilience from the fact they need to fight nature for nutrients.



Villa Pomona: four hectares of vineyards, olive groves and holiday apartments.

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The hilltop village of Castellina in Chianti.

Nearby, Villa Pomona is also working hard to leave an impression on visitors. With four hectares of vineyards, olive groves and a sprawling farm that includes holiday apartments, Monica Raspi has been producing her own wines according to biodiversity principles since 2007. Her Chianti Classico is a blend of 95 per cent sangiovese with five per cent of the local colorino variety. Monica's best sangiovese grapes are used to produce an excellent, deep ruby-red Riserva, which has 20 months' maturation, plus another six in the bottle. Monica's wines capture her bold spirit. "There was a time when our authentic wines were totally out of favour," Monica explains. "But the fashion has turned and people are beginning to understand that the soil in each village in the zone has its own characteristics and personality. We want to harness that spirit to create truly memorable wines."

Over in Volterra, outside the Classico zone but well worth a visit, is the luxury farmstay Borgo Pignano, where they are experimenting with biodiversity and organic wines. The streams that flow through the estates help irrigate the fields, orchards, olive groves and vineyard, while the seasonal vegetable gardens produce a wide variety of foods that are picked in the morning and end up on the table later that day. The Borgo offers guests accommodation in a beautifully restored castle and the opportunity to savour homemade and organic Tuscan breads, honeys, cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil and organic wines. A visit to the Chianti region need not only be about wine. Chianti also boasts superior olive oil of the highest quality and

there is plenty to be sampled at various wineries and among the Saturday market stalls that line the main square in the region's principal town, Greve. It's worth making a detour to browse the stalls and small artisanal shops under the porticoes that surround the piazza. Also visit La Bottega dell'Artigianato, which is filled with hand-woven baskets and cutting boards carved from the wood of the local olive trees.

In Panzano, Antica Macelleria Cecchini can't be missed. This hybrid butcher and restaurant takes the business of meat very seriously. Run by eighth-generation master macellaio (butcher) Dario Cecchini, this institution offers a huge range of products to buy, while his restaurant next door offers everything from beef tartare to lardo and bistecca alla Fiorentina prepared to order. "You're welcome to bring your own bottle," he says, "And of course, don't forget your appetite!"

Finally, for a twist on the usual cellar door experience, consider a stop in Gaiole at Castello di Ama. This 18th-century villa also gives its name to a world-class winery and, in addition to the remarkable wines, what makes it unique is the chance to enjoy a collection of contemporary art by some of the world's best, including Anish Kapoor. Winemaker Marco Pallanti says the idea started more than 12 years ago as a project to invite artists to live temporarily at the winery and "place them in the same environment as the winemaker – to create something born of the place, just like the wine."

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Luxury farmstay Borgo Pignano; (below) the view from its terrace.



Getting around.

From Florence, the road to Chianti Classico territory begins as soon as you leave the motorway outside the city. Keep in mind that most of the best wineries are in the remote depths of the countryside, so a car is essential. Be prepared for more than a little dust. This area is famous for its winding *strade bianche* (white roads), which are well made but unsealed.



Borgo Pignano.



Where to stay.

From Florence or Siena, a drive of less than an hour will get you into the heart of Chianti Classico. One option is to stay in either of these cities and make day-trips out to the countryside, but undoubtedly the most rewarding experience is a few days spent leisurely moving from village to village, sampling the local food and wine, while staying overnight at the guesthouses, countryside castles or farmstays that dot the region.

Borgo Pignano, Volterra
borgopignano.com/en

Castello di Ama, Gaiole In Chianti
castellodiama.com/en

Villa Pomona, Castellina in Chianti
fattoriapomona.it/index-en.html

Where to eat.

Not all of the wineries in Chianti include restaurants, but those that do have them offer visitors a wide range of delicious local dishes and specialty products complete with wine pairing. Whether you opt for a restaurant in one of the villages or at a cellar door, you won't be disappointed. Italians, and Tuscans in particular, take their food seriously and prepare it joyously, so expect everything from cold plates of cheese, prosciutto, olive oil and crostini to substantial dishes of handmade pappardelle with hare or wild boar ragu and, of course, the famous Flintstone-sized bistecca alla Fiorentina.

La Foresteria at Villa Cerna, Cecchi Winery, Castellina In Chianti
foresteriavillacerna.it/en/
Antica Macelleria Cecchini, Panzano
darioceccchini.com