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Going Organic with Chianti Classico



© Strada Toscana | The idyllic, pastoral landscape is being farmed on an increasingly organic basis. Commercial demand for organic wines has had a big influence on the region's growers, **W. Blake Gray** reports.

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Chianti Classico now has 50 producers making wine from organic grapes, and fully one-third of the vineyards in the region are certified organic.

Those numbers are impressive: at a time when other regions of the world (cough, cough California) are trying to undermine the concept of organic certification by pushing "sustainability," [Chianti Classico](#) is increasingly committed to following third-party rules meant to safeguard the health of consumers, workers and grapevines.

"Fifty percent are (converting to organic) for commercial demand," Fabrizio Benedetti, sales manager for Castello Monterinaldi told Wine-Searcher. "The market is asking. But the other 50 percent, it really comes from the feeling. As for ourselves, it's a long time that we are organic but we weren't certified."

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I was in Firenze in February for the annual Antepreme Toscana, where writers sit at a table and ask sommeliers to bring any current-release Chianti Classico your heart desires. I love Chianti Classico, but even for the power taster, it's too much; this year you could sample 435 different wines from 185 different producers. You need a strategy. This year I decided to taste all the wines listed as "organic."

My favorites are below. A small point is that there is still not much quality distinction between the entry-level Chianti Classicos, the more expensive, longer-oak-aged Riservas and the newish Gran Selezione wines that the region wants to charge a lot of money for. There are good wines in all three classifications; you just pay more at the top.

2010 [Fattoria La Ripa Chianti Classico Riserva](#) (90% Sangiovese, 10% Canaiolo)

Nice nose: spicy, fruity, aromatic. I just wanted to keep smelling it. First pomegranates, then dried wildflowers, then tobacco; it just kept changing. Once I got around to putting it in my mouth, it delivered juicy pomegranate with white pepper and cinnamon spiciness, and a pleasurable supple texture. The estate dates to the 15th Century, and has been certified organic since 2001. The best wine I had in [Tuscany](#).

2014 [Querceto di Castellina L'Aura Chianti Classico](#) (100% Sangiovese)

I looked up the prices when I got home and discovered this entry-level wine not only was the best value, but is also surprisingly available in the US. It has good complexity, with initial juicy cherry fruit and tobacco notes on the finish. Nice freshness and the tannins are present without being grippy. I'm surprised it's so affordable because the winery was only founded in 1998, so it shouldn't have the Old World price advantage that so many Chianti Classico producers have of no mortgage on the property.

2013 [Castello di Volpaia Coltassala Chianti Classico Riserva](#) (95% Sangiovese, 5% Mammolo)

There's an interesting story behind the creation of this winery. A printing magnate bought two-thirds of the walled medieval town of Volpaia and gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter in 1972. She and her husband decided to go into the wine business and now their son runs the estate. They were certified organic in 2004. This wine has a characteristic aroma of dark fresh and dried cherries with some tobacco notes. Nice juiciness in the mouth with the right amount of presence. A well-balanced representation of Chianti Classico Riserva, more about the fruit than some, but with restraint.

2013 [Fattoria La Ripa Chianti Classico](#) (90% Sangiovese, 10% Canaiolo)

The entry-level version from the estate that made my favorite wine (above) is very different from the Riserva. It's intense and fresh on the palate: a rush of cherry fruit, with medium body, and some interesting tobacco notes in the aroma.

2011 [Casaloste Don Vincenzo Chianti Classico Gran Selezione](#) (100% Sangiovese)

Though not cheap, this is the best of this winery's offerings: a well-balanced wine with dark cherry and tobacco notes and very nice tannins.



© Castello di Volpaia | A tycoon bought two-thirds of the town of Volpaia for his daughter's wedding present. She and her husband now make wine there.

2014 [Le Fonti Panzano Chianti Classico](#) (90% Sangiovese, 8% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Sauvignon)

This tastes like a Super Tuscan but it's a nice wine on its own merits, though the Cab flavor is surprisingly strong. Good freshness, nice cherry fruit with some backbone and a hint of pepper on the finish. It's a nice if untraditional wine from a small 3000-case winery.

2012 [Rocca di Montegrossi Vigneto San Marcellino Chianti Classico Gran Selezione](#) (97% Sangiovese, 3% Pugnitello)

The estate was established in the Dark Ages, perhaps as early as the 7th Century. It was purchased in 1994 by a member of the aristocratic Ricasoli family, and certified organic in 2010. This wine opens with a dusty, sour plum nose, but on the palate it's bright cherry up front that leads to a denser, more austere finish. I like the way it leaves an impression of cherry but closes off the finish with tannins.

2015 [Montesecondo Chianti Classico](#) (80% Sangiovese, 15% Canaiolo, 5% Colorino)

Silvio Messana's father purchased a farm in 1963. When he died in 1978, Silvio had to take over. He tried to sell it but, after he left the country in 1985 to move to the US to be a musician, he learned the sale didn't go through. Eventually he had to move back home to care for his mother. He took the estate biodynamic in 2004 against what he said were the suspicions of his neighbors; he was just ahead of his time. This wine is a clean, pure-tasting mouthful of refreshing red plum, with a touch of savoriness on the finish. It's not complex but it's delightful.

2015 [Fattoria San Michele a Torri - Tenuta La Gabbiola Chianti Classico](#) (95% Sangiovese, 5% Syrah)

In 1944, this estate was in the center of The Battle of San Michele a Torri, as New Zealand and German troops fought for a week. During this battle, much of the population of San Michele took refuge in the cellars below the winery, and 120 people are thought to have hidden in the barrels, believing they would be safer there. I don't know if the winery still uses those barrels, but the estate has been organic since 1992. The wine is medium-full bodied, offering rich cherry fruit with a touch of earthiness.

2013 [Le Cinciole Chianti Classico](#) (100% Sangiovese)

I was struck by how intense the acidity is on this wine that wasn't released for four years. Maybe that was why? It's straightforward but fresh, with taut cherry fruit, and would be fine with dinner right now but also tastes like it would hold up a lot longer than you expect from an entry-level wine.

2013 [Panzanello Chianti Classico Riserva](#) (95% Sangiovese, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon)

Another Super Tuscan-ish wine that turns out to be pretty nice. This smells of earth and dark fruit, but the flavor is all juicy dark cherry with good freshness and some tannic backbone.

2012 [Quercia al Poggio Chianti Classico Riserva](#) (100% Sangiovese)

The dense aroma is packed with dark cherry and a touch of tobacco. The aroma is ahead of the palate, which is tannic and tight. The wine will probably benefit from decanting. I bet on the aroma.

2015 [Riecine Chianti Classico](#) (100% Sangiovese)

This winery has an English owner and Jancis Robinson is a fan. The wines are light and aromatic and pretty enough on the nose to remind you of Nebbiolo. A Chianti Classico for Beaujolais drinkers. I also tasted the 2014 vintage and it is similar.

2014 [Rocca di Montegrossi Chianti Classico](#) (91% Sangiovese, 5% Canaiolo, 4% Colorino)

This seems like a very classic version, right down to the grape variety mix. It's earthy and a little funky on the nose and taut on the palate, leading with red plum, but not fruit-driven.

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