

## Europe

# Dig into the terroir of Italy's famous Chianti wine region in Tuscany

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Vineyards of Chianti. Picture: iStock

BREAD, olive oil and wine. The holy trinity of Tuscany. Add wild boar, pecorino and fresh tomato bruschetta blessed with truffle shavings, and you have a celestial cuisine.

I am staying in Siena, the centre of the Tuscan universe. Many prefer to stay in Florence and give Siena a cursory glance for a day, but I have put my roots down for a week because there is much to see.

The Palio is on. Since the 17th century, this crazy horse race has drawn crowds of thousands. It even featured in James Bond's *Quantum of Solace*.

In July and August each year, young men ride bareback on a dirt track spread around the perimeter of the sloping semicircular shell of Siena's medieval square, the Piazza del Campo.

It's a time of rivalry, bribery and danger as the jockeys from each contrade (neighbourhood) vie for their mounts, the handsome winner's purse and the precious banner of silk, the pallium. It's a cornucopia of feast and festivity as costumed drummers and flag throwers parade noisily through the streets. Even the horses are blessed inside the chapel of their contrade, and all to the backdrop of the jazz and classical music festivals taking place in this sensory city.

But there's another drawcard to staying in Siena, the famed wine area of Chianti, only 30 minutes to the north.

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Looking across the combed vineyards of Chianti.

Seduced by the imagery in the brochure at the tourist office, I book a tour with “easygoing, happy and single, Marco” and board his minibus with eight other wine enthusiasts. We’re not far from the hugging walls of Siena when Marco begins my first lesson our understanding the elusive nature of this enigmatic area. “Chianti is not a grape, but a recipe,” he whispers as if he is unlocking the secret of a love potion.

“It all depends on the rain to understand the sugar in the grape. The soil is full of stone that gives a lot of mineral salt. The huge temperature variations between day and night make the skin grow thicker to protect the flesh. A good skin is a good wine,” Marco continues. “The grapes do not get much water in summer. They must not be lazy. They have to find water in the soil.” Ah, the mysterious terror.

Driving along dirt roads pressed hard by tourists we pass incongruous signs of leaping deer and snowflakes. We stop on a hill overlooking the area of Chianti and drink in the view. Cypress trees wind like dark sentinels for a kilometre up to a house on a hill presenting it to all who visit. A rooster crows from the valley, a donkey walks around an olive grove and church bells toll. “It is not unusual to see a Porsche or Mercedes commercial being made on these hills.” Marco’s gesticulations are as sensuous as the view.



A small piazza in Raddo. Picture: iStock

We gather beside a wild fig tree laced at its base with fruiting blackberry vines while Marco explains how

Chianti was almost abandoned in the '60s.

As we listen, we pluck the green, voluptuous figs from their branches and suck on their pink flesh. We stain our fingers purple while feasting on the plump blackberries. Marco tells us how, when the English came to Chianti in the '70s and bought many of the properties, the area became known as Chiantishire. The Germans and Dutch soon followed.

Chianti most likely derived from the word clangour: the rooster squawks heard in the dense woodlands. The Gallo Nero, the black rooster, has since graced the label on the bottles of Chianti Classico. That's when you know you're drinking the real deal.

The hill town of Radda is our first port of call. It's a small, fortified village in a sea of vineyards and olive groves. It has a vault-covered street known as the Ghiacciaia del Granduca, the Icehouse of the Grand Duke. Built in the 19th century and with its northern exposure, it was used to store snow that was pressed into blocks of ice.

We are taken to a new winery with young fields. Eighty per cent of the vines are Sangiovese, which supports the Code of Production of Chianti Classico. Producers may now add 20 per cent from other native red grapes such as Canaiolo and Colorino as well as the international varieties of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.



The black rooster, the Gallo Nero, is a symbol of good wine in Tuscany. Picture: iStock

Our next stop is the castellated hamlet of Vertine with its grand population of 31 and twice as many cats.

Built out of the earth about 1000 years ago, Vertine is rimmed by chestnut and oak trees, olive groves and combed vineyards. Access to the village is through a gothic-arched portal flanked by a stone keep.

Every stop on Marco's tour deepens understanding of the intricacies of wine making and its symbiotic relationship with the olive. In Vertine, each farmer books a day to use the public olive press.

In the winery's production area, I learn the importance of wood. Larger oak barrels come from Slovakia while smaller barrels from France are used to make the Super Tuscan Wine. After five years, the barrels lose their tannin and are sent to Moderna to age balsamic vinegar and grappa, giving each a golden hue.

No doubt to keep us sober, our tasting has been left until our last stop, the 12th century Castello d'Albola. Winemaker Gianni Zonin has 11 estates spanning from tip to toe of the Italian peninsula. Here, there are 20ha of olives, 405ha of forest and 160ha of vineyards where the vines have been converted from the classic doppio capovolto (double-arched cane) to espalier, to bathe the grapes in sunlight.



Cypress trees line the roads. Picture: iStock

It's here in the crusty underground cellars that I learn about barrels: how the glass jars on top control the air within and how the barrels are not sealed with cork, but with wax, to stop popping. I learn how barrels nurturing the original holy communion wine, Vin Santo, are not cleaned enabling the mother left behind to help it mature.

After enthusiastically sampling six wines from the violet-scented Acciaioli to the heavenly Vin Santo, with its

palate of apricot, raisin and creamy toffee, we finish with the 45 per cent alcoholic Grappa. The room spins and my legs begin to dance as I throw back the firewater. “Señora, you are pulling a strange face and you have goose skin,” Marco laughs. “Mamma Mia!”

## ESCAPE ROUTE

## GETTING THERE

A direct bus to Siena’s Piazza Gramsci departs from Rome’s Tiburtina station (about three hours’ duration). If going to Siena by train, when you reach Siena station you will have to catch a local bus or taxi to the historic centre, which is about 1.5km away. Siena is car-free although several car parks surround the city.

## BOOKING THERE

There are many one-day tours of Chianti that can be booked through the official tourist office in the Piazza del Campo, Siena.

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