Chianti Classico 2010: top levels

Tuscany’s winemakers now have the chance to shine with a new category for estate-grown grapes, but where does that the Riserva-level wines? Stephen Brook finds out...

IS 2010 A truly great vintage in Chianti? Most producers would say yes, but it’s not a view that’s uniformly held. The year began inauspiciously, with a cold winter and a cool, soggy spring. Conditions improved greatly by June, and July was hot, but the rest of the summer was cooler than usual, so ripening was slow. Late September brought rain and disease, which continued into early October. There was considerable rot during harvest, and much of the crop had to be discarded. Lower vineyards suffered more than better-ventilated higher sites.

Disease led to a drop in average production by around 20%. Growers had to make choices before harvest: to pick a bit too early and accept the possibility that not all the fruit was optimally ripe, or to wait for perfection, while risking further rot and disease.

Those knife-edge conditions at harvest endowed the wines with fine acidity and freshness. They mostly lack the lushness and high alcohols of many 2009s, although the 2010s are far from underpowered. Giovanni Manetti at Fontodi acclaims the wines’ rich fruitiness, allied to admirable concentration and a muscular structure.

Most agree that the wines’ fine acidity will contribute to their ageing potential. They also tend to have lower alcohol than the super-ripe 2009s. I am an admirer of the 2010 vintage, though perhaps it is not as consistently fine and enjoyable as the 2009s. There will be some disappointments.

Classification shortcomings

The recent launch of the Gran Selezione tier of wines has cast light on the shortcomings of the Riserva classification in Chianti Classico. ‘Riserva’ does not necessarily indicate higher quality, since the designation is won by ageing the wine for longer than is required for basic Chianti Classico. Most serious producers set aside wines from single vineyards or exceptional parcels when aiming to produce a Riserva, but they are not obliged to do so. The grapes don’t need to come from their own vineyards, either. One of the ‘innovations’ of Gran Selezione is the requirement that the wines be sourced from the growers’ own properties.

Thus Chianti Classico Riserva has become so loosely defined as to become almost meaningless, which is not to say that there are not splendid wines released as Riservas. However, the category’s status will not be enhanced by the fact that the introduction of Gran Selezione will demote Riserva to the top tier of production.

There is a widely held view that Gran Selezione has been a missed opportunity. The majority of the wines released as Gran Selezione are very good quality (even if many of them are existing Riserva simply bumped up to a higher category), but the real task in this diverse region is to map and promote individual communes such as Castellina or Greve, thus establishing a more precise typicity for the many sub-zones. Areas close to Florence inevitably have different soils and microclimates to those around Siena. Barolo and Barbaresco growers have moved steadily in this direction over the past decade; the Chianti growers have not.

In the meantime, Chianti Classico will struggle on with its existing difficulties: the continuing existence of DOC Chianti wines that have little in common with the more noble wines from Chianti Classico; the continuation of a Riserva category that is unsatisfactory; the well-intentioned introduction of Gran Selezione, which will struggle to gain recognition when so many of its wines overlap with existing Riservas; and a wide stylistic gap between pure-Sangiovese wines and those with a good dose of French varieties in the blend. Nonetheless Chianti Classico Riserva at its best is a great wine, showing the splendour and structure of top-class Sangiovese in a wide range of interpretations.

Chianti: know your vintages

2010 Full ripeness sometimes problematic, but fresh, intense wines.
2008 Rain at harvest, so selection is essential. Many dense, structured wines.
2007 Lush, ripe wines but with relatively low acidity, delicious for medium-term drinking.
2006 Heat and cooler spells in summer led to concentrated, long-lived, occasionally tough wines.
2005 Cool summer and mixed autumn led to some disappointing wines. Selection essential.
2004 Excellent year. Finely balanced wines, still going strong.
2003 Extreme heat led to high alcohols and low acidity. Drink up.
2002 Poor summer. A good September helped some vineyards to ripen but many wines tiring.
2001 Fine autumn gave classic wines with ageing potential.

Stephen Brook is a contributing editor to Decanter.
The results

While there were few exceptional wines, our judges were pleasantly surprised by the precise and elegant Gran Selezione, which outshone the more numerous Classico Riservas. Georgina Hindle reports:

**2010 represents really good wines for medium-term drinking**

Michael Garner

Garner has worked in the wine business for more than 30 years and has specialised in Italian wine for nearly 25 years. He is the co-author of Barolo: Tar and Roses, a regular contributor to Decanter and has taught at the WSET. He lives in rural Devon with his family and two large Briard dogs.

Garner’s verdict

This was my first chance to assess the Gran Selezione category. The opportunity for comparison with Chianti Classico Riserva from the same vintage was an added bonus. I like the 2010 vintage, and there were few Riserva wines on show that I wouldn’t recommend, though conversely few that I found truly exceptional either. The better ones are beginning to show very good aromatic development.

I must admit to prior doubts about the new “premium tier” but it’s worth noting that in the glass that really counts. On the whole, the Gran Selezione wines were surprisingly good, though mostly made in a very international style: deeply coloured, fat, ripe and opulent with lashings of expensive new oak evident. However, a lot of the top examples offer nothing new and seem to be exactly the same wines that used to be marketed as Riserva. I remain convinced that there is a need for a real Gran Selezione. The opportunity it offers is too good to be missed.

I think people are obsessed with the idea of wines that are for keeping longer. Whether they’ve got the sort of depth and concentration of fruit to be able to do that is questionable.

While Garner believes Gran Selezione is ‘perhaps more of an international style’ and Chianti Classico Riserva represents ‘real Tuscan’, consumers will find many examples showcasing the best of this region. But be cautious – as is often the case, it pays to know your producers, and budget counts.

**18.5/20pts**

Emily O’Hare

O’Hare is the head sommelier and wine buyer at London’s River Café, where she has worked for five years. Alongside Charles Metcalfe, she is the wine consultant for Waitrose Kitchen magazine, and she also writes articles about wine and sits on the judging panels for Decanter. Last year she was named Sommelier of the Year by Harpers Wines & Spirits.

O’Hare’s verdict

Tusend Starr 2010 was an unusual Chianti. Yet the quality of wines produced by the majority of producers in this tasting was anything but uneven. Yields were low for many estates, so what has been bottled, and what has made Riserva, is undoubtedly good quality. I am left to imagine the swagger of the Riservas we tasted in 2009 and the potential energy they seemed to have – compact, muscular, dramatic and rich. Unfortunately this was not the case.

I found the 2010 Riservas as more kinetic, vigorous and immediate. The majority of wines looked good; how could they not? These are single vineyard wines, or parcels of fruit from one estate’s top sites. Although there has been much debate as to the necessity of such a tier, the wines speak well for themselves, and in such a tricky year, too. Two of my standout wines are from this category, and they are utterly compelling. There seemed to be more concentration and more intensity to these wines; they showed off the powerful qualities of Sangiovese.

Melini, Vigneti La Selvanella, Chianti Classico Riserva 18.5 (95) AB 18.5 MG 18.5 EDN 18.5 £12.99<p>

Although Melini, an estate that grows five farms in Chianti and Chianti Classico, makes much of the fact that it dates back to the early 18th century, it has long been part of the giant GIV company, which has properties in most areas of Italy. Of the five Chianti properties, La Selvanella, in the commune of Radice, is probably its flagship. First made in 1969, this Riserva is a Chianti Classico of the old school, aged for around five years in large casks. It is the most traditional of its Riservas; Vigia di Fontalle, for instance, is aged in barriques as well as large casks. Despite the industrial scale of the GIV operation, the company has maintained high quality at its top estates. AB 18.5<p>

MG Massaia riserva is green with forest fruit aromas. Rustic with flavours of leather and wild game and gripping tannins. Pump and intense, this has great texture and spice on the finish. It is textbook Sangiovese – complex yet elegant. MG 18.5<p>

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Classico Riserva & Gran Selezione 2010

**Outstanding 18.5-20pts (95-100pts)**

Individual judges’ scores: Andrea Briccarello 18.5 Michael Garner 18.5 Emily O’Hare 18.5

£19.95 - £25 Wurdsal Wwe

The name of the estate translates as ‘the mill of Grace’. It’s not quite as romantic as it sounds, as the mill dates from the 19th century and Grace is the name of the American-born owner, Frank Grace. He bought the property, near Panzano, in 1995; until then the grapes had been sold to cooperatives. Grace’s first vintage under the new name was in 1999. Since then, acclaim has been swift. The 2008 at Chianti Classico is famed organically. As well as a regular Riserva, the estate produces ‘Margone’, a selection from pure Sangiovese, which is aged 12 months in 50% new barriques and tonnarelle, and then given further ageing in large casks.

Andrea Briccarello

Notes of caramelised plums and hints of dark spices and cranberries. Lots of leather and chocolate-box aromas. Wild game and meaty flavours on the finish, followed by ripe plums on the back of the palate. Very attractive.

Michael Garner

Coffee, chocolate and spice over ripe and powerful black fruit aromas. Dense and full with persuasively opulent fruit characters. Good intensity and balance; will keep well.

Emily O’Hare

Cherry and menthol aromas lead into a savoury and chewy palate with earthy tannins. This is a well-structured wine with great balance.

Drink 2014-2025 Alcohol13.5%
Highly Recommended 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)

**Castello Vicchiomaggio, Vigna La Prima, Gran Selezione 18.5 (95)**
AB 17.5 MG 19 EOH 17.75
£36.99 Halliday Drizt
Lifted, fresh and floral aromas over cassis and cherry. Lots of intensity with an overlap that gives identity and personality. The jammy notes open up to a deep complex world of spices and summer fruit puddings with a nutty finish. Drink 2014-2025 Alc 14.5%.

**Casa Sola, Gran Selezione 17.5 (91)**
AB 17.5 MG 18 EOH 17.25
N/A UK www.fattoricasola.com
Ethereal and complex nose with hints of cedar and sweet tobacco leaves. Full, fresh palate with damson fruit flavours and coffee notes from the oak. Meaty and smoky with hints of paprika coming through. Drink 2014-2025 Alc 14%

**Monte Bernardi, Chianti Classico Riserva 17.5 (91)**
AB 17.5 MG 17.5 EOH 17.25
£22 navolò Morris & Verdin
Seasoned leather over fresh and dried fruit aromas. Cool and lean but with good concentration. The oak is very well integrated and offers complex and intense leathery notes on the finish. Drink 2014-2018 Alc 15.5%

**Fontodi, Vigna del Sorbo, Gran Selezione 17.25 (90+)**
AB 17.5 MG 16 EOH 18

**Lornano, Gran Selezione 17.25 (90+) AB 17.5 MG 18 EOH 16**
N/A UK www.lornano.it
Bright ripe mono-re farmers with lots of layers of expressive red fruits and dense forest fruits. Full and lush ripe fruit flavours supported by finely grained tannins and lovely fresh acidity. Beautifully balanced and very persuasive. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 14%

**Machiavelli, Vigna di Fontalle, Chianti Classico Riserva 17.25 (90)**
AB 17.5 MG 16 EOH 17.5
£14.99 Vinesae
Maraschino cherries and intense strawberry coulis notes. Juicy and clean with great lift from the acidity and support from the tannins; very charming. Precise and linear with well-balanced concentration and unobtrusive oak. Drink 2014-2020 Alc 15%

**Monteoltrando di Basagni Saverio, Seretina, Chianti Classico Riserva 17.25 (90+) AB 17 MG 17 EOH 17.5**
N/A UK www.agriturismomonteoltrando.net
Expressive cherry and blackberry notes with hints of sandalwood. Quite a tight palate with good, focused berry fruit flavours. Tannins are high, but they have good grip. Traditionally and rustic with meaty undertones. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 14%

**Bandini, Villa Pomona, Chianti Classico Riserva 17 (90)**
AB 16.5 MG 17 EOH 17
N/A UK www.fattoricasola.com
Violets, plums and blackberry notes followed by a mix of dark spices and orange peel. Ripe and intense mono-re cherries with round tannins and a precise fruit core. A performed finish of good length. Drink 2014-2018 Alc 14.5%

**Brancaia, Chianti Classico Riserva 17 (90)**
AB 16.5 MG 16 EOH 17.5
£29 Whisky Whistle Shop, Old World Wines: Wine Direct International
Broad, open and spicy-toned berry fruit aromas with hints of cinnamon and nuts. Savoury mid-palate with notes of camphor and herbs to finish. Clean, lean and elegant. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 14.5%

Highly Recommended (continued) 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)

**Castello D’Albola, Chianti Classico Riserva 17 (90)**
AB 16 MG 17 EOH 17.5
£24.30 zin
Fleshy and spicy with a sour cherry and manthol note. Classic, balanced and fresh not overtly so. Forward, ripe fruit flavours with pretty aroma to finish. Honest and drinkable. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 15%

**Poggioerino, Bugialla, Chianti Classico Riserva, Gran Selezione 17 (90)**
AB 17 MG 17 EOH 17
£26.95 Lea & Sandeman
Restrained but spicy nose with hints of coffee and cassis aromas. Coriander, fennel, cranberries and plum perfumed. Elegant and well balanced, a true classic in the glass. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 14.5%

**San Michele a Torri, Tenuta La Gabbia, Chianti Classico Riserva 16.5 (89)**
£17.99 (2009) vynemos
Oak and nutmeg up-front with golden plum aromas. Intense blackberries and redcurrants on mid-palate followed by a well-knit acidity and uplifting cherry notes; gripping and firm. Drink 2014-2020 Alc 14%

**Vecchie Terre di Montefili, Chianti Classico Riserva 17 (90)**
AB 15.5 MG 16 EOH 16.5
£30 Hambro Kylie
Oak and ripeness on the nose and adds lots of drama. Typical cherry character with bright and final notes of pomegranate juice. Lots of freshness and liftiness on the palate. Excellent balance and length with many complex layers. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 15.5%

**Volpaia, Il Puro, Gran Selezione 17 (90+) AB 17 MG 17.25 EOH 16.5**
N/A UK www.volpaia.com
Subtle but savoury notes with ripe plums, pomegranate and spice. Balanced, medium full palate with ripe goodness and density; a very elegant and performed finish with hints of cherry depth and brick cherry acidity. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 15.3%

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**Castello di Gabbiano, Bella, Gran Selezione 17.25 (90+) AB 17.5 MG 18 EOH 16**
N/A UK www.casteldiaggiano.com
‘On the whole, the Gran Selezione wines were surprisingly good, though mostly made in the international style’ Michael Garner

**Tenute di Castelvecchi, Madonna delle Pieve, Gran Selezione 17.25 (90+) AB 17.5 MG 17 EOH 17.5**
N/A UK www.casteldiaggiano.com
Charming and elegant nose of ripe strawberries and raspberries. Full, ripe and round with very good acidity, polished tannins and controlled oak; an opulent wine. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 14%

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**Siller, Vigna Fantasia, Gran Selezione 17 (10)**
AB 17.5 MG 16 EOH 17.5
£16.50 Vinscultura, Blu, Blythford, Liberty
Vanilla and maple waft up and reveal another layer – intense bramble fruits. Clean and frank. Lacks ripeness but feels balanced overall; quite stylish.

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**Forti Dieci**
£36.30 Forty Five 10
Tart and firm but balanced with plenty of tannin and black cherry, good length.

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**Lerici Web**
£32.99 www.lerici-web.com
Forti Dieci

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**Oddbins**
£39.99

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**Forty Five 10**
£40.99-

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**Casa al Vento, Foho, Chianti Classico Riserva 16.75**
£16.5 16.5 17 Plum clafoutis and pastry on the nose. Fleshy and forward with good ripe fruit concentration. The oak is very well integrated and offers complex and intense leathery notes on the finish. Drink 2014-2022 Alc 15%

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