



THE CHIANTI

The Chianti is one of the most beautiful hilly zones in Tuscany and maybe even in all of Italy. Sprawling between the provinces of Florence and Siena this region is famous around the world for its production of Chianti wines. The landscape is made of **vineyards** and **olive groves**, **fortified villages**, **castles** and **characteristic hamlets**, all set in a splendid panorama.



The sweet hills of the Chianti

Tuscany is situated in the centre of Italy and we find the Chianti area in the centre of Tuscany, between Florence, Siena and Arezzo. This hilly zone is fascinating for its diversity as much as for the famous cities around it.

Besides referring to the wine produced here, the name "**Chianti**" designates a territory with different limits according to the aspect considered. **Geographically** speaking, it is a hilly terrain, at medium altitude, expanding on about twenty kilometres (with a progression north, south, south-east). The highest point is the **Monte San Michele** (893 m). The valleys of five rivers define its shape: Pesa, Greve, Ombrone, Staggia and Arbia. From a **historic** point of view, its name should only refer to the towns of **Gaiole**, **Radda** and **Castellina** (all "**in Chianti**") which were the territories members of the old "**Lega militare fiorentina del Chianti**" with the **Gallo Nero** (black rooster) as an emblem.



According to the law on wine denomination the zone generally designated by the name “Chianti” includes the three “comuni della Lega” as well as the Florentine territories of **San Casciano** and **Tavarnelle** in Val di Pesa, **Greve** and part of **Barberino in Val d'Elsa** and the Siena territories of **Castelnuovo Berardenga** and **Poggibonsi**. The wine produced in these places is distinguished as “**Chianti Classico**”, characterized by the famous label of the **Gallo Nero**.

The territory of Chianti

Seen from the top of a hill the silvery colour of the olive trees, the green geometry of the vineyards, the roads lined by cypresses, the yellow brooms on the edge of the woods create fascinating and harmonious pictures as if they had been created by one and only mind. Triggered by such beauty, a visit to Tuscany should start at its “heart”, in the Chianti, to continue with the other sites the chemistry of which being this way easier to understand.

The road network here is excellent and allows to enjoy the beautiful scenery at a leisurely pace, going uphill and downhill (speeding is definitely not recommended). Small tracks connect minor sites leading to surprising discoveries. Many foreigners are attracted to this area which is sometimes alluded to as “**Chiantishire**”, given the number of British residents having settled there.

One place to highly recommend is the **Badia a Passignano**, old headquarters of the “Lega del Chianti”, easy to reach with the *Superstrada Firenze-Siena*. The small medieval village of **Volpaia** looks like a movie set whereas the historic **castle of Brolio** was the residence of the Baron Ricasoli, the inventor of modern wine-making.

A bit of history

First occupied by Etruscans and then by Romans, the old Chianti territory was thick with woods, rich of rivers and full of game animals; its aspect was more mountainous than hilly even though the summits were not that high. Situated outside the main road network, it was **not easy to access** which somehow protected it from the barbarian invasions after the fall of the Roman Empire.

From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, on the other hand, this territory was a **permanent battlefield** for **Siena** and **Florence’s** troops fighting to possess it. The many **castles and fortified villages** standing close to each other are a proof of the reciprocal control exercised during feudal wars. Castles, small villages, farms, parish churches, Renaissance villas, often hiding in woods and valleys, are all part of the natural landscape.

When the wars ceased, some valleys were deforested and converted to **agriculture** with mainly olive groves, vineyards, oak and chestnut woods. The variety and high level of cultivation contributes to the richness of the Chianti today .

A day in the Florentine Chianti (round trip: about 225 km)

Here is an itinerary to help you discover this spectacular area of Tuscany if you only have one day at your disposal to enjoy it. After leaving the A1 Highway at the exit Firenze-Impruneta, you have to drive through Tavarnuzze and then **Impruneta**, a town famous for its bricks and terracotta production.



Impruneta

Already inhabited in Etruscan and Roman times, Impruneta was involved during the Middle Ages in nearby Florence political and economic trials and tribulations. The real propelling interest towards Impruneta was the **Pieve di S. Maria**, founded in 1060 and becoming an important sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The church, originally built in the Romanesque style, was renovated several times over the centuries and only the crypt is left from the original structure, while the whole building presents a sober aspect in the Renaissance style. Inside are kept works made by important artists like **Michelozzo** and **Luca della Robbia**. There is also venerated a *miraculous icon of the Madonna* attributed to **Luke the Evangelist**. Along the centuries the cult of the *Madonna dell'Impruneta* encouraged donations and many precious gifts and ex-voto are today kept in the **Museum of Sacred Art**, adjacent to the church where are also found illuminated manuscripts and silversmith objects. Following the tradition of making bricks and terracotta, the **cotto imprunetino** became a characteristic element of Tuscan architecture and landscape, also exported around the world. **Piazza Buondelmonti**, traditional market square became famous thanks to a picture by J. Callot dated 1620 and representing la **Fiera di San Luca**, held in October.

Leaving Impruneta and continuing in the direction of Strada in Chianti, we find road **SR 222, the Chiantigiana**, starting at Ponte a Ema just outside Florence. The Chiantigiana links many centres in the Chianti area.

Before reaching Greve we find the **Castello di Uzzano**, erected in the 13th century and practically destroyed by the Ghibellines in 1269. This is where **Niccolò da Uzzano** was born. He was a member of the government of Florence between the 14th and the 15th century. Already at Niccolò's time, renovations had started to transform the castle into a sumptuous villa.

At only 3km from Greve in Chianti is located the **Castello di Vicchiomaggio**, of Lombard origins and with a large park covering 130 hectares it produces a good Chianti Classico Gallo Nero. There is also the famous Castello di Verrazzano, the birthplace of **Giovanni da Verrazzano**, who discovered the Hudson Bay. It is possible to visit the historic cellars of the castle every day, including tasting of wine and typical regional produce.

Greve in Chianti



Greve in Chianti is sometimes regarded as the entrance door to the Chianti because of its strategic position half way between Florence and Siena: it is situated along the SR 222 road, the Chiantigiana, at about 30 km from Florence and 40 km from Siena.

This town is undoubtedly very picturesque and worth visiting. It looks more like a village and it is a lovely place to stop to drink a coffee or eat a *gelato*, when touring the Chianti. Etruscans used to live in this fertile area. A statue of navigator **Giovanni da Verrazzano** stands in the main square, **Piazza Matteotti**, called the *Mercatale* which is the main attraction of the town with its original shape, its shops and restaurants. Not to be missed is the **Chiesa di Santa Croce**, keeping the works of some famous Florentine artists like Andrea della Robbia. Wine lovers will be interested by a visit to the **Wine Museum**, recently opened and offering many types of wines to taste.

The *piazza di Greve* is the focal point of this dynamic little town and many visitors enjoy strolling around it. Every Saturday the local food market is held on the square and throughout the year, many craft markets and food festivals are organised. Information on the events can be found at the tourist bureau located on the square near the town hall. The triangular-shaped square is embellished all around by arches under which are located several restaurants, hotels and shops selling a variety of craft items.



Some of these shops have become famous and are well worthy of a visit; for instance the **Antica Macelleria Falorni** has been renowned for the production of Tuscan cold cuts since 1729 and the **Bottega dell'Artigianato** specializes in the art of weaving and in olive wood products. On the square stands the **Palazzo del Comune** (town hall) built in neo-Renaissance style on the ruins of the old Palazzo Pretorio. It is on the right hand side of the palace that we find the statue of **Giovanni da Verrazzano**.

Opposite the town hall is the **Chiesa di Santa Croce**, with its unusual neoclassical façade. Built on the vestiges of the old medieval church, it keeps some interesting works of art coming from various

churches in the area. Among them is a 14th century fresco depicting a *Madonna with Child* and a triptych by Bicci di Lorenzo dated around 1420.

Not far from there the **Museo di Arte Sacra** is located in the old hospice of San Francesco which keeps the altar from the neighbouring oratory, characterized by a wonderful group of sculptures in painted terracotta. Among the works we find an *Annunciation* from the 14th century, coming from the church of Santa Croce, a *Madonna with Child between St. Bartholomew and St. Francis*, from the church of Santa Maria a Cintoia, and a *Madonna with Child between St. Anthony the Abbot and St. Lucy* from the church of Sezzate. The **Museo del Vino** is another interesting museum. It offers tasting of nearly 200 wines, providing for each of them detailed information on its production and its taste. Many old tools used in wine-making are also displayed as well as more than 180 types of cork-screws.

Montefioralle



From Greve we get to **Montefioralle**, an old medieval castle. Still looking like a fortified hamlet with its towers, it is one of the oldest and most beautiful villages in the Chianti region. The Gherardini, Ricasoli, Vespucci and Benci, all noble Tuscan families, used to have a house at Montefioralle. It is advised to visit the **Chiesa di Santo Stefano**, from the 17th century, where are kept artworks of great quality. There is also found the house where lived **Amerigo Vespucci**, another great explorer who was born in the Chianti.

Panzano in Chianti

Back to the main road we reach **Panzano in Chianti** that became famous in recent years thanks to a butcher shop *l'Antica Macelleria Cecchini*, where the butcher carves the *bistecca alla fiorentina* (T-bone steak) declaiming the *Divine Comedy*. The old village offers **panoramic views of the Chianti**. The old castle dominates the area from the top of the hill. Panzano was often the cause of disputes between Florence and Siena and was severely damaged. Not far from the village is the lovely **Pieve di San Leolino**, a parish church in 12th century Romanesque style where are preserved precious works of art like the *Madonna in trono con angeli e santi*, attributed to Mariotto di Nardo.

Nearby in the *Antica Fattoria Montagliari*, the Chianti Classico Riserva produced there can be tasted as well as *vin santo*, *grappa*, oil and other typical regional produce. Back in 1427 the wine made in Panzanello's farm, located at 2 km from Panzanello, was already praised. Today it is still possible to drink an excellent Chianti Classico there while eating delicious nibbles and enjoying a guided tour of the cellars.

There are many other places where you can taste local produce and visit farms. The whole Chianti area is dotted with properties of all sizes producing appreciated wines. Gaiole, Radda and Castellina are among the main locations where the production of the Chianti Classico is concentrated.

Il vino Chianti Classico

Chianti wine is one of the **most famous and appreciated Tuscan products**. The Chianti area, between Florence and Siena, is marked by the association of a special climate and a special soil allowing to produce a quality wine renowned as one of the best in the world.



The various denominations of Chianti wines depend on the exact area of production as you find Chianti Classico (the best known), Chianti dei Colli Aretini, Chianti Rufina, Chianti dei Colli Senesi. The Chianti Classico, also called Gallo Nero (its symbolic image), is under the supervision of the *Consorzio del Chianti Classico*. The black rooster was the emblem of the old “Lega del Chianti”.

The legend of the rooster

A curious legend shows how much rivalry existed between Florentine Guelphs and Siena Ghibellines to obtain supremacy over this vast and rich territory in the early 1200s. A dispute arose regarding a race involving two horsemen, one departing from Florence and the other one from Siena and whose meeting point would mark the limit between respective territories. The departing time was set at first cock-crow. The astute Florentines used a young starving cockerel who woke up before dawn. This way their horseman set up early and covered more distance than the Siena rival, winning more territories for the Republic. The meeting point is known as the “Croce Fiorentina”. This is how the poor rooster became the emblem of the Chianti. So much so that a few centuries later Vasari chose it with Bacchus to represent this region on his fresco in the Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. In 1250 as part of a new administrative organization the “Lega del Chianti” was created, including Radda, Castellina and Gaiole. The Podestà was based in Radda.

The **Chianti** has always maintained a special link with wine and culture. The winding hills are criss-crossed by kilometres of vineyards enriching the landscape with unique colours every season. Green, purple, red and yellow, sparkling colours on these hills attracting thousands of visitors each year.

There are many wine-making farms between Florence and Siena and lots of cellars offering a full range of their produce, fruits of efforts and passion. Regardless of their age or size, the Chianti **wine-making farms** all give possibility to taste quality wines.

Following the Chiantigiana road, we arrive in [Castellina in Chianti](#), at the border between Florentine Chianti and Siena Chianti. With Etruscan origins, this village played a relevant role in the fight between Siena and Florence. The majestic **Rocca** and its powerful walls are a proof of this important past. Not to be missed is the walk on **via delle Volte**, with its extraordinary views on the surrounding panorama, and the **Museo Archeologico del Chianti Senese**.

Castellina in Chianti



Castellina in Chianti is located on a hill, at the crossing point of important communication routes and the valleys of the Arbia, Elsa and Pesa rivers. Set on the SR 222 road connecting Florence to Siena, it is central to the main destinations inside the Chianti. Although there isn't much to see there, it is worth having a stroll around the main street, which is always busy and rich with history despite its modern look.

Castellina has Etruscan origins and fell under Florence domination in the 12th century, becoming an important outpost due to its strategic position along the road linking Florence to Siena. It was destroyed and rebuilt several times because of the fights opposing the two cities and built bigger and bigger walls. It is said that Brunelleschi contributed to design part of the fortifications.

Today the covered walkway is the only part left of these walls; the **via delle Volte** is lined with shops and restaurants. The street follows the perimeter of the ancient walls enclosing the pretty historic centre. It is advised to walk around at various times of the day to fully enjoy the variations of the panorama through the embrasures.

Via Ferruccio is the main street going across the centre of the village and it is lined with shops, craftsmen workshops and restaurants; there are also important palaces like **Palazzo Banciardi** and **Palazzo Squarcialupi** which were owned by powerful families. Palazzo Squarcialupi hosts the **Enoteca Antiquaria** where are kept more than 100 year old wines, providing historic archives about the original characteristics of the Chianti Classico.

The **Chiesa di San Salvatore** is also worth visiting. Rebuilt in 1945, this church preserves a precious fresco by **Lorenzo di Bicci** depicting the *Madonna col Bambino* and a wooden statue from the Renaissance period. Not far from there stands the **Rocca** with its high crenellated donjon from

where to enjoy a beautiful panorama. Inside the Rocca are located Castellina town hall offices and the **Museo Archeologico del Chianti**, keeping archaeological pieces from the surrounding zones: a proof of the ancient origins of the Chianti.

Close to the historic centre is the excellent home-made ice-cream parlour *l'Antica Delizia*, where you can get a gigantic *gelato*. Just outside the village you can visit the **tumulo etrusco di Montecalvario**, an important example of Etruscan funerary architecture.

On the way back to Florence, it is advised to go towards **Poggibonsi** to take the *Superstrada Firenze-Siena* and reach [Barberino Val D'Elsa](#). This little fortified village has kept a characteristic medieval aspect with its high walls, its tower-houses and its large portals.

Barberino Val D'Elsa



Barberino Val d'Elsa is a splendid medieval village, immersed in green hills between Florence and Siena. Located on the Via Cassia, connecting Rome to Florence, it offers a beautiful panorama of the Chianti.

There are no museums or monuments to visit there but a stroll along the streets of the historic centre allows you to enjoy its tranquillity and think of its glorious past.

Barberino's history is linked to the history of the town of Semifonte, totally destroyed in 1202 by the Florentines. It is even said that Barberino was built with stones coming from Semifonte's walls. Barberino was fortified to become a Florentine outpost. The village maintains its original aspect with an elliptic plan and two longitudinal streets going through it.

Entering through **Porta Senese**, still well kept, we arrive at the main street, **via Francesco da Barberino** where stand old palaces decorated with beautiful portals and birds' nests in the gutters! Among the important palaces is the **Palazzo del Podestà**, with a façade decorated with various coats of arms of the families involved in the government.

At the end of the street is the **Porta Fiorentina**, next to which used to be located the old **pilgrims' hospital**, founded in 1363 to provide accommodation for pilgrims on their way to Rome. Today it hosts a modern library. Going through the street parallel to the main one, we find the "*Antico Forno*" having baked for three generations bread and *schacciata* which is definitely worth tasting.

We then get to the **Chiesa di San Bartolomeo**, rebuilt in neo-Gothic style in 1910. Inside the church is found a fragment of a 14th century fresco and a painting by the Maestro da Barberino,

dated from the 16th century and depicting a *Madonna con Bambino che dona un rosario a Santa Caterina da Siena e San Domenico*.

Following the visit of this small but lovely village, it is advised to have a look at the surrounding countryside where we find the charming church of **Sant'Appiano** and the **Cappella di San Michele Arcangelo** at Semifonte. Semifonte's history is an interesting one. It was a fortified city which declared itself the enemy of Florence in the 12th century. Since it had become one of the most important centres in the Valley of Elsa, a fight with the Florentine Republic was inevitable and the town got totally razed to the ground in 1202. Florence prohibited any house to be built there, an order still respected today except for the Cappella di San Michele Arcangelo which was erected at the end of the 16th century.

A few kilometres from Barberino Val D'Elsa, in the direction of the picturesque village of Linari is found the beautiful **Pieve di Sant'Appiano**, often said to be the **oldest church in the Chianti**, and definitely unique for the tranquillity one can enjoy there.



This very old church came into the possession of the bishop of Florence in 990. The right hand side nave was destroyed in 1171 when the campanile collapsed. One can actually notice that the right hand side wall was rebuilt with bricks whereas the left hand side part is made of pebbles and irregular stones. It is possible to observe the same thing inside, divided in three naves: arches on the left hand side are stone made and supported by imposing pillars while those on the right side are supported by brick columns with capitals made of stone and decorated with floral patterns in the Florentine Gothic style.

Inside, in the left hand side nave, can be found three magnificent frescoes from the Renaissance period made by artists from Ghirlandaio school. The frescoes represent the *Martirio di San Sebastiano*, *San Pietro Martire*, *Santi Antonio Abate e Matteo Evangelista*. In the opposite nave are remains of frescoes dated from the early 1400s.

We can also admire the **Cappella dell'Assunta**, decorated with frescoes from the late 1700s representing various saints. On the opposite side you find the well kept gravestone of **Gherarduccio Gherardini**, who was buried there in 1331. Past the sepulchre we have access to a small 13th century cloister and to the chapter house with a lunette made of marble and bricks.

The Gherardini and Monna Lisa

The **Gherardini family** was an important noble Florentine family. Its origins are very old and its members, who were landowners in the Chianti area and in the Elsa Valley, settled in Florence in the 10th century. They became very involved in politics and in the wars opposing Guelphs and Ghibellines. What makes this family different is that the famous Monna Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci's

model, was a member of it. **Lisa Gherardini** got married to a member of the Del Giocondo family, this is the reason why she is known as the Gioconda.

Another special feature in the church of Sant'Appiano is the vestiges of the **old Baptistery** which collapsed in the 19th century. It is the only building in the Florentine countryside with a baptistery detached from the church. The structure goes back to the 4th century and today there are only four supporting pillars left, with capitals decorated with Christian symbols like the cross and the lamb.



Antiquarium

Next to the Pieve di Sant'Appiano is located an **Antiquarium, small museum of archaeology**, keeping many pieces that were found in the area. Inside the museum there are some Etruscan funerary urns made in alabaster; their beautiful covers are decorated with the figures of the deceased in a half-lying position. There are also typically Florentine **ceramics from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period**. The most important piece of the collection is the **small sandstone statue of a pagan idol**, representing *Eros a cavallo di un animale*, and discovered when the baptistery was demolished.

From Barberino, it is advised to make a detour to the village of Petrognano to go to the **Cappella di San Michele a Semifonte**. Also called the *Duomo della Val D'Elsa* (1567), it symbolically recalls the glorious and sad fate of the town of Semifonte, razed to the ground by the Florentines in the 12th century.

Tavarnelle Val di Pesa

Getting back to the main road, **SR 222**, we come across **Tavarnelle Val di Pesa**.

It is very pleasant to visit this village as the medieval part of it is well maintained with characteristic narrow streets opening onto colourful little squares. At one end of the village stands Tavarnelle's most important building: the **Chiesa di Santa Lucia al Borghetto** dated 1278. This church is a beautiful example of Gothic architecture (Franciscan implantation) with a single nave and the Neri di Bicci's masterpiece *l'Annunciazione*, dated 1471.

Outside the village is located the **Pieve di San Piero in Bossolo**, dated from the year 1000, the most classical example of Romanesque art in the Florentine countryside.

Not far from Tavarnelle, near Sambucca, close to the San Donato entry ramp to the *Superstrada Firenze-Siena*, we find the splendid **Badia di Passignano**.



Founded in 1049, by a disciple of Vallombrosian monk San Giovanni Gualberto, who died there in 1073, Passignano became an imposing monastery complex with fortified structures. An avenue lined with cypresses leads to a vast courtyard where stands the church of San Michele Archangelo and the monastery. The church has a single nave and a Latin cross shape. New elements were added to the initial structure in the 16th and 17th centuries. Many important frescoes and paintings are kept there. The main chapel is decorated with frescoes by painter Domenico Cresti, known as Il Passignano, in 1601. In the chapel dedicated to San Giovanni Gualberto there are paintings about the saint's life, by Giovanni Maria Butteri and Alessandro Pieroni. In the left hand side transept are found portraits of Bianca Cappello and Francesco whose romance caused turmoil in Florence. Also in this transept is located the very simple gravestone of Saint Giovanni Gualberto. Coming out of the church we are facing the monastery portal; a community of Vallombrosian monks is still living there in the present days. The monastery can be visited with a guide every Sunday afternoon. In the refectory is kept an amazing *Ultima Cena* by Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio dated 1476, above which two lunettes represent the *Expulsion of Paradise* and *Abel's murder*, by Bernardo and Stefano Rosselli. In the chapter house are found *l'Annunciazione* and *l'Ecce Homo* by Filippelli.

Continuing the road in the direction of Florence, we come across the last village of the Chianti region, **San Casciano Val di Pesa**. This charming village has kept marks of its medieval origins. A few kilometres away, the *Albergaccio di Sant'Andrea in Percussina* is a famous restaurant and *enoteca*; this is also where **Niccolò Machiavelli** lived.