

Italian Wine Labels — A Complete Visual Guide

Chianti Classico · Brunello · Barolo · Amarone · Super Tuscan · Prosecco · kazmicellars.com

Italy's classification system runs *DOCG* → *DOC* → *IGT* → *Vino d'Italia*. Unlike France, Italy's label language is relatively consistent across regions — producer name, appellation, quality tier (*Riserva/Superiore*), vintage. The key differences are: what the appellation implies about the grape, whether a vineyard appears, and how the aging tiers work by region.

THE ITALIAN CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

DOCG	Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita. Italy's highest tier. Strictest rules on grapes, yields, aging, production. Marked by a pink paper strip seal (<i>fascia</i>) over the bottle capsule. 77 DOCGs including Barolo, Brunello, Chianti Classico, Barbaresco, Amarone.
DOC	Denominazione di Origine Controllata. Broad quality tier covering most quality Italian wine. Similar to France's AOC. Over 340 DOCs including Valpolicella, Soave, Bolgheri, Chianti.
IGT	Indicazione Geografica Tipica. Equivalent to France's IGP. Flexible rules — used by Super Tuscans (Sassicaia, Tignanello) to escape DOC restrictions on non-traditional varieties.
Riserva	Legally defined extended aging requirement — different minimum for every DOCG. Chianti Classico Riserva: 24 months. Brunello Riserva: 6 years. Barolo Riserva: 5 years. A legal term with real teeth.
Classico	The historic production zone within a larger DOC/DOCG. Chianti Classico, Valpolicella Classico, Soave Classico all come from original hillside vineyards — generally considered superior to the extended zone.
Superiore	Higher minimum alcohol or stricter production rules within a DOC. Not the same as Riserva — no extra aging requirement.
Gran Selezione	Chianti Classico specific — the top tier above Riserva. Introduced 2014. Single vineyard, minimum 30 months aging, only exceptional lots.
Imbottigliato all'Origine	'Bottled at the origin' — estate-bottled. The Italian equivalent of 'Mis en Bouteille au Domaine.'

TUSCANY — CHIANTI CLASSICO & BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

Both wines are Sangiovese but carry completely different names and prestige tiers. Neither label shows the grape variety. The DOCG seal (pink strip on the capsule) is the key quality marker.



Chianti Classico Gran Selezione (DOCG) — 100% Sangiovese. Grape never shown. DOCG pink strip seals the capsule.

1 Producer	The estate ('Fattoria' = farm estate). Producer name is prominent but the appellation is the centrepiece.
2 Appellation	Chianti Classico DOCG — the historic Chianti heartland between Florence and Siena. 80-100% Sangiovese. Never shows the grape variety.
3 Quality Tier	Gran Selezione = the top tier since 2014. Single vineyard, minimum 30 months aging. Above Riserva (24 months). Below: standard Chianti Classico (12 months).
4 Vineyard	Single vineyard name — optional but increasingly used. 'Rancia' is one of Fèlsina's prized plots.
5 Vintage	Critical — 2010, 2015, 2016, 2019 are outstanding Chianti Classico vintages.
6 Estate-Bottled	'Imbottigliato all'Origine' or 'all'Origine' = estate-bottled. Same concept as French 'Mis en Bouteille au Domaine.'



Brunello di Montalcino (DOCG) — 100% Sangiovese (Brunello clone). Minimum 5 years aging, 6 for Riserva.

1 Producer	The tenuta (estate). Biondi-Santi essentially invented Brunello as a wine category in the 19th century.
2 Appellation	Brunello di Montalcino DOCG — one of Italy's most prestigious. 100% Sangiovese (called Brunello locally). No grape variety stated on the label.
3 Riserva	Standard Brunello: minimum 5 years aging. Riserva: minimum 6 years (2 in oak). Only made in exceptional vintages. The difference in bottle longevity is profound.
4 Vintage	Outstanding Brunello vintages: 2004, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2019. Great wines need 15-30+ years.
5 Estate-Bottled	
6 Grape Note	Unusual to state the grape — most Brunello labels don't. Biondi-Santi includes it for educational clarity.

■ Tuscany key: Chianti Classico and Brunello are both 100% Sangiovese — but you'd never know from the label. The Gran Selezione tier (Chianti Classico) and Riserva (Brunello) both indicate extended aging and selection, but the minimum times differ significantly. The DOCG pink strip seal on the capsule is Italy's quality mark.

PIEDMONT — BAROLO: ITALY'S BURGUNDY SYSTEM

Barolo and Barbaresco have adopted a Burgundy-style single-vineyard classification system. The MGA (Menzione Geografica Aggiuntiva) identifies specific plots — like Burgundy's Premier and Grand Crus — but without the formal quality tier. The vineyard name carries the prestige.



Barolo DOCG — 100% Nebbiolo. Grape never shown. The MGA vineyard name is the quality signal. Aging rules: minimum 38 months (18 in wood). Riserva: 62 months (minimum).

1	Producer	The azienda (farm/estate). Giacomo Conterno is considered one of Barolo's greatest producers.
2	Appellation	BAROLO DOCG — 100% Nebbiolo from the Barolo zone in the Langhe hills. Grape never stated; Barolo IS Nebbiolo.
3	MGA / Vineyard	Menzione Geografica Aggiuntiva — Barolo's Burgundy-style single vineyard classification introduced in 2010. 'Cascina Francia' in Serralunga d'Alba = one of the zone's greatest.
4	Vintage	Extremely important. 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019 are outstanding Barolo vintages.
5	DOCG	Confirmed by the pink paper strip seal over the capsule — the fascia — as well as the label declaration.
6	Estate-Bottled	Estate bottled. In Barolo, estate production from a single vineyard is the quality pinnacle.

■ Piedmont key: 'Barolo' = Nebbiolo. 'Barbaresco' = Nebbiolo. 'Barbera d'Alba' = Barbera. 'Dolcetto d'Alba' = Dolcetto. 'Moscato d'Asti' = Muscat. None of these show the grape on the label. The appellation name IS the grape name in Piedmont.

VENETO — AMARONE & PROSECCO: TWO COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SYSTEMS

The Veneto contains two of Italy's most famous wine types — Amarone (powerful, dry, air-dried red) and Prosecco (light, fresh, Charmat-method sparkling) — with completely different label logic.



Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG — Corvina + Corvinone + Rondinella, air-dried (appassimento). Grape never shown.

1	Producer	The azienda. Quintarelli is one of Amarone's legendary producers — handwritten labels, traditional long maceration.
2	Amarone	The wine type — always full name 'Amarone della Valpolicella.' Made from air-dried grapes (Corvina, Corvinone, Rondinella). Grape varieties never stated.
3	Classico	The historic production zone within Valpolicella — wines labeled Classico are from the original hillside vineyards. Quality indicator.
4	Vintage	Amarone is released 5-7+ years after harvest. A 2012 Quintarelli released in 2020+ is normal.
5	Estate-Bottled	
6	Appassimento	Some producers note the drying process on the label or back label — the defining technique that makes Amarone what it is.



Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Superiore DOCG — Glera grape, Charmat method. One of few Italian DOC wines stating the grape.

1	Producer	The house. Bisol is one of Valdobbiadene's most respected producers.
2	Cuvée Name	Proprietary name for a specific wine. 'Crede' is Bisol's flagship from clay-rich soils.
3	PROSECCO	The wine type. Only sparkling wine from this zone made with Glera grapes via the Charmat method may be called Prosecco.
4	Superiore DOCG	Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Superiore is DOCG — the highest tier. Basic Prosecco DOC comes from a wider zone. Rive (single vineyard) is a prestige subset.
5	Dosage	Brut (0–12g/L) is standard. Extra Brut = drier. 'Extra Dry' (12–17g/L) is also common in Prosecco — confusingly sweeter than Brut.
6	Vintage	Many quality Prosecco Superiore wines are vintage-dated — freshness is everything.
7	Grape	Glera is almost always stated — Prosecco is one of the few Italian DOC wines that regularly shows the grape.

■ Veneto key: Amarone must say 'Amarone' — look for the full name 'Amarone della Valpolicella.' Ripasso says 'Valpolicella Ripasso.' Plain 'Valpolicella' is the lightest style. For Prosecco: 'Valdobbiadene' or 'Conegliano' on the label = superior DOCG; plain 'Prosecco DOC' = broader, simpler.

SUPER TUSCAN — WHERE THE BRAND IS BIGGER THAN THE APPELLATION



Super Tuscans broke Italian DOC rules by using Cabernet, Merlot, and Syrah. Filed as IGT Toscana (or now Bolgheri DOC for Sassicaia), the wine name became the brand. The appellation is secondary to the producer's reputation.

1	Producer	The estate. Brand name and producer are equally prominent — in the Super Tuscan world, the wine name IS the brand.
2	Wine Name	'Sassicaia' — the proprietary name. Larger than the estate name. Super Tuscans built their reputation on wine names, not appellations.
3	Vintage	
4	DOC (not DOCG)	'Bolgheri Sassicaia DOC' — the only single-estate DOC in Italy, created in 1994 specifically for Sassicaia after decades as a mere 'Vino da Tavola' (table wine). Most Super Tuscans are IGT Toscana.
5	Grape Varieties	Unusual for Italy — Sassicaia states the grape blend on the label. Most Italian DOC wines do not. A marker of the wine's Bordeaux-inspired origin.
6	Estate-Bottled	

■ **Super Tuscan key:** If you see 'IGT Toscana' on a Tuscan bottle, it may be a Super Tuscan — possibly one of Italy's most expensive wines despite the 'lower' classification. Sassicaia (Bolgheri DOC), Tignanello, Ornellaia, and Masseto are the benchmarks. Don't dismiss a wine because it says IGT rather than DOCG.