Divorce Chianti-style

9 Feb 2010 by Walter Speller

At least this is how the Consorzio of Chianti Classico yesterday announced the modification of the 1992 law that separates Chianti Classico from straight Chianti. Or, to quote Giuseppe Liberatore, the Consorzio's director, in its press release published just days before its most important annual event, the en primeur tasting in Florence showing the latest vintages of its members: 'cutting an umbilical cord between two distinct wines ... a fact that can definitely be called historic'.

The Consorzio has devoted the best part of its history to defending the borders of the ancient classic production zone, the hills between Florence and Siena, not only against counterfeit but even more so against legislation, which tried, successfully, to enlarge the production zone many times to include large swathes of land which were never part of the classic area but were nevertheless able to capitalise on the famous name.

After years of questioning these doubtful laws, at least from a quality point of view, the Consorzio seems to have finally got its way: the modification decrees that within the Chianti Classico production zone, 'it is prohibited to plant or declare in grape-growing records vineyards for Chianti DOCG. In the production zone for Chianti Classico wine it is prohibited to plant and inscribe vineyards in the Chianti DOCG register or produce Chianti and Chianti Superiore wines'. This means that vineyards within the Classico zone can be used for the production of Classico wines only, and not used for or declassified to plain Chianti, a designation which comes with a set of less stringent rules, the most important being the much higher yields allowed.

In a country that is notorious for its stifling bureaucracy, perhaps the introduction of this modification was facilitated by falling grape and bulk wine prices, which only last year the Consorzio tried to halt by introducing a regulation which forces its members to hold on to 20% of their total production for 24 months longer before putting the wine on the market. This block on sales seemed a well-meant, if perhaps weak, measure in the face of the fact that most producers produce a Riserva wine, which can only be released 24 months after the vintage. This time the new modification seems to go much further, although at this stage it is unclear to what extent existing vineyards within the classic zone but declared for the production of straight Chianti are excluded from the new rule.