Travel the Via Chiantigiana

Take a leisurely drive along Tuscany's most scenic wine route, discovering artisan pasta, ancient terracotta, world-class gastronomy and heritage as you go – and of course, great Chianti Classico

STORY EMILY O'HARE

Drone's-eye view of Panzano in Chianti (see p70), looking due north

The road known as the Via Chiantigiana begins at Ponte a Ema, a suburban area 10 minutes southeast of Florence. It ends five minutes north of Siena after wending its way due south for almost 70km, through spectacular Tuscan countryside. Originally a network of ancient paths and medieval tracks, it was modernised in the late 19th century, following Italy's unification (by 1870), with the aim of moving agricultural goods efficiently. Motorcar races in the early 20th century drew attention to this scenic route, leading to its official designation as a state highway in the late 1950s – the less romantic Strada Statale 222, now designated SR222.

On the way out of Ponte a Ema, a bridge enables travellers to cross the river Ema and head into the hills. The regional river networks are elemental to the gastronomic success of the area, having once powered mills to grind olives to paste and wheat into flour. These river channels carve valleys through the hills, and the Ema keeps you company – albeit flowing in the opposite direction – for the first few kilometres as you move south along the Via Chiantigiana into the Chianti Classico region.

Approaching Strada in Chianti, your first village stop about 14km on from Ponte a Ema by road, it's hard to miss the three-metre high statue of a seed-thrower, *Il Seminatore*, standing on the roundabout. A proud testament to the town's wheat-growing past, it's a reminder that this land was once more widely planted to grain than to grapes and olives. Facing Strada's sole piazza, grab a coffee at **Il Caffè in Piazza** *(see 'Address book', p70)* before heading across the square to **Pastificio Fabbri**, an artisan pasta factory and shop run by the family for five generations, complete with a small museum of Tuscan rural life.

A tale of terracotta

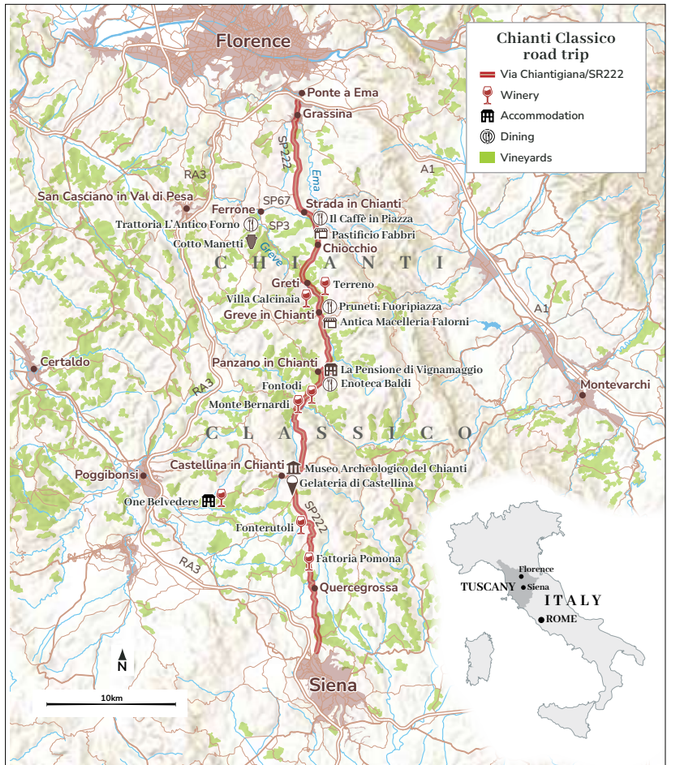
Returning to the road, the Via Chiantigiana continues south and dips 50m into the Greve valley, and you can continue this way on the SR222 through Chiocchio, then the hamlet of Greti and on into the market town of Greve in Chianti. Alternatively, from Strada take a short six-minute detour west along the SP67 to Ferrone. Literally meaning 'great iron', Ferrone is famous for its iron-rich earth and its friable clay galestro soils. Fired in local chestnut- and oak-fuelled kilns, this clay turns a distinctive warm red, becoming durable terracotta. It was from this earth that the tiles for the roof of Florence's Duomo were made, as well as enormous jars for storing olive oil.

From early 2027, you can tour the artisan ceramic production at **Cotto Manetti** in Ferrone. This family business shares a profound connection with local wine: it produces the terracotta amphorae used for fermentation and maturation at its Fontodi winery *(see p71)* in Panzano, the next village south after Greve. Two brothers run these businesses:



Marco Manetti manages the terracotta production and Giovanni Manetti manages Fontodi, while also serving as president of the regional Chianti Classico consorzio. The estate produces Dino, an excellent amphora-vinified Sangiovese named after their father, honouring this union of the brothers' craft.

Above: Marco Manetti of ceramics specialist Cotto Manetti in Ferrone, where the kilns have been working uninterrupted since 1975. Top: vines below the town of Greve in Chianti (see p70)



'Find a bench, pop the bubbles and enjoy a memorable moment on the Via Chiantigiana!'

While in Ferrone, stop for lunch at **Trattoria L'Antico Forno** to try peposo, a famous traditional Tuscan dish that consists of beef shank or shin, whole garlic cloves, black peppercorns and red wine. Placed in a terracotta pot set in the embers of the fires, the meat becomes wonderfully tender and imbued with the rich flavours of wine and spices.

Sights, sounds & smells

From Ferrone, head to Greve in Chianti – drive down the SP3 until it joins the SR222 at Le Bolle, just before Greti. Nearing Greve, signs begin to direct you to one fantastic Chianti Classico winery after another: on the left, **Terreno**, where Sofia ►

Your Via Chiantigiana, Tuscany address book

• **Il Caffè in Piazza**
Strada in Chianti – Piazza Emilio Landi, 27
+39 055 858145
@ilcaffeinpiazza21

• **Pastificio Fabbri**
Strada in Chianti – Piazza Emilio Landi, 18
+39 055 858013
pastafabbri.it

• **Cotto Manetti**
Greve in Chianti – Località Il Ferrone, SP 3 Chiantigiana 50/A
+39 055 850631-2-3
cottomanetti.com

• **Trattoria L'Antico Forno**
Ferrone – Via Chiantigiana per Ferrone, 205
+39 055 207131
rossanomazzi@virgilio.it

• **Terreno**
Greve in Chianti – Via Citille, 4
+39 335 153 6335
terreno.eu

• **Villa Calcinaia, Conti Capponi**
Greve in Chianti – Via Citille, 84
+39 055 853715
conticapponi.it

• **Antica Macelleria Falorni**
Greve in Chianti – Piazza G Matteotti, 66
+39 055 853029
falorni.it

• **Pruneti**
Greve in Chianti – Piazza Trento, 2
+39 331 713 3833
pruneti.it

• **Enoteca Fuoripiazza**
Greve in Chianti – Via I Maggio 2, Angolo Piazza Trento
+39 055 8546313
@fuoripiazza

• **La Pensione di Vignamaggio**
Panzano in Chianti – Piazza Gastone Bucciarelli, 5


Gelateria di Castellina

+39 055 8546691
vignamaggio.com

• **Enoteca Baldi**
Panzano in Chianti – Piazza Gastone Bucciarelli, 25
+39 055 852843
enotecabaldi.it

• **Fontodi**
Panzano in Chianti – Via San Leolino, 89
+39 055 852005
fontodi.com

• **Monte Bernardi**
Panzano in Chianti – Via Chiantigiana, SR222 km33
+39 055 852400
montebernardi.com

• **Museo Archeologico del Chianti**
Castellina in Chianti – Piazza del Comune 17-18
+39 0577 742090
museoarcheologicochianti.it

• **Gelateria di Castellina**
Castellina in Chianti – Via IV Novembre, 47
+39 0577 741337
gelateriadicastellina.com

• **One Belvedere**
Poggiobonsi – Località Belvedere, 1
+39 0577 1607365
onebelvedere.com

• **Fattoria Pomona**
Castellina in Chianti – Località Pomona, 39
+39 327 495 6225
fattoriapomona.it



Ruhne produces the stellar Sillano Gran Selezione; on the right, **Villa Calcinaia**, an exquisite property where Count Sebastiano Capponi hosts exclusive cellar tours and estate lunches.

The main road skirts around Greve's historic centre, but do not skip this beautiful town and its shaded medieval-era porticoed piazza. Historically a hub of trade for surrounding hilltop villages, its culinary legacy thrives at **Antica Macelleria Falorni**, the oldest of the many butchers in the town, operating since 1844. Here you can buy thick Fiorentina steaks cut from local Chianina cattle, alongside cured pork from the prized Tuscan Cinta Senese pigs – the slow-growing black breed with a distinctive pink belt (cinta), as depicted in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1338 painting *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*.

Lastly, a short stroll away in Piazza Trento, pass by the **Pruneti** family shop, opposite the excellent trattoria **Fuoripiazza** *(pictured, opposite)*. Farming irises and olives since the 19th century, the Pruneti family offers extra virgin olive oil tastings alongside artisanal gin and liqueurs distilled using the iris flower – the emblem of Florence. In May, this area is a sea of purple petals, and their delicate aroma is a lovely one to bank in the memory – when it comes to the scents of the best Chianti Classico wines, there is this gentle purple note that hovers between violet and iris. But it is the roots of these flowers that give the most exquisite scent, long prized by luxury parfumiers in Grasse and Paris.

Pause in Panzano

Leaving the Greve valley floor, the road climbs toward Panzano, at up to 510m above sea level. Situated on the small piazza as you arrive in town, **La Pensione di Vignamaggio** *(pictured, top right)* is a wonderful rest stop. The bedrooms offer old-school glamour with clean lines, minimalist design and pristine cotton sheets, offering either a panorama of Greve towards Florence, or a view over the square.

The hotel is part of the Vignamaggio farm estate, whose main production is Chianti Classico. But the owners clearly delight in all the agricultural possibilities of this region, as they also rear Cinta Senese pigs and have fruit orchards and vegetable gardens, olive groves and fields of ancient grain varieties that are ground onsite to make pasta and bread. Once a month they host a great brunch at their farm restaurant Il Ristoro – a rare treat, if you happen to visit at the right time!





Clockwise from top left: slowing the pace at Villa Calcinaia, just south of Greti; in Panzano, the swimming pool at La Pensione di Vignamaggio; Fuoripiazza ristorante enoteca in Greve in Chianti

Across the square, **Enoteca Baldi** boasts an outstanding wine list, with many tempting options from the classic regions of France and other countries, as well as the huge selection from around Italy. Pick up a chilled bottle of traditional-method Sangiovese sparkling wine made by the Chioccioli family based in nearby Gaiole, or from Sangiovese maestro Sean O'Callaghan at Tenuta di Carleone in neighbouring Radda, then walk down to Dario Cecchini's food truck – on the southwest-facing side of town, parked in a layby overlooking the magnificent, shell-shaped, sun-drenched Conca d'Oro valley – for an extravagantly good beefburger. Find a bench, pop the bubbles and enjoy a memorable moment on the Via Chiantigiana!

The SR222 out of Panzano follows the curves of the Conca d'Oro to the southwest. Drive slowly, so as not to miss the sign on your left for the **Fontodi** winery; tours are by appointment only, so call ahead to arrange a visit and argue later over who prefers the Vigna del Sorbo Chianti Classico Gran Selezione and who plumps for the Flaccianello delle Pieve Toscana IGT bottling. Further along the road, after a few more dramatic bends, on the right lies Michael Schmelzer's **Monte Bernardi**. His MB 1933 Chianti Classico, a field blend of grapes from a single hectare planted in that year, is a particular highlight. ►





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Castellina vistas

From Monte Bernardi, a 13-minute drive brings you to the hilltop town of Castellina in Chianti. Look out as you approach Castellina for signs on the right for the Montecalvario tumulus, an Etruscan burial site excavated in 1905 – it is easily accessible on foot. Artefacts are displayed in the **archaeological museum** inside the Rocca on the main square – a medieval fortress with a tower offering fabulous views across Castellina to the Chianti mountains to the east, source of the Ombrone river.

If you have an appetite for ice cream, family-run **Gelateria di Castellina** (still on the SR222) has some of the best in the region. Complete with a garden and parking, it makes an easy pitstop. Try the Buontalenti, a rich cream gelato named after Bernardo Buontalenti, who created the recipe in the 16th century for a Medici banquet.

The place to rest for the night once refreshed by gelato is **One Belvedere** *(pictured, top)*, a luxury farm stay about 6km to the west of Castellina, a worthy diversion off the SR222 heading in the direction of Poggibonsi. It is a blissful sanctuary with a winery, spa and a superb vegetarian restaurant (a welcome and delicious change from the meat-heavy Tuscan diet). Do not neglect the winery, however strongly the spa or pool beckon. It's an elegant cantina that was, until two years ago, an abandoned tractor shed. Tastings are hosted around a long central table. The precision of young winemaking team Giovanni Stella and Alessio Cecchini explains why the experience in the glass is so profound. Their Amphitheatro Bianco is a real surprise: a Trebbiano that holds the gaze and interest of the drinker, defying the neutrality often found with this grape.

Into the city

As you continue south to Siena, via Fonterutoli, dense woodland opens up towards the west, and Siena's Torre del Mangia clock tower and the church of Santa Caterina will eventually appear on the skyline in the distance. As the elevation drops towards Pomona, before you reach Quercegrossa village, the warmer temperature is evident in the sudden appearance of cacti jutting from the rocks. Make your final stop at **Fattoria Pomona**, where winemaker Monica Raspi makes some of the best wines of Chianti Classico: bright, dense with fruit and showing the warmth of southern Castellina while retaining impeccable posture.

Next stop the city of Siena, bidding farewell to the historic Via Chiantigiana, and you're ready for another Tuscan adventure. D

Above: wandering the streets in the heart of Castellina in Chianti. Top: the 'sanctuary' of One Belvedere, near Poggibonsi