

World heritage in the vineyard

1 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson/Syndicated though this is longer

The world of wine has one irreplaceable resource and yet I'm not sure how aware most wine drinkers, or even most wine producers, are of it. I refer to seriously old vines, which, in the right hands, can produce wines of incomparable concentration and complexity with wonderfully direct flavours. I don't mean vines that are a little bit older than the norm - say, 25 years old - which are so often touted on wine labels as 'vieilles vignes', but really old vines of 50 to 100 years old and more. There are even two places in the world that can boast, it is claimed, vines that are several hundred years of age.

For a region to have stocks of particularly ancient vines, it helps if phylloxera never struck. This vine louse devastated most of the world's wine regions between 1860 and the 1920s to such an extent that most vineyards had to be pulled out entirely and replaced with young vines grafted on to phylloxera-resistant American rootstocks. The island of Santorini may have the world's oldest vines of all - some claim 400 years for the oldest - because, unlike the Greek mainland, it was never invaded by the louse, and the volcanic terrain is such that the vines have been grown for generations in protective basket-like shapes over deeply sunken roots.

The fact that, unlike its neighbouring states, South Australia managed to keep phylloxera at bay explains why places such as Barossa Valley and Eden Valley are such a rich repository of old vines. Indeed it was a [tasting of old-vine wines](#) from Barossa held in London last January that inspired me to instigate enquiries around the world as to the extent of remaining stocks of seriously old vines. At the suggestion of Brian Walsh of Yalumba, an official census of old vines, the Old Vine Charter, has recently been established by the generic body Barossa Grapes & Wine. A listing of all known ancient vineyards with date of planting, exact area and grape varieties has been drawn up and a truly historic document it is too, showing just how dependent on the Silesian settlers the early Barossa Valley was. They are insisting on documented proof of planting dates and so far the oldest vineyard they have found - most but not all of them are Shiraz - is the Freedom vineyard planted in 1843.

By chance, and completely independently, an almost identical initiative is underway in California. It all started in late February this year when geologist and amateur wine lover Mike Dildine posted his privately compiled list of 60 ancient California vineyards on the forum of wineberserkers.com. This attracted scores of additional suggestions so that the list rapidly grew to 145 vineyards of well over 50 years old, many of them dating from the 1880s. These include in Sonoma the widely used Monte Rosso, Shaw, Teldeschi and Old Hill Ranches, Ridge's Geyserville, the vineyard that supplies Martinelli's Jackass Hill Zinfandel and the Bedrock vineyard; Old Crane in Napa Valley; and Boeger in El Dorado in the Sierra Foothills. The Ciapusci vineyard in Mendocino, whose fruit has been bottled by Edmeades, is thought to have been planted in 1878.

This Heritage Vineyards Project comes not a moment too soon. California winemakers sensitive to the special qualities of seriously old vine fruit yet without the means to simply acquire the vineyards for themselves - Mike Officer of Carlisle springs most readily to mind - have become painfully aware recently of just how precarious is the existence of these ancient vineyards. Nowhere is this more true than in Russian River Valley, one of the hotspots for ancient Zinfandel vines, but also a prime location for that most fashionable of grape varieties Pinot Noir. Officer saw, for example, Pietro's Ranch Zinfandel, for which he had established such an enviable reputation, pulled out after the 2006 vintage, when the vines celebrated their centenary, to make way for young Pinot vines.

Most but by no means all of the oldest California vines are Zinfandel, often mixed in the field with varieties such as Petite Sirah, Carignan(e), Alicante Bouschet and occasionally Mataro (Mourvèdre). These were the varieties typically planted by the Italian immigrants who arrived in Sonoma in the late 19th century and the plants have clearly adapted extremely well to the local conditions, but alas they struggle to fetch the prices on the open market that they deserve. Old-vine Zinfandel can be a great wine, but it is not regarded as one that deserves as high a price as, say, a smart Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir. (You have only to look at the relative prices of [Ridge's Monte Bello and Lytton Springs](#) for a demonstration of this phenomenon.)

What is needed is a bit more fuss to be made of the extent to which old vines represent the local viticultural heritage, and we can hope and expect to see both the Barossa Old Vine Charter and California's Heritage Vineyard Project to do this. I would like to see a global register of old vines and some sort of protection of them, a bit like the World Wildlife Fund. This

may be a mite idealistic, but I have been thoroughly heartened and intrigued since asking various contacts and members of the Purple pages around the world on our forum to highlight the seriously old vines they know in this [Really old vines thread](#).

Efficient and successful wine-producing countries such as France and Italy tend not to have as high a proportion of ancient vines as some other parts of the world since there was always commercial encouragement to keep yields up by replacing old vines. Even so, within France Burgundy has a few famously old rows of vines such as Roty's in the Charmes-Chambertin appellation and Moreau's Grandes Ruchottes in Chassagne-Montrachet - even if the only known really ancient vines in Bordeaux are the 0.85 hectares of 125-year-old vines that supply Clos Louie in Côtes de Castillon. Languedoc-Roussillon and the south west are much richer in really old vines because they remained off the beaten commercial track for so long, and Henry Marionnet of the Loire's Domaine de la Charmoise has some 160-year-old Romorantin vines.

Some of the oldest vines in Italy are in what was until recently the neglected south, the 180-year-old likes of Pantanella Aglianico in Campania, and the oldest Nerello Mascalese on the slopes of Mt Etna bottled by Terre Nere, but doubtless more would emerge if there were a concerted effort to curate this aspect of Italian history. Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal, probably have an even higher proportion of seriously old vines, notably, as in France and Italy, in the less famous regions where viticulture was relatively unsophisticated. The picture shows one of the many very old vines in [Cigales](#), for example.

There are little pockets of ancient vines all over the world. Germany may have two or three small plantings of vines that are several hundred years old. Greece and Turkey are both home to some particularly senior vines, as is Maule in Chile, and there are some ancient vines in parts of Mendoza that were brought there via Chile from pre-phylloxera Bordeaux.

Of course the problem with old vines is that they produce very low yields - one or two tonnes per acre typically, whereas young vines can produce several times more than this - and they need more care in the vineyard than young vines. A careless tractor turn can so easily sever an old vine from its roots. But what they produce is unique, it gives us a direct connection with history and previous generations.

To see our ongoing, online register of seriously old vineyards, see our [Old vine register](#), and please feel free to suggest additions to it via the comments box below.