

HOW TO AGE *Gracefully*

Old vines are valuable for all sorts of reasons, and they need to be protected. They also make jolly good wine

by **Lorraine Kearney**

We've all heard the idiom 'to age like fine wine'. We know it means someone (or something, even) improves with age: becomes better, more refined, more appealing, much like how certain wines develop more complex flavours and increased value as they age.

It's often used as a compliment. No arguing with that. But here's the thing: old vines generally age just as well, and wine made from old vines is generally sublime. So much so, there is an Old Vine Project (OVP) in South Africa and the global Old Vine Conference and Old Vine Registry, among others.

It's a source of pride that South Africa

is a pioneer; the OVP the first to be established worldwide (it was formalised in 2016). By way of comparison, the conference was only set up in 2021.

The OVP is all thanks to Rosa Kruger, a vineyard manager, who started scouting for old South African vines in 2002. It has helped that since 1900, every new vine planting has had to be documented.

AGE IS NOT JUST A NUMBER

Vines must be at least 35 years old to be considered 'old vines' and be allowed to sign up for the OVP. But not all wine farms are members, so you can buy wine from vines that are not certified but are just as old.

South Africa has some of the oldest viticultural soils in the world. Its wine history dates back to 1659, and today, there are just 4 879 hectares of vineyards that hit the 35-year mark, which means only about 4% of vineyards qualify for Certified Heritage Vineyards. We need to protect this resource.

The country clocked up another first in 2018, when it launched the Certified Heritage Vineyards seal. It guarantees the wine is made from old vines. The planting date is reflected on the seal.

There are 39 varieties in the country's list of old vineyards, more than 50% of which is Chenin Blanc. But there's also Cinsault, Pinotage, Palomino, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Syrah and Tinta Barocca.

THE SCIENCE OF IT

The trouble is older vineyards tend to bear less fruit, making the financial viability per hectare a key challenge for growers.

Research by Winetech, the University of Cape Town and the UCT Graduate School of Business found that vine age does affect the price of wine, with R2.96 added for every year a vineyard has been in the ground. Or a R103.60 premium for a 35-year-old vine entering old vine status.

But old vines make wines that reflect the earth and the terroir they grow in. They exist because of the people who touched and tended them over many years, says the OVP.

They have the potential to make exceptional wines and are a vital source of scientific insight, particularly in the context of climate change. The project looks to the future by advocating for sustainable, nature-aligned farming practices – so all vineyards may reach a venerable age.



The quality of the wines is high, and there are multiple award-winners coming from Certified Heritage Vineyards.

The Old Vine Registry says saving old vines is addressing a planetary crisis. Why? Because old vines carry the secrets of survival and have adapted to stress over decades and even centuries.

There're loads of reasons why they are important, such as: they are more resilient in droughts and heatwaves; have developed immunity to pests and diseases; don't need to be irrigated; need less, if any, chemical inputs; can be propagated for more resilient young vines; and are significant reservoirs of biomass and carbon.

**Old vines
carry the
secrets of
survival**



THE ROMANCE OF IT ALL

Old vines retain and celebrate tradition, handed-down knowledge, experience and the people who are an integral part of that.

The Old Vine Registry says these vineyards represent history; they are family heirlooms; they are the stories of places and people.

And they often make delicious wines with a unique and different character. They often mirror the landscape where they have grown for decades.

Expect texture, mouthfeel, complexity, stability and a perceived freshness in the wines.

DO YOUR BIT

This Valentine's Day, show your love for an old vine bottle (remember not all of them carry the Certified Heritage Vineyards seal).

Some to try are:

- ❖ Klein Roosboom My Way Sauvignon Blanc 2023 (R165, kleinroosboom.co.za)
- ❖ Kleine Zalze Vineyard Selection Chenin Blanc 2023 (R155, **Makro**)
- ❖ Baba Yetu Chenin Blanc 2023 (R129, **Norman Goodfellows**)
- ❖ Spier 21 Gables Chenin Blanc 2022 (R320, **Checkers**)
- ❖ Brookdale Estate Chenin Blanc Old Vine 2022 (R385, brookdale-estate.com)
- ❖ Duke Chenin Blanc Vine 2024 (R68, wellingtonwines.com)

HOW TO KEEP THEM GOING

The secret is the skill and knowledge of the viticulturist, and of those who care for and prune the vineyards. As the OVP says, the talent, skill, knowledge and attitude of pruners can determine the longevity of the vineyard, as well as influence the yield.

Rosa herself points out that some vineyard workers have been living on the farms for three or four generations. They have generational knowledge about old vines that the experts sometimes miss.

For its part, the Old Vine Registry says they need to be monetised. Old vines cost more but they also have more value. And this needs to be recognised. Protection schemes need to be set up and funded.

Importers, distributors, retailers and consumers need to be up for paying more for old vine wines.

In South Africa, the OVP focuses on research, vineyard worker education, climate change adaptation strategies, and economic value creation for its members.

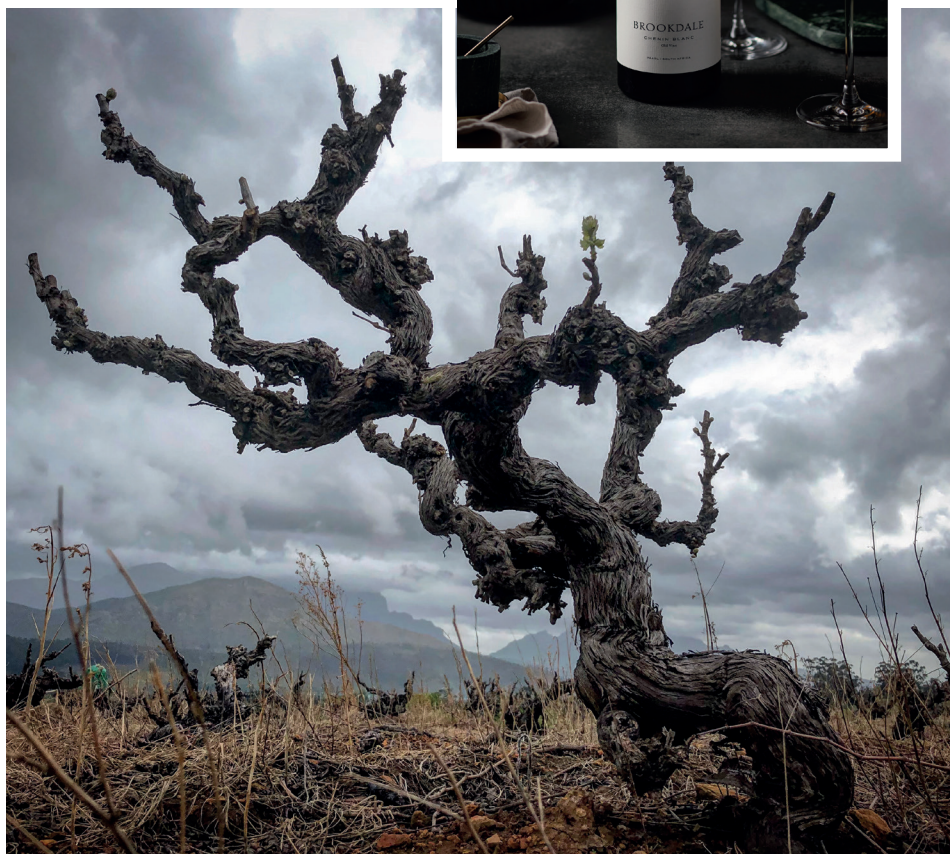
As for us wine drinkers, we can splash out a bit and get a bottle. And it doesn't even have to be for a special occasion.

The Oupas of the Vines

254 years old: 1771 Vine, Coastal Region, Cape Town, planted in 1771; it's a Crouchen Blanc in Heritage Square in the centre of Cape Town – and it's the oldest fruit-bearing vine in the southern hemisphere.

142 years old: Gevonden, Breede River Valley, Bredekloof, planted in 1883; it's a Muscat d'Alexandria or Hanepoot.

128 years old: T Voetpad, Coastal Region, Swartland, planted in 1887, owned by the Sadie Family; it's a field blend of Sémillon(white and gris), Palomino, Chenin Blanc and Hanepoot (Muscat d'Alexandria).



South Africa
has some of
the oldest
viticultural
soil in the
world