



Why Old Vines Are a Thing of the Future

Beverage consultant James Brim, CSW, with Zinfandel vines planted in 1889 at Jessie's Grove in California's Mokelumne River-Lodi AVA.

WHILE THE TERM "old vine" has always been unregulated—to the point of now being virtually meaningless to wine buyers due to its ubiquity—there's a growing movement within the industry to help it reclaim its meaningful place in the lexicon.

Members of the British wine trade, for instance, have formed a nonprofit group called The Old Vine Conference that has recently been holding a series of discussions designed to coordinate global efforts to preserve and celebrate old vines. The first thing you read on the organization's website (oldvines.org) is: "The best old vines yield uniquely transcendent wines, incomparably rich in savour, symbolism, and heritage. The genetic material of ancient varieties, often retrieved from forgotten old vineyards, is proving vital in adapting to climate change." That's a lot of high-minded verbiage to absorb, but let's break some of it down.

For starters, I'd use the word "transparent" rather than "transcendent" due to the nature of old-vine viticulture. Everywhere they are found around the world, old vines survive for 50, 100, and in some cases 150 years primarily because they sit on ideal terroirs, benefit from the healthiest possible environments, and continuously produce high-value wines defined by sensory qualities reflecting their origins. The longevity of old vines, in other words, is directly dependent upon not only their health but also the transparency of the resulting wines in terms of reflecting their terroir. Otherwise, they would have been pulled out long ago. That said, it's also the case that vineyards over 50 years old become part and parcel of the culture and heritage of the wine regions they're located in, as illustrated by the creation of a California nonprofit dedicated to preserving old-vine sites called the Historic Vineyard Society.

In regard to climate change, I would point out that the typical morphology of old vines—trained as free-standing goblets or bush vines rather than on modern-day trellises—is currently teaching a thing or two to a wine industry beset by the shock of heat waves, drought, fires, "100-year" floods, and other manifestations of a changing planet. It has become clearer than ever that the grapevines best adapted to extreme climate events are



Grower Terri Harvey in her Original Grandpere Vineyard in the Shendandoah Valley AVA.



those with the deepest roots, the most mature trunks, and the most muscular spurs: in short, the oldest vines. No wonder there is a current movement to adjust the pruning of young trellised vines, which now dominate the industry, in ways that maximize wood size and sap flow—that replicate, in other words, the intrinsic physical advantages enjoyed by older vines, trained on stakes in the "old-school" style.

In California, authentic old-vine bottlings—primarily Zinfandel and Carignan along with the occasional Mourvèdre, Cinsaut, and Mission—are rarely labeled as "old vine"; they are primarily identified by vineyard designations. In South Africa,

by contrast, certified Old Vine Project wines are now identified as such on their labels: amazing bottlings of Cinsaut, Pinotage, Sémillon, Chenin Blanc, and other varieties. Barossa Valley has its groundbreaking Old Vine Charter, and France always has its *vieilles vignes*.

When tasting old-vine wines, do not expect dark colors, extreme concentration, or oversized body. You occasionally find that, but more often than not you'll encounter a delicate, finely delineated profile: The older the vines, the more likely they are to express terroir-related earth or mineral notes. This is why, despite being around literally forever, old vines are a bigger deal than ever. ■