

Max allen writes about wine:

“BAROSSA RESILIENCE”

What makes old vines tick?

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HILL OF GRACE VINEYARD, EDEN VALLEY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

THERE. You can taste it. In your mouth. Clear as day. Proof, if proof were needed, that there's something very special about wine made from old vines.

Two glasses of black-purple Shiraz sit on the table in front of you.

The wine on the left fairly bursts from the glass: sweet ripe red berries bounce around your gums, but soon after they appear, they're gone.

The wine on the right, by contrast, is subdued when you stick your nose in to the glass. Turns out it's saving itself for your palate: as soon as you take a sip, the black liquid settles in slowly, draping a coat of rich and spicy flavours across your tongue.

These two wines were made from shiraz grapes grown on the same patch of deep brown silty soil in the world-famous Hill of Grace vineyard in the Eden Valley, the higher, cooler eastern region of South Australia's Barossa wine zone.

The grapes come from adjoining rows of vines; were picked at exactly the same ripeness; made in exactly the same way. The only difference, then, is the age of the vines: those that produced the lighter, fruitier wine on the left were planted just six years ago, while the vines that produced the deeper, more satisfying wine on the right were planted in the 1860s.

Conventional viticultural wisdom ascribes this difference primarily to yield. As vines get older, the thinking goes, their vigour and crop levels decline, producing wines with more concentration and flavour.

But this doesn't explain the fact that the young vine wine you've just tasted cropped at two kilograms per vine - while the old vine wine cropped at six kilos per vine.

Viticulturist Prue Henschke believes there's much more to old vine wine than just yield.

Henschke and winemaker husband Stephen view themselves as custodians of Hill of Grace (as well as a number of other old Barossa vineyards such as Mount Edelstone), and have embarked on a meticulous program of selecting the best clonal material from that 1860s block (dubbed 'the grandfathers') and replanting - hence the neighbouring vine rows of such dramatically different age.

'That difference you can taste has got to do with a number of things,' says Henschke. 'I think there's probably a mediating factor of those very old vines having such thick trunks, so much wood. And the fact that the root mass is so huge by the time they get to that age. I think that sometimes, the secrets are underground.'

There are very old vines in many Australian wine regions - Shiraz dating back to the mid 19th century can be found in McLaren Vale, the Hunter Valley, Great Western, Nagambie and elsewhere. But no region boasts quite so many old vineyards as the Barossa - and no region relies quite so heavily on the fruit from those ancient vines for its signature wine style.

Almost every top-shelf Barossa Shiraz you can think of - Penfolds Grange (traditionally a blend of wine from many regions, but with the Barossa at its core), Peter Lehmann Stonewell, Yalumba Octavius, Torbreck Run Rig, Chris Ringland, Elderton Command, Charles Melton, Rockford Basket Press, Veritas Hanisch - owes its depth, richness and complexity to grapes from gnarly old vines.

What better place, then, to visit to unearth some of those secrets Prue Henschke alluded to. Why does old vine wine taste different? How old does a vine have to be before that difference can be tasted? How old is old?

KROEHN VINEYARD, EDEN VALLEY TOWNSHIP, EDEN VALLEY

Colin Kroehn is just a little younger than the modest, hillside vineyard his grandfather established in 1912.

'I remember it was 1912,' he says, 'because Dad told us he needed to get some wire for training the vines a couple of years after they were planted, but he couldn't get any because the war had started.'

Like many other old growers across the Barossa, Colin calls his eleven acres of riesling and shiraz his 'garden'. This harks back to the very foundations of European settlement in the Barossa in the 1840s, when whole communities of Prussian Lutherans, escaping religious persecution, landed in the new colony of South Australia, seeking a new life.

These first settlers transposed traditions essentially unchanged since the Middle Ages - traditions of worship, of art, of mixed farming - from a cold central European setting to an often harsh, hot Australian environment. No wonder so many of those old vineyards have survived, passed down from father to son for generations.

The shiraz grapes from Colin Kroen's garden are bought each year by the St Hallett winery, and usually find their way into St Hallett's top wine, the Old Block Shiraz.

When it was first released in 1980, Old Block was the first Barossa red to make an explicit feature of the ancient viticultural heritage of the region. It was the first to celebrate the fact that, as St Hallett winemaker Matt Gant puts it, 'While young vines produce fruit with up-front flavours, wines from old vines have better texture - they have an evenness that just cruises along across your palate.'

Senior winemaker Stuart Blackwell, who has been responsible for Old Block since the 1982 vintage, agrees. 'Somewhere between about 40 and 60 years old,' he says, 'there's an absolute change in the grapes a shiraz vine produces. It goes from having young, vibrant red fruit to having dark fruits, blackberries - and mocha.'

Colin Kroehn is even more specific. He can pinpoint the moment when he saw his own vines move into maturity.

'They came good in about 1942,' he says. 'When they were 30 years old. I know because I used to prune them and pick them as a kid, when they were young, and they were wild, then. But I remember thinking, around '42, that they were better, and the grapes were better, now they'd settled down.'

This issue - how old is old? - is of more than passing interest. There is, for example, no legally binding or even commonly agreed-upon definition of how old an Australian vine has to be to earn the name. As a result, as veteran Eden Valley winemaker Jim Irvine points out, 'For some years now the use of "old vines" as a descriptor has been well and truly abused, (although) in the absence of any official guide, nobody can be blamed for stretching the imagination of readers, winemakers, wine consumers or wine marketers.'

In an effort to sort out the confusion, Irvine has proposed some names that could be applied to vines of varying age: 'junior' for vineyards that have been bearing fruit for ten to fifteen years, 'adolescent' from those vines that have seen sixteen to twenty seasons, 'mature' from 21 to 50, 'aged' 51 to 70, 'ancient' 71 to 100 and 'methuselah' for vineyards with more than 100 vintages under their craggy belts.

While some of the oldest vines have well-documented planting dates - 1843 in the case of Langmeil winery's Freedom vineyard at Tanunda; 1847 in the case of the old shiraz vines at Turkey Flat in Bethany - as Irvine admits, verifying the age of some of the very old vineyards may not always be easy.

KALLESKE VINEYARD, GREENOCK, NORTH-WEST BAROSSA VALLEY

The oldest vines on the Kalleske family's property definitely qualify for 'methuselah' status. Indeed, they'd already done most of their settling down before the 19th century was over: they were planted in 1875.

Winemaker Troy Kalleske knows the exact date because the property has been in his family's hands since 1853. But although Troy is the sixth generation of his family to tend this vineyard, he is the first to make wine from the grapes.

Until just a few years ago, the Kalleske fruit, like Colin Kroehn's, was sold to other wineries in the region - notably Penfolds (where Troy then worked as a winemaker), where it often ended up in top wines such as Grange. Indeed, most of the Kalleskes annual crop is still sold, but since 2002, some is also made on-site and released under the family's own name.

Importantly, the powerfully-structured, deeply black-fruity shiraz from those sparsely-planted, surprisingly spindly 1875 vines is bottled

separately under the Johann Georg label, and is sold for A\$100 a bottle.

'We feel that in the wine from those old vines there's a "wow" factor,' says Kalleske, echoing the other winemakers. 'There's a difference in texture; the mouthfeel is more impressive. We wanted to show how that tasted on its own.'

This importance of this cultural shift in the Barossa - from a community of small-scale growers at the whim of changing market conditions and winery ownership to, increasingly, a community of grower-makers with a burgeoning pride in their unique viticultural heritage - cannot be understated. As St Hallett's Matt Gant observes: 'To get the best possible fruit, it's not enough just to have old vines growing in those old sites; you also need the right people working those vines with the right attitude.'

KAESLER VINEYARD, NURIOOTPA, CENTRAL BAROSSA VALLEY

To get a feel for how dramatically attitudes to old vines have changed in the Barossa, you only have to visit Kaesler vineyard.

These days, Kaesler is the home of one of the region's most outstanding modern red wines, the Old Bastard Shiraz (A\$160). This gloriously complex, multi-layered, deeply satisfying red wine that lingers seductively in the mouth is made from a small block of lovingly-tended, incredibly low-yielding vines that were planted in 1893, and is the epitome of the old vine style.

A generation ago, though, under previous owners, things were very different at Kaesler: thanks to abundant irrigation and fertilisers and cultivation, this same ancient vineyard was being cropped very heavily, and its grapes ended up in pretty ordinary, high-volume commercial wines.

The prevailing regional wisdom at the time was 'the bigger the crop, the better'. After all, growers in the 1980s were being paid by the tonne. The concept of a A\$100-a-bottle Barossa shiraz was pure fantasy. Indeed, at that time, cabernet was king with consumers, and shiraz was so unpopular that growers were lucky to get A\$100 a *tonne* for their grapes - so the only way they could get reasonable returns was to grow big crops.

'When I took over in 1998,' remembers winemaker Reid Bosward, 'the soils had been flogged to within an inch of their lives, and some of those vines were on the bones of their arse. So we turned the water off, started mulching under-vine and sowing a cover-crop in winter. And you can see what a difference it's made.'

The crucial point, though, is that despite wildly varying management techniques - from industrial to artisanal - these vines have *survived* by always coming up with the goods, always squeezing out grapes, year after year, for over a century.

And it's this feature - resilience - that is the key to understanding old vines.

A VINEYARD IN LIGHT PASS, NORTH-EASTERN BAROSSA VALLEY

I can't tell you the name of the family who tend the 94 year-old vineyard in this quiet pocket of the Barossa. There are only 144 shiraz vines here: thick-of-trunk, twisted, weighed down by time. And while these admirable old plants only yield a few hundred kilos of grapes each season (enough for perhaps one or two barrels of wine), the father and son winemaking team of Ron and Abel Gibson who buy the meagre crop value that fruit incredibly highly, and would hate to see it snaffled by another producer.

The wine is blended with the produce of two other tiny, venerable vineyards in the region - in classic Barossa tradition - to produce a shiraz under the Gibsons' top label, the Australian Old Vine Collection. And it's an absolute stunner: the current, 2004 vintage is wonderfully spicy, with lovely balance and restrained power.

Before establishing his own winery and vineyard business in the late 1990s, Rob Gibson spent over 20 years working as a winemaker and viticulturist for Penfolds, where he gained an intimate knowledge of the great old vine resource scattered across the Barossa. This background - and an ongoing role as viticultural consultant - gives him special insight into what makes old vines tick.

'What you need to understand,' says Rob Gibson, 'is that the surviving population of old vines here - what I call the original gardens - are very strong vines. The average age of the grape vine is about thirty-three years; after that, productivity begins to decrease and the vine

becomes uneconomical. For the vine to survive beyond that, it has to have special attributes: it must be able to continue to produce.'

In other words, old vines aren't good because they're old, they're old because they're good: they've survived because they've proved to be the fittest. But what is it that makes them so strong? Like Prue Henschke does, Rob Gibson points underground.

'The older the vine gets, the bigger the root mass, the deeper the roots go,' he says. 'The more you get away from the thirty to fifty centimetres of topsoil, the better the vine expression. That top layer is a relatively fertile environment, and that's what the vine expresses when the roots are that deep - varietal flavour, but not great character. Once the roots go deeper, move out of that luxury zone, it not only checks the vigour of the vine above ground, but also adds another dimension - of finesse - to the flavour of the grapes.'

Gibson doesn't dismiss the idea that this difference comes, at these deeper levels, from the roots (or, rather the mycchorizal fungi associated with the fine root hairs) being able to extract minerals from the soil and rock and transfer them to the vine. But he suspects it has more to do with the fact that the larger root mass of the older vine acts as a survival mechanism - 'produces a vine insulated from stress' - allowing moisture to be drawn from the soil at a steady and consistent rate, producing fully flavoured, even-structured, characterful grapes.

To prove the point, Abel Gibson draws a slug of deep purple liquid from a barrel stacked deep in the Gibsons' tin-shed winery. It's last year's vintage of the wine from that Light Pass vineyard.

And there. You can taste it. The black liquid drapes its coat of rich and spicy flavours across your tongue. All the proof, if proof were needed, that there's something very special about wine made from old vines.

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