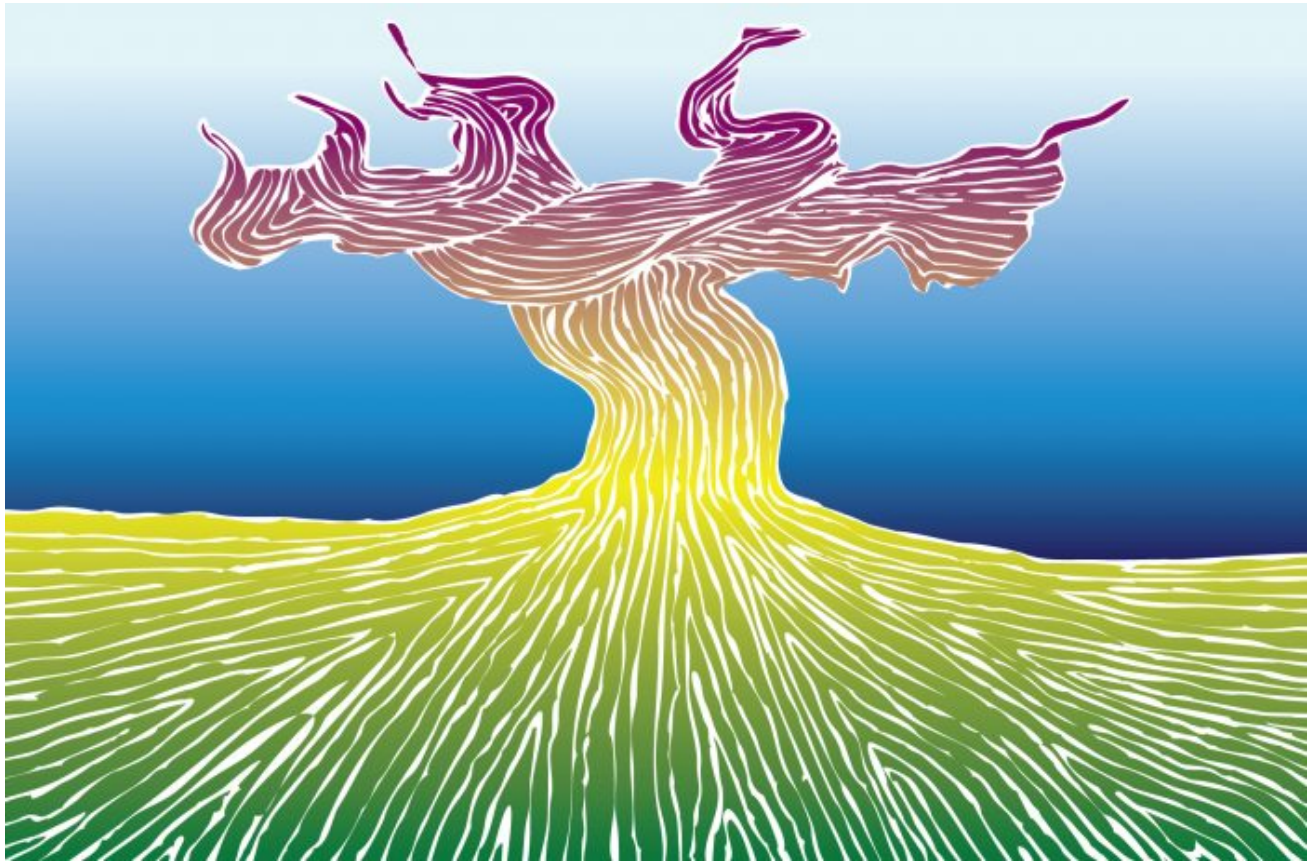


# Old Vines Cultivate Pride and Profits at New World Wineries

BY STACY BRISCOE



*Getty*

“Old vines are not good because they’re old, they’re old because they make good wine,” says James Lindner, proprietor of Langmeil Winery in Barossa, Australia. His estate’s Freedom Vineyard grows some of the region’s oldest Shiraz vines.

Like many Barossa estates that farm old vines, Langmeil is registered with the Barossa Old Vine Charter, an association that records, preserves and promotes old vineyards. It defines vine age by category: Old Vines (35-plus years old), Survivor Vines (70-plus years old), Centenarian Vines (100-plus years old) and Ancestor Vines (125-plus years old).





*Australia's Barossa Old Vine Charter categorizes vine age, and preserves and promotes old vineyards /  
Photo courtesy Barossa Grape & Wine Association*

In Lindner's experience, registering with the group translates to better sales.

"I have seen grape prices from growers with outstanding old vineyards get their just rewards," he says. "There's often a correlation between the price of grapes and the wines made from them."

In South Africa, old vines, defined as those 35 or more years old, are protected and promoted by the Old Vine Project (OVP).

"It was formed for the purpose of keeping old vines in the soil and introducing them to interested winemakers," says viticulturist and OVP founder Rosa Kruger. "Very quickly, winemakers started making wine from older vines and realized their value."





*South Africa's Old Vine Project protects vineyards with vines that are 35 or more years old / Photo by Gideon Nel*

Kruger believes there are differences in quality between wines from older and younger vineyards. She believes that the older vineyards impart more of a sense of place.

“As such, winemakers are prepared to pay more for these grapes,” says Kruger.

She points to studies from University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business that find wines with the OVP seal are perceived as higher quality. Consumers “are prepared to pay more,” says Kruger.

Premiumization of old vine fruit and wine is not universal, though. In California, Lodi Winegrape Commission (LWC) executive director Stuart Spencer says economic pressures like lower Zinfandel grape prices and increased labor costs have resulted in the removal of several old-vine Zinfandel vineyards throughout the region. Growers replace the vines with more lucrative varieties or alternative crops.

“Zinfandel is at a crossroads,” says Spencer. “We have a segment of vineyards that go into premium wines, but a lot go into the value segment (\$7 to \$10 wines). We want to shift more vineyards into higher price points.”





The trade group has launched Save the Old, a campaign that Spencer describes as a call to action.

“It was created to get consumers, wineries, winemakers and wine trade—everyone involved in buying and selling wine—to see that these vineyards go into wines with price points that justifies keeping the vines in the ground,” says Spencer.

LWC provides education to help growers refine their brand image and promote their fruit.

“Many vineyards have been farmed consistently by the same family who have only ever sold to one winery,” says Spencer. “To be successful now, they may have to sell to multiple producers and find quality, niche-focused winemakers willing to produce vineyard designates.”

Working alongside the LWC is the Sonoma-based Historic Vineyard Society, a nonprofit organization that validates age and historical significance of old-vine vineyards (defined as 50-plus years) throughout California. Approved sites are catalogued in the group’s online registry.

Only 17 of the 144 old-vine vineyards registered with Historic Vineyard Society are from Lodi, with seven more in review. The organization is working with the LWC to validate others.





*In Lodi, some growers removed old-vine Zinfandel vineyards and replaced them with more lucrative crops / Photo by Randy Caparoso Photography, Lodi Winegrape Commission*

The Historic Vineyard Society also helped fund a Cal-Poly San Luis Obispo research project to study the effects of vine age on grape and wine quality.

Led by Dr. L. Federico Casassa, a professor of enology, in collaboration with Dr. Jean Dodson Peterson, a professor of viticulture, researchers examined performance of young vines (10 years or younger), old vines (50 years or older) and a control group throughout the growing season.

They analyze the three groupings during the winemaking process and assess the samples with both chemical and sensory analyses.

“The concept of old vines is particularly relevant because most are dry-farmed, an important aspect in terms of sustainable viticulture,” says Casassa. Their deep root structure and stable physiology means dry-farmed old vines can better adapt to their terroir and are less susceptible to environmental factors like climate change.

Casassa also plans to create 3-D imaging of old-vine root systems to map their depth and compare their architecture versus younger roots.

“These studies have both commercial and cultural value,” says Casassa. “Commercial, because there is an implication that old vines are higher in quality. Cultural, because the Zinfandel grape is an integral part of the patrimony of the U.S. wine industry.”



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