

“Old Vines”

Tasted September 2013 – Vintners’ Hall, London

What is an “old” vine and what are the unique characteristics and implied virtues that wines from such vines have in common? These questions were at the heart of this seminar and examination of wines from numerous grape varieties and regions. Rosa Kruger, a South African viticulturist, argued that old vines yield wines with better acidity. She said they also seem to produce an uneven number of bunches per plant and require less irrigation, no doubt because truly old vines are less vigorous and their roots reach deeper water sources. Kruger suggested as well that old vines were naturally more disease resistant and were even less susceptible to viruses such as leaf roll. Mark De Vere MW, representing California, wondered if the vines which had survived for decades were simply the hardiest ones while weaker vines in the same vineyard had died off, or did age confer added strength? The answer wasn’t fully clear. As to whether wines made from old vines are innately superior, there was general agreement this was true, yet the precise reasons were implied rather than argued in detail. In fact, quality varied across the 13 featured wines which came from vines from 50 to over 100 years old, ending with a Barossa Mourvedre from a plot planted 160 years ago!

Assyrtiko de Mylos 2011, Domaine Hatzidakis – Santorini, Greece **(*)**

Vines more than 100 years of age

Brilliant light gold. Subdued nose offering a sense of richness. Very clean and faintly creamy with muted small yellow fruits. The palate is full with a textured center, good weight, and possesses an elevated acid frame which lingers. Overall, the wine has an appealing presence, is very young and will develop. Faintly saline ending. The alcohol content is a surprising 15%.

Grenache Soldaat 2012, Eben Sadie – Paardeberg, South Africa*(*)**

Vines about 60 years old

Moderately dense purple red. Very fresh, clean, youthful aroma of black fruits and berries. The palate is similarly very youthful and vibrant, closing up rather quickly. There is moderate substance and a pronounced backbone of acidity along with a degree of tannic grip. The finale is very fresh and clean.

T'Voetpad Chenin-Palomino (field blend) 2012 – South Africa *(*)**

Vineyard averaging 108 years old planted in three sections

Light straw gold. Very clean and youthful impression. Delicate yellow fruits, dried white currant. The nose has depth and substance. In the mouth, the wine is direct and fresh with a marked acid spine. Somewhat blunt, undeveloped finish.

Semillon 2004 Boekenhoutskloof, Mark Kent – South Africa *(+)**

Semillon Gris & Blanc from parcels 45, 60 & 100 years of age

Gold color. Dried yellow fruit and nut dominate the nose. Very good concentration and a degree of bottle development. The taste is expressive and has a long line with marked nutty, wooly flavors and balanced acidity. There is very good persistence. Just beginning to evolve and no doubt will age well.

Garnacha 2009, El Puño – Calatayud, Spain *(+)**

Vines 70 to 100 years old

Very young color, moderately dense very dark red purple. Concentrated, very youthful, fresh nose displaying boysenberry and black currant with an evident French oak overlay. The palate is fresh and alive with juicy acidity and a measure of tannic grip. The oak is quite dominant, covering the black fruits beneath. Well-balanced with good length. Norrel Robertson MW, who works in Spain, told the audience that higher altitudes here preserve the anthocyanins and result in wines with lower pH; hence the Grenache has a far denser color than is common in other conditions.

Garnacha Vinas Viejas 2011, Peña el Gato – Rioja Alta, Spain *(*?)**

95-year old vines

Dense black red with thin purple rim (Syrah-like). Very youthful, concentrated, held back with sweet black fruit and pepper hints. The taste is concentrated and structured with elevated acidity and rather dry tannins, delivering a very young, fresh and assertive impression. Opens slowly to reveal a muted mix of black fruit and oak. This wine did not go through malo and was dosed with SO2 at about .3 - .4 malic acid.

Flor de Silos 2005, Cillar de Silos – Ribera del Duero, Spain *(+)**

Dense black red with purple rim. Very attractive, lifted dark fruits and berries together with well-married French oak adding very subtle wood spice. The palate offers concentration and youthful vibrancy and intensity. There are lasting ripe dark fruits and berries. Rather dry and astringent from both grape and barrel, particularly after several years in bottle.

Numanthia 2009, Bodega Numanthia – Toro, Spain **(+)**

Vines more than 50 years old

Dense black red with purple rim. The aroma exhibits particular ripeness, with black cherry and plum jam. There is substance and a warm lift along with well-matched oak. On the palate, the wine has a concentrated, layered and intense profile. Still very young and a touch raw, though this should resolve in time (skin tannin in Tinta de Toro is particularly high). The wine finishes with a lovely undercurrent of ripe dark fruit and a faint minty note.

Zinfandel Old Hill 2008, Ravenswood – Sonoma Valley, California *(*)**

Vines planted in 1870s – about ¾ Zin with co-fermented mixed blacks (Grenache, Grand Noir, Lenoire, Alicante Bouschet, Tannat, Petite Sirah, table grapes, etc.)

Nearly dense very dark red with slight purple rim. Very generous, warm nose with ripe cranberry, cherry and blueberry together with well-matched, barely visible oak (even though it spent 20 months in all-new French barrels). There is a soft attack and full center as well as a vivid acid backbone and firm, somewhat dry tannins which remain on the palate. This demands more time and will keep for the long term.

Fumé Blanc To Kalon Vineyard “I Block” 2010, Robert Mondavi Winery – Oakville/Napa, California *(+)**

Vines planted 1945 (65 years old at vintage)

Light straw gold. Complex mélange of citrus, white fruit, herbs and prominent nutty oak. Aromatically, there is notable substance. The attack is assertive and very dry, and the wine also seems generous but is muted. An imposing acid frame holds the palate in check. This remains a very distinctive wine of which only 130 cases were made. Combines high alcohol for Sauvignon Blanc (14.61%) with very low pH (3.11) and high acidity (7.8 g/l).

Command Shiraz 2009, Elderton – Barossa Valley, Australia *(*)**

Nearly dense very dark red with small purple rim. Warm, very ample aroma of expressive ripe, macerated cherry and plum. The palate is concentrated and structured, closing up at first from high acidity. Then flavors of very ripe dark fruits surface and remain in the aftertaste. This powerful, forceful wine has a great deal to offer and demands keeping.

Mourvedre 2010 “Old Garden” Single Vineyard, Hewitson – Rowland Flat, Barossa, Australia - **(*)**

Extraordinarily old vines planted in 1853

Moderately dense black red with purple rim. The nose offers a beautiful expression of ripe dark red fruit with a distinct inky overtone and shows restrained concentration. In the mouth, the concentration is immediately evident, and the wine is textured through the finish. There is rich dark fruit and terrific overall presence. Youthful and vital. Will keep very well. The wine of the tasting for me, proving perhaps that the older the vines, the better the wine (but in fact it's more complicated).

Grenache Tricentenary 2005, Yalumba – Barossa, Australia ****

Vines planted in 1899

Moderately dense very dark red. Ripe, slightly evolved dark red fruit. Warm and generous as well as faintly animal (a touch of Brett?). Warm but not excessive on the palate. Ripe dark fruit well-framed by defining acidity and moderate tannin still to be resolved. Certainly has plenty of flavor interest.