



Age shall not weary them

When it comes to vines, older can often mean better. So much so that there is now a society dedicated to recording and preserving all of California's historic vineyards. Adam Lechmere explains

IT'S A FACT that isn't always acknowledged, or understood, that many of the world's oldest vineyards are found in the New World. The magisterial 160-year-old Shiraz vines of Barossa, the ancient pre-phylloxera Malbecs in Argentina, old Cabernet in Napa – and the Zinfandel of Sonoma.

Vines become less profitable with age. A vine's ability to produce grapes in quantity declines as it gets older, and old vines need more looking after. Even if the grapes on old vines are smaller and more intensely flavoured than on younger vines, the industry economics means that as vines reach their

Photograph: Tempered-Light.com

Above: the old vines of the Pagani vineyard are registered with the Historic Vineyard Society and produce grapes for Ridge Vineyards, among others

third decade, what they produce in quality isn't offset, for most, by what they produce in quantity.

But fine winemakers prize old vineyards. Chester Osborn of d'Arenberg in Australia's McLaren Vale has even named one of his wines after a well-known ailment of old vines. The Dead Arm Shiraz is one of his most sought-after cuvées. Wherever you are, 'old vine' on the label is an attempt at indicating quality as common as 'reserve'.

Sonoma has some of the oldest vines in America, and it's here that a group of wine professionals – including Jancis Robinson MW from the UK – and keen amateurs formed the Historic Vineyard Society (HVS) in 2010, an organisation created to preserve not only Sonoma's old plantings but old vines across California. The HVS's mission statement is simple: to 'compile a comprehensive, fact-based and consistent directory of California's Heritage Vineyards'.

Growing support

The HVS has some 200 members to date. 'They are trickling in slowly but surely,' says David Gates, one of the six-strong project team that runs the HVS (his day job is head of viticulture at Ridge Vineyards). He admits it can be difficult assessing the age of a vineyard. 'It can be really hard to tell when it was planted. If it's more than 50 years old you get a good sense, but documentation is important.' Those vineyards that have had 'good families' running them are the easiest. 'They had a lot of pride in their work and they kept records.'

The HVS started in Sonoma, which explains why half the vineyards on its list are in that county – the oldest are concentrated in Alexander Valley, Dry Creek and Russian River Valley. It also lists 26 vineyards in Napa, 12 in Lodi and a handful in Paso Robles. The big producers of Lodi, Gates says, are resistant. 'They won't sign up, as wineries worry that it will drive up prices [of grapes].'

Membership of the HVS has no legal force – Gates says they 'can best be protected by educated consumers who value the intensity, depth and site expression of the wines, along with the unique role the vineyards have played in California's social and agricultural history'.

The first *vitis vinifera* – a mix of varieties known as Mission grapes, used for sacramental wine – were planted in Mexican-owned northern California by Franciscan missionaries in the 1770s. Mission wine would be the only wine produced in California until the 1820s, when an enterprising French cooper by the name (appropriately enough) of Jean-Louis Vignes planted vines outside a dusty little *pueblo* called Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles. Twenty years later, gold would be discovered here, and *The Oxford Companion to Wine* notes that the 'frenzied commercialism' that gripped the region during the gold rush – which propelled the



Above: the Monte Bello vineyard owned by Ridge. Left: David Gates, head of viticulture at Ridge and a member of the six-strong HVS project team

Above: the Old Hill Ranch vineyard was established in 1852 by William McPherson Hill. The HVS describes it as ‘possibly the oldest continuously farmed vineyard in California’

mushroom-like growth of that sleepy *pueblo* Los Angeles – fuelled the expansion of winemaking. It inspired pioneers such as the Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy de Mokesa, the founder of Buena Vista, who brought in cuttings from France and Spain, and planted some 300 varieties in Sonoma.

Those early vines were decimated by phylloxera, with the result that the oldest vines today date back to the replantings of the 1880s. Many of these vineyards are incredibly diverse. Zinfandel is a mainstay: vigneron recognised its adaptability early on but, as HVS board member Mike Dildine says: ‘In the late 19th century, vineyards were often planted as field blends, containing a hodge-podge of grape varieties, typically including Zinfandel, Grenache, Mourvedre, Carignane, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Alicante, Grand Noir, Tannat, French Colombard and many other miscellaneous and even unknown varieties.’

Old Hill Ranch, for example, was established in 1852 by William McPherson Hill, the first viticulturist to import non-Mission grapes into Sonoma. The HVS says Old Hill is ‘possibly the oldest continuously farmed vineyard in California’. The vineyard’s page on the HVS website is a distillation of old Sonoma. The varietal composition of this 4.9ha (hectare) parcel is 71% Zinfandel, 10% Grenache, 7% Alicante Bouchet, 2.5% Petite Sirah and Peloursin, 1.3% Grand Noir, 1.2% Tannat and

1% Mourvedre. Then, the HVS goes on, there are: ‘1% various table grapes, 5% Carignane, Syrah, Trousseau, French Colombard, Cinsaut, Charbono, Lenoir, Palomino, Chasselas, Tempranillo, Petit Bouchet, Muscat and various unknowns.’

Commercial value

To qualify for membership of the HVS, a vineyard must be ‘currently producing’ and, in California, the original plantings must date no later than 1960. At least a third of existing producing vines must be traceable back at least to that date. Note that the vineyard must be viable. Dildine clarifies this, saying: ‘Ultimately, vineyards can only be preserved if they are valued in the marketplace. HVS believes that historic vineyards make uniquely great wines and also represent an irreplaceable piece of California’s wine heritage.’

It is a small but significant point that Dildine mentions profit before heritage. These are not museum pieces. The 200-plus listed vineyards on the registry provide grapes for some of America’s most famous wines.

There is Monte Bello, for example, a 1.6ha parcel of Cabernet Sauvignon that is all that remains of a 1949 planting by a theologian from Stanford called William Short, subsequently bought by the group of families that founded Ridge Vineyards. ‘These

blocks,’ the HVS says with typical understatement, ‘were part of the 1971 Monte Bello that showed well in the 1976 Judgment of Paris.’

Or Pagani Ranch, whose 100-year-old Zinfandel goes into Seghesio’s rich wines; or the ancient Alegria Vineyards, mainly Zinfandel but with a rainbow of other varieties including Alicante Bouschet, Négrette, Trousseau Noir and Carignane.

The biographies accompanying each vineyard are evocative. You get a palpable sense of the pioneer grit behind these biblical lists of names and quill-pen transactions: Alegria ‘is part of the 1841 Sotoyome land grant from the Mexican governor of California to Henry Delano Fitch... who married Josefa Carrillo, sister-in-law of General Mariano Vallejo... Summers Brumfield sold 85 acres in 1895 to George Davis, who sold in 1896 to Elizabeth Moes... After she died in 1924, her daughter Ernestine and son-in-law Adolph DiNucci maintained the vineyard until 1943. The vineyard then passed through a series of owners...’

Most of the vineyards – the HVS estimates some 90% – are family owned, with a small percentage owned by corporates, such as the Gallo-owned Monte Rosso. This is 99% Zinfandel planted in the 1890s, with 1.2ha of Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1938, which vineyard manager Jake Terrell says is among the oldest in North America.

Photograph: Tempered-Light.com; Jamey Thomas

‘If a vineyard is more than 50 years old, the quality must be good, or it would have been pulled out’

David Gates

Significantly, the HVS doesn’t assess quality when it considers a vineyard for inclusion. Gates says: ‘The idea of the HVS is to ‘document and preserve – we don’t care about quality – although if a vineyard is more than 50 years old, the quality must be good, or it would have been pulled out’.

Is older always better?

But do old grapes necessarily make better wine? There are some who think not. ‘Sometimes it’s praised too highly,’ says Walter Schug, who founded Schug Carneros Estate Winery in 1980. ‘It’s got great value for consumers and increases the value of the wine, but you can rarely see the difference in taste.’

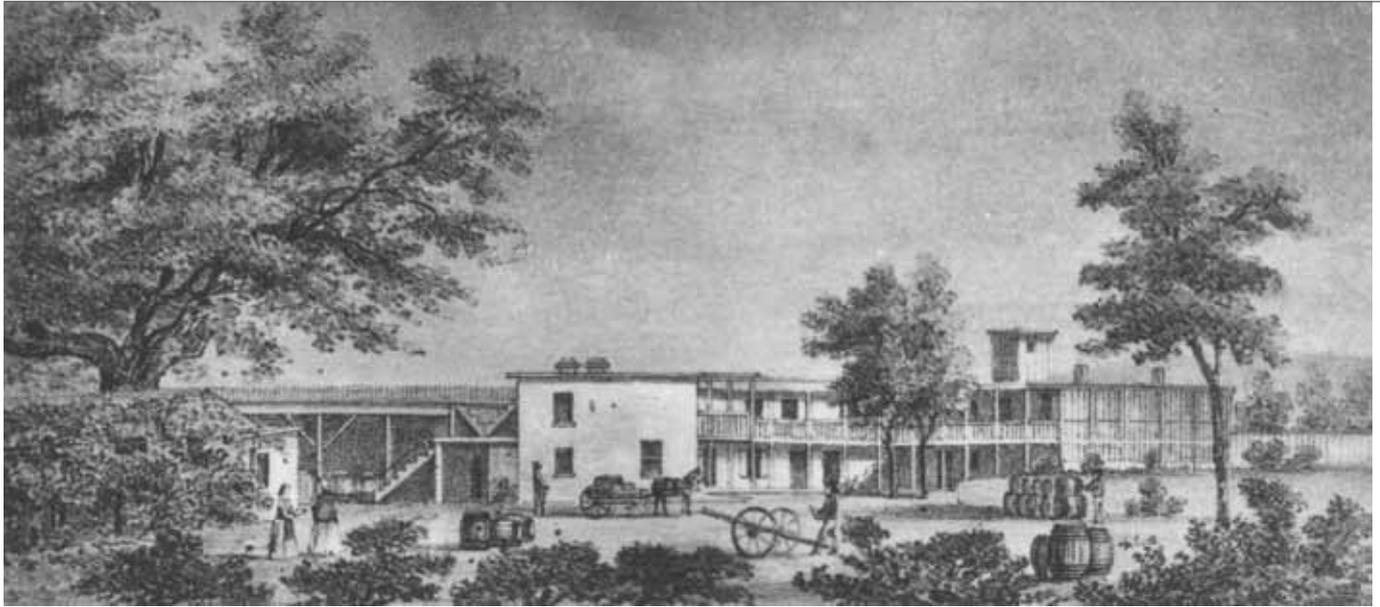
Schug’s point is that a 15-year-old vineyard with rigorously controlled yields will produce grapes of equal quality to an ancient vineyard whose yields are controlled by age. ‘At 15 years old, you can get as good a wine as at 70 years old.’

I put the question to the HVS board and received lengthy replies which can be summed up as: you don’t need old grapes to make great wine, but old grapes can add depth, complexity and site-specificity.

There are many reasons, the HVS says, why this happens. Old vines are hardier, less subject to weather fluctuations, their roots deeper, their ability to absorb nutrients better. This tends to result in more balanced grapes and, crucially, lower alcohol.

Mike Officer, who makes wine from 90-year-old vines at Carlisle Vineyards, considered the question. ‘Are old vines a prerequisite for making great wine? Obviously not. But when it comes to Zinfandel and the often-associated mixed blacks, it certainly seems to help. In several of our old-vine vineyards in which we have replaced dead or missing vines, we pick the replants separately from the old vines. We know that the replants are in a great terroir and ➤

OLD VINES



Notable vineyards on the HVS register

Deaver

Appellation Shenandoah Valley of California **First planted** 1855
Grape varieties 100% Mission
Producers supplied Swanson

Rinaldi

Appellation Fiddletown **Planted** 1865
Grapes 95% Zinfandel; also Mission, White Muscat, Black Muscat
Producers Rombauer, Easton Wines

Evangelho

Appellation Contra Costa **Planted** 1889
Grapes 35% Zinfandel, 20% Mourvèdre, 45% Carignane
Producers Cline, Neyers

Old Crane

Appellation St Helena **Planted** 1880s
Grapes 'European varieties'
Producers Robert Biale

Benito Dusi

Appellation Paso Robles **Planted** 1923
Grapes Mostly Zinfandel, with Carignane, Petite Sirah and Grenache
Producers Ridge, Dover Canyon

Lytton Springs

Appellation Dry Creek **Planted** 1901-1960 **Grapes** Zinfandel (85%), Petite Sirah, Carignane, Alicante and Mataro **Producers** Ridge

Monte Rosso

Appellation Sonoma Valley
Planted 1890 **Grapes** Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, mixed blacks
Producers Rancho Zabaco, Louis M Martini, Robert Biale, Bedrock Wine Co, Amapola Creek, Rosenblum, Charter Oak, M Squared

Pagani

Appellation Sonoma Valley
Planted 1884-1922 **Grapes** Zinfandel, Alicante Bouschet, Petite Sirah, Sauvignon Vert, Carignane, Lenoir
Producers Seghesio, Ridge, Bedrock Wine Co, Robert Biale, Wellington, Berthoud, Carlisle

Old Hill

Appellation Sonoma Valley
Planted 1885 **Grapes** Zinfandel (71%), Grenache, Alicante Bouchet, Petite Sirah, Peloursin, Grand Noir, Tannat, Mourvedre, various table grapes, Carignane, Syrah, Trousseau, French Colombard, Cinsaut, Charbono, Lenoir, Palomino, Chasselas, Tempranillo, Petit Bouchet, Muscat and various unknowns **Producers** Bucklin, Ravenswood

Papera

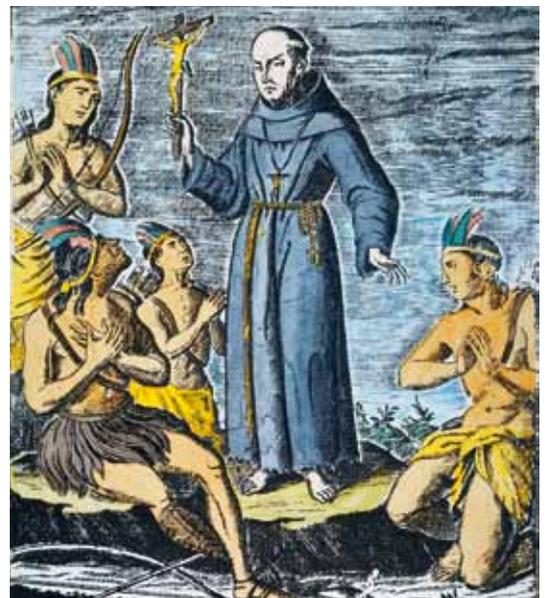
Appellation Russian River Valley
First planted 1934 **Grapes** 88% Zinfandel, 10% Carignane, 2% other mixed blacks **Producers** Williams Selyem, Novy Family Wines, Bedrock Wine Co, Carlisle

Monte Bello

Appellation Santa Cruz Mountains
Planted 1949 **Grapes** Cabernet Sauvignon **Producers** Ridge

Whitton

Appellation Alexander Valley
First planted 1882-1891
Grape varieties Zinfandel (60%), Carignane, Petite Sirah, others including Syrah, Grenache and Alicante Bouschet
Producers Ridge



Above: Father Antonio Margil de Jesus, the founder of missions in Texas. Mission wine was the only wine produced in California until the 1820s saw the arrival of talented French cooper Jean-Louis Vignes, whose wine establishment is depicted, top, in a picture from 1831

vigorously farmed. Yet, the juice chemistry is completely different from the old vines. Compared to the juice from the young vines, the old-vine fruit is simply much better balanced in terms of acids, sugars, potassium and nutrients, resulting in a more complete and harmonious wine. The interesting question is at what age will the replants produce wine equal to the old vines? Ten years? 20? 50? Hopefully I'll find out in my lifetime.'

The answer, as with so many aspects of wine, lies in experimentation and accumulation of knowledge over generations. What is certain, in a region where the average age of a vine is 17 years, is that vineyards that have survived a century and more should be respected. As Walter Schug says, there is nothing so noble as an old vine. 'I walk past an ancient vineyard every day. It's wonderful to see those old trunks.' **D**

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