



MAY
2021

CHEVALIER

OLD
VINES

A GRAPEVINE becomes fully productive about five to ten years after planting, but yields typically start to decrease at around twenty-five to thirty years of age.

Given that yield usually correlates directly with profit, farmers sometimes choose to tear out a vine or an entire parcel as its output declines. In fact, this practice—planting a vineyard, spurring it to eke out every drop it can muster, then uprooting it after twenty-odd years, only to replant and repeat the cycle—has often been abused by commercially oriented producers interested solely in quantity and, by extension, profit.

However, in the world of *fine* wine, quality matters just as much as quantity, if not more. Aging vineyards are prized for the quality of the fruit they produce, and artisanal growers are more accepting of low yields, believing the tradeoff is worthwhile. Furthermore, they tend to treat their vineyards and soil much more wholesomely than do commercial growers, and

VIEILLES VIGNES

their vines consequently stay healthy—and sufficiently productive—for many more years.

While older vines bear less fruit, what they do produce tends to be more concentrated, as if the must had been boiled down for a greater proportion of sugars, acids, phenols, minerals, and volatile aroma compounds. We can often taste the difference: such wines are prized for their richness, depth of flavor, structure, and dry extract.



Old vine in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. © GAIL SKOFF

With each passing year, a vine's root system plunges deeper and deeper into the soil. These roots, which can extend as far as thirty feet below the surface, are responsible for water and nutrient intake, so having a complex and well-developed root system is absolutely crucial. Older vines are therefore better able to withstand extreme weather conditions such as drought, an increasingly important advantage with the reality of climate change. Vignerons value the dependable quality of these wines vintage after vintage, cherishing their excellent balance in good and bad years alike.

Being deeply rooted in the soil also appears to provide a more genuine expression of terroir. Whereas wines from young vines can be fruity, with strong varietal character, old vines deliver more minerality, complexity, and a stronger sense of place. It's as if those deep roots were capturing the essence of the soil itself, sucking up minerals from the bedrock and delivering them to the bottle. If the science does not entirely back up this notion, when it comes to wine, tasting is believing.

Old vines are simply fascinating: consider that the vineyards responsible for this month's Club shipment were planted long before most of us were even born. They lived through wars and pandemics, growing slowly and steadily to become the thick, gnarled trunks we celebrate today. And after so much time, they still do their job with diligence and humility, providing us with these fabulous nectars of unrivaled soul and vitality. May they stand among us for many more years to come.

—ANTHONY LYNCH



Thierry Germain's ancient Cabernet Franc
© ANTHONY LYNCH

2018 SAUMUR *BLANC* “L'INSOLITE”

◆ THIERRY GERMAIN \$45

FROM ANCIENT VINES planted in chalky soils littered with hunks of flint (silex), Insolite is a sleek, spirited Chenin, bursting with energy and cushioned by a bit of baby fat. If it were Burgundy, you might call it Puligny-esque. Thierry's whites are among the very best from the Saumur appellation,



one with a noble history of producing age-worthy white wine of serious pedigree. His devotion to biodynamic farming is evidenced by his wines' purity and freshness, and his low-intervention cellar practices accentuate the minerality of vines deeply rooted in great terroir. Bracing yet succulent, this stellar Chenin is perfect now and should be enjoyed over the next few years.

2017 POUILLY-FUISSÉ “LA CROIX VIEILLES VIGNES”

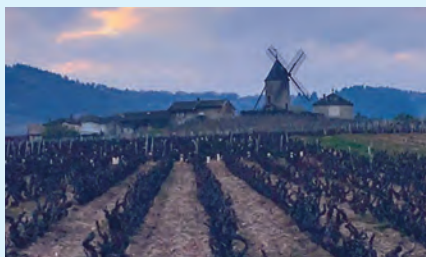
◆ DOMAINE ROBERT-DENOGENT \$60

YOUNG BROTHERS Antoine and Nico at Robert-Denogent are stars in the Maconnais, and rightfully so: they farm incredibly old vines in top terroirs around Pouilly-Fuissé, allowing their vineyards to shine through organic farming and all-natural vinifications. They have recently begun a conversion to biodynamics, and are moving toward using larger barrels and more neutral vessels such as concrete to reduce oak influence. The cuvée La Croix is a bit of an anomaly: the soil of dark, flaky schist is without equal in all of Burgundy, a region dominated by limestone. A long *élevage* allows the wine to stabilize naturally without the need for filtration, preserving its luscious flesh. Its wiry core and stimulating saline finish perfectly counterbalance layers of dense, fleshy fruit.



2018 MOULIN-À-VENT “VIEILLES VIGNES”

◆ DOMAINE DIOCHON \$27



IN OUR NOVEMBER 1984 NEWSLETTER, Kermit wrote, “There was only one cask of old vines and Diochon was going to blend it in to add substance and character to his other casks. I had to pay a premium to obtain that one cask pure and unblended.” Today, the wine is made from vines planted in 1920, 1950, and the 1960s. Not much else

has changed with respect to this Moulin-à-Vent, the Beaujolais *cru* known for producing some of the region’s most age-worthy wines. Bernard Diochon, who succeeded his father in 1967, once said, “I like tannic wines without heaviness; with fruit and floral aromas. I don’t like weighty wines with hard tannins.” Although Bernard has been succeeded by Thomas Patenôtre, the wine remains true to that sentiment. It contains some tannin—it wouldn’t be young Moulin-à-Vent if it didn’t—but it is beautifully integrated, and the wine is ready to drink now if given a little time to breathe. Soulful and savory, with notes of cherries, iron, and smoke, this is *cru* Beaujolais built to last.



2018 PAYS D’OC “CUVÉE LES VIEILLES VIGNES DE MOURVÈDRE” ◆ CHÂTEAU LA ROQUE \$27

AROUND THE LANGUEDOC’S imposing vertical escarpment known as the Pic Saint Loup, abundant limestone litters the vineyard floor, balmy *garrigue* fragrances waft through the dry Mediterranean air, and the nearby mountains bring cool breezes that temper the at times stifling meridional heat. Mourvèdre thrives in these conditions, so it’s no surprise that La Roque’s old-vine bottling is consistently one of the finest values we import from any region. Rugged as the landscape from which it is born, this chewy red offers aromas of ripe black cherry and wild brush that beg for something hearty, grilled, and smothered with garlic and herbs. Mourvèdre of this breed is no stranger to aging, so put a few more bottles aside and see what happens.



2017 ETNA ROSSO “CRASÀ CONTRADA”

◆ VIGNETI VECCHIO \$58



YOU’LL FIND WHIFFS of both Burgundy and Barolo in this single-vineyard bottling from vines planted in 1930, but it is unmistakably Etna: smoky and suave, with radiant cherry fruit and gripping tannins fine as ash. While Carmelo Vecchio and Rosa La Guzza, proprietors of Vigneti Vecchio, are relatively new on the scene, they follow time-honored practices such as co-fermenting their Nerello Mascalese with a smattering of other indigenous varieties and bottling unfiltered. This is a statement in power and finesse from Europe’s most active volcano.

2012 TAURASI “LARGO MADAMA”

◆ TERRE DEL VESCOVO \$42

IN THE HEART OF IRPINIA, the mountainous part of the Campania region inland of Napoli, the noble Aglianico grape produces one of southern Italy’s most storied wines. Giuseppa Molettieri runs her family’s small estate, Terre del Vescovo, according to traditional methods learned from her father, Giovanni, one of the first producers to bottle wine in their village of Montemarano. She farms her vines sustainably and ages her wines for several years in large casks, allowing Aglianico’s firm tannins to soften gradually with time.

Planted in 1952, the Largo Madama parcel sits at high altitude and has precious water reserves in the subsoil—keys to producing fresh, balanced wines in this southern climate. Her just-released 2012 is intensely fragrant, evoking a myriad of spices, cherry, and licorice along with a nostalgic scent that recalls flipping through the pages of an old leatherbound book. A wine of imperial structure, built around a backbone of lively acidity and dense, chalky tannins, her Taurasi is ready to drink now but will live for many, many years.





<p>2018 Saumur Blanc "L'Insolite"</p> <p><i>Thierry Germain</i></p> <p>LOIRE</p>	<p>Chenin Blanc</p>	<p>90-year-old vines</p> <p>Silex, clay, red limestone, sandstone</p>	<p>Serve <i>cold</i> 48–52° F</p> <p>Decant optional</p>	<p>Pineapple, lime, pear, wet stone</p> <p>Bracing, mineral, succulent, mouthwatering</p>	<p>Drink now through 2025</p>
<p>2017 Pouilly-Fuissé "La Croix Vieilles Vignes"</p> <p><i>Domaine Robert-Denogent</i></p> <p>BURGUNDY</p>	<p>Chardonnay</p>	<p>79-year-old vines</p> <p>Schist</p>	<p>Serve <i>cold</i> 50–54° F</p> <p>Decant optional</p>	<p>Yellow peach, acacia, salted butter</p> <p>Fleshy, rich, wiry, saline</p>	<p>Drink now through 2030</p>
<p>2018 Moulin-à-Vent "Vieilles Vignes"</p> <p><i>Domaine Diochon</i></p> <p>BEAUJOLAIS</p>	<p>Gamay</p>	<p>50- to 100-year- old vines</p> <p>Pink granite, sandstone, with a manganese- rich subsoil</p>	<p>Serve <i>cool</i> 56–60° F</p> <p>Decant optional</p>	<p>Raspberry, violets, iron, ripe cherry</p> <p>Juicy, bright, mouth-filling, exuberant</p>	<p>Drink now through 2028</p>
<p>2018 Pays d'Oc "Cuvée Les Vieilles Vignes de Mourvèdre"</p> <p><i>Château La Roque</i></p> <p>LANGUEDOC</p>	<p>70% Mourvèdre, 20% Syrah, 10% Grenache</p>	<p>50- to 60-year- old vines</p> <p>Clay, limestone scree</p>	<p>Serve <i>slightly cool</i> 58–62° F</p> <p>Decant optional</p>	<p>Black cherry, <i>garrigue</i> herbs, game</p> <p>Chewy, savory, deep, stony</p>	<p>Drink now through 2030</p>
<p>2017 Etna Rosso "Crasà Contrada"</p> <p><i>Vigneti Vecchio</i></p> <p>SICILY</p>	<p>90% Nerello Mascalese, 10% indigenous varieties (Inzolia, Grecanico, Catarratto)</p>	<p>Vines planted in 1930</p> <p>Volcanic</p>	<p>Serve <i>slightly cool</i> 58–62° F</p> <p>Decant recommended</p>	<p>Smoke, pepper, brandied cherries</p> <p>Bold, grippy, concentrated</p>	<p>Drink now through 2028</p>
<p>2012 Taurasi "Largo Madama"</p> <p><i>Terre del Vescovo</i></p> <p>CAMPANIA</p>	<p>Aglianico</p>	<p>Vines planted in 1952</p> <p>Clay, limestone</p>	<p>Serve <i>slightly cool</i> 60–64° F</p> <p>Decant recommended</p>	<p>Leather, spices, licorice, faded flowers</p> <p>Profound, regal, dense, chalky</p>	<p>Drink now through 2035</p>

far left top: © GAIL SKOFF

far left bottom: © DOMAINE ROBERT-DENOGENT

middle top: © ANTHONY LYNCH

middle bottom: © CHÂTEAU LA ROQUE

near left top: © VIGNETI VECCHIO

near left bottom: © ANTHONY LYNCH

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If anybody knows a thing about old vines, it's Thierry Germain. The Loire vigneron-cum-philosopher farms numerous ancient parcels, the oldest of which dates back to 1904. We asked Thierry about his career's experience working with old vines, and he generously shared some wisdom.

KLWM: How do old vines behave relative to young vines?

TG: In essence, as it ages, the vine gains in wisdom and affirms its own identity. We must therefore act accordingly and ask ourselves the right questions at every stage of its development so as not to harm it. A young vine will be more indulgent of the vigneron's mistakes, compared to a much more sensitive older vine.

The same is true during vinification. We cannot hurry the wines. That is why we practice infusions with only light pumpovers to harness the finesse expressed by the terroir.

With whites, the principal objective working with old vines is to let things take their time—pressing the grapes and everything that follows.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with old vines?

For us, there are no disadvantages to working with old vines. Some might mention the lower yields, but for us this is largely compensated by the balance and complexity of the fruit. The yields may be lower, but this allows us to better manage things to work even more precisely.

What effect does vine age have on the resulting wine?

Old vines undeniably give wines that are better balanced, with more brightness and salinity. We obtain much greater finesse, purity, and complexity in these wines. The other undeniable effect is that the identity of the terroir takes on a new dimension.

Any further thoughts on the subject?

Young vines are comparable to a human being in its youth—exuberant, but lacking experience. Old vines resemble a human being in its very prime—less dynamic, but with much more knowledge, experience, and wisdom. With young vines, the work required to obtain balance is more intense. With old vines, balance is much easier to attain because over the course of 50 or 100 years, a vine has learned to interact with its terroir and is capable of expressing its full spirit. This is why it is so exciting for us to prune our old vines. When facing one, we tend to go where the vine takes us. When we prune old vines, we understand the full scope of our work with regards to what we can contribute to the plant.