

Better red than dead

THE AUSTRALIAN

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MARCH 8TH 2010

A LITTLE taste of history. The year is 1850. Convicts are still arriving on our shores from mother England, the Gold Rush is yet to break and Australia is 50 odd years from Federation.

In that same year a 6.5ha parcel of vines, planted around Siegersdorf in the Barossa Valley is flourishing with young grenache, semillon and shiraz vines just beginning their long working lives. Many seasons, and winemakers, have come and gone but these same vines still stand proud at over 150 years of age and nearly 2m tall. They may not quite be the oldest vines in the Barossa but, as far as grenache goes, there is no older quality vineyard in the world today, the great regions of Spain and France included.



Today these 150-year-old grenache, semillon and shiraz vines are owned by the Cirillo family, and paternally tended by eighth-generation winemaker Marco Cirillo. To say they get the Rolls Royce treatment is somewhat of an understatement; lavish attention is heaped on each and every vine.

The vineyard is a piece of history and treated as such with Marco alone tasked with keeping the vines fighting fit for vintages to come. He dare not lose one to an inexperienced or careless hand and prefers to work the hours himself rather than risk damaging his treasures. It is a strategy that certainly pays off. While his 2009 Barossa Semillon is a deliciously crisp, low alcohol wine with finely balanced, vibrant fruit and acidity, it is the old vine 2006 Grenache that sits as one of the finest grenaches I have tasted, with its long, complex, luxurious palate demanding a second bottle. A truly serious and authentic grenache, it will comfortably live 15 years or more.

Old vine treasures such as these, patches of which are spotted around our country, have not always been treasured. As recently as 1985, when a grape glut similar to the one we are experiencing today was ravaging the local industry, a vine-pull scheme was instigated to remove excess productive vines. Many hectares of seriously old vines were uprooted, their owners mistakenly thinking that the time for these old workhorses had passed. How wrong they were, with the quality of wines made from our reserves of ancient vines adored globally.

The real key to old vines is their deep-root systems, which dive deep into the surrounding soil tapping water and nutrients, even in the harshest of environments. Nowhere is this clearer than in poor vintages where young vines will struggle without the resources for a successful season. While the young vines literally wilt under pressure, the old hands stride on, unperturbed. Old vines also are significantly less productive, which gives the prized fruit greater depth and concentration. On the flip side, these grand old dames require great care to continue producing exceptional fruit otherwise they will simply curl up and die.

In France, Italy and Spain, there has been another enemy for the old vines: the phylloxera vastatrix, a small mite that laid waste to many great vineyards in the late 18th century. To this day its march continues; it infiltrated parts of the Yarra Valley in 2006. But many Australian regions are, as yet, unscathed, leaving some great old stocks in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales, a lot of which were planted in the 19th century. There is no other country that can match this astounding legacy, which has been handed down through generations. And our Australian vignerons can, and regularly do, create true masterpieces in a bottle.

Mount Pleasant Old Paddock & Old Hill Shiraz 2005, \$50

This Hunter Valley shiraz is a real crowd-pleaser, being denser than the usual medium-bodied Hunter style. It is also a beautifully weighted wine with dark cherry, vanilla oak and some local earthy notes supported by a rich but approachable core of fruit finely balanced with silky tannins. It deserves at least 10 years in a cellar to show its best, and most likely will live another decade or more.

Cirillo 1850 Grenache 2006, \$50

A momentous Australian grenache that bursts with Barossa personality, this wine radiates with dark cherry, raspberry fruit lifted by savoury herbal, earthy nuances. Generous yet firm it is a grand wine that slowly unfurls and finishes with outstanding length. Benchmark Australian grenache and a must-have for lovers of this varietal.

Kaesler Old Bastard Shiraz 2007, \$150 plus

The Old Bastard comes from a single block of vines planted in 1893 and is a turbo-charged, hearty style, much like the man behind it, with layers of dark plum and chocolate fruit underpinned by a core of fine-grained tannins. Full-bodied and decadent it will drink well for a decade.

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