



YOUNG WINEMAKERS



OLD VINES

These innovative California vintners are crafting groundbreaking wines from ancient vineyards >>>

BY VIRGINIE BOONE / PHOTOS ALANNA HALE

There's something sexy about old vines.

It may be the gnarled curves of their trunks, the historic events they've witnessed or the sheer quality of their limited fruit, but winemakers have long sought out old vines.

In California, storied producers like Bonny Doon, Ravenswood, Ridge, Rosenblum, Turley and Williams Selyem have long sought to keep old vines in the ground. Bedrock Wine Co. and Carlisle Winery & Vineyards are more recent additions to this group.

These wineries also helped define the old-vine category as Zinfandel, Petite Sirah or Mixed Blacks—a field blend including these and such long-forgotten varieties as Alicante Bouschet and Palomino (a white), typically planted by Italian immigrants around the turn of the 20th century.

Many of these original plantings succumbed to disease over the years, while many were replanted to more profitable varieties.

Today, a new generation of winemakers is changing the perception of old vines, working with everything from Chardonnay to Chenin Blanc and Cinsault.

They include people like Joel Peterson of Ravenswood, who helped save a handful of old-vine Zinfandel vineyards by using them in single-vineyard Ravenswood wines, and his son, Morgan Twain-Peterson, of Bedrock.

The Petersons and others support a preservation initiative called the Historic Vineyard Society. The aim is to inventory existing old vines and get their fruit into the hands of winemakers who care.

The following four winemakers are driven by many things: a sense of California history, of why things were planted and survived, and most of all, the complexity of flavor bursting from these vines.





Leo Hansen

Leo Steen Wines

Hansen grew up in Denmark, and then worked his way into the restaurant world, serving as wine director at the Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg through the early 2000s.

Steen is a South African name for Chenin Blanc, and Chenin is what he wanted to make.

"I was looking to do something that can maintain acidity in this climate, a fresh summer wine."

Chenin was the first goal, but old vines figured prominently as well.

"In California, vineyards need time to get over their teenage years, but also so as not to be overly productive," says Hansen.

The first vintage of Leo Steen Chenin Blanc, in 2006, came from a tiny dry-farmed plot in Dry Creek Valley called Saini Farms, which was planted in 1981. Hidden in a gravel bed between acres of Zinfandel, the Chenin had been sold for years to make sparkling wine and for blending.

When Hansen first came around in 2005, there were eight acres of Chenin. Today, there are only two. He ferments the grapes in steel fairly cold to retain freshness, then lets it mature awhile in neutral oak.

Hansen is working with a second Chenin Blanc vineyard in Santa Ynez called the Jurassic Park Vineyard, planted in sandy, calcareous soils, and also makes a wine he calls Calpella Red from 60-year-old Carignan and Petite Sirah grown in Mendocino's Testa Vineyard.

"The old Carignan vines are just naturally balanced—the things people were doing were more natural for the area," he says.

Recommended Wine

90 Leo Steen 2011 Saini Farms Chenin Blanc (Dry Creek Valley). This is a dry, floral white, with textured character and nuanced acidity that's garnished with layers of apple, herb and pear. —V.B.

abv: 13.5% Price: \$18



Tracey (& Jared) Brandt

Donkey & Goat

Tracey (pictured) and her husband, Jared, trained in France before setting up shop in Berkeley to make California wines. They craft numerous selections, mostly Rhône-inspired, plus popular *pétillant naturel* from old Chardonnay vines.

"The thing old vines mean to me more than anything else is balance," Jared says. "The young vines throw out too much fruit."

Complexity is key, too. He uses a Grenache Gris vineyard in Mendocino as an example.

"There's a Syrah section next to it where I counted 22 varieties," he says. "You often have things intermixed. That adds to the complexity."

"With old vines you get a more complete representation of place," Tracey adds. "Younger vines seem to shout their varietal first; old vines first speak of place."

The Brandts like the unusual, and when they can't find old plantings of it, they plant their own, including Clairette (a white Rhône variety) and Mourvèdre, both of which they've recently planted in El Dorado County. There, as well as in Mendocino County, they also source 60-year-old Carignan, 30-year-old Mourvèdre and 40-year-old Syrah.

Jared says that in California, vineyards tend to be ripped out too quickly, trading maturity to chase trends. The following that he and others are generating for old-vine wines may help change that.

"There's a new group of consumers that are interested in almost anything. They're not prejudiced about what should be where."

Recommended Wine

97 Donkey & Goat 2010 Fe-naughty Vineyard Syrah (El Dorado). This complex wine sings of black pepper and garrigue, fleshy in just-ripe cherry, leather and dark plum.

Cellar Selection. —V.B.
abv: 14.1% Price: \$35

Chris Brockway

Broc Cellars

Brockway's love affair with old vines started in 2009 with a four-acre block of Carignan from Alexander Valley that was over 100 years old, grapes that used to go to Ridge Vineyards's Advanced Tasting Program.

As with many older vines, there's no record of when the vines were planted, but there's an 1879 photo of the block in the Cloverdale Library.

Now, as then, the Carignan vines are head-trained, dry-farmed bushes planted on their own roots. Anything else that was old and had been growing nearby has since been torn out and replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel or Merlot.

Brockway's preference for fun wines with moderate alcohol levels led him to Solano County Green Valley and a grower who thought he had some Gamay, planted in 1948.

"And I was like, 'They had Gamay back then?'" Brockway says. "Pretty soon, we came to realize it was Valdiguié."

Brockway describes the vines as borderline untended: untrellised, untrained, overgrown and blissfully self-regulating.

Though through the years vintners chose more popular, and fewer, varieties in favor of the grapes grown in past, "there was a reason some of that older stuff was planted," Brockway says. "Now, there are more obscure varieties that seem better suited to the climate."

That includes Picpoul, a white grape that Brockway sources from Paso Robles, and Cunoise, which he makes as a lower-alcohol red.

Recommended Wine

90 **Broc Cellars 2012 Valdiguié (Solano County Green Valley).** This light, ethereal wine—akin to Gamay Noir—is made in an easy-to-consume style, with beautiful aromatics like just-ripe cherries. Juicy and soft, the wine is balanced and appealing. —V.B.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$24



Jillian Johnson

Onesta Wines

Johnson first came across Lodi old-vine Cinsault in 2004 while working with Randall Grahm at Bonny Doon. Together, they picked 130-year-old-plus Bechthold Vineyard Cinsault for the Vin Gris de Cigare rosé.

"I didn't even know the age of the vines back then," Johnson says. "It was just these gigantic berries, and it made killer rosé. It had this unique, aromatic rhubarb character I didn't see in anything else."

But the age matters.

"They have time under their belt to get that natural balance," she says. "You don't have to drop crop as much, they had to survive, their roots had to go deep to access more nutrients, more minerals, water."

In 2009, Johnson made her first solo wine from Bechthold fruit under the Phoenix Ranch label, buying four tons of grapes to make a rosé and a red wine. She has since started her own label, Onesta Wines.

Her first solo focus? "Cinsault was top of the list, from that vineyard. Now, everybody wants some."

"I have to sell it for almost \$30 a bottle to make it happen," she continues. "I'm hoping that a good wine from 130-year-old vines is enough for people to spend that much."

Johnson continues to look for old vineyards, poking around Mendocino to search out Grenache and Mourvèdre plantings.

"I use the vineyard as the biggest selling point with people that are in the know about wine," she says. "One hundred and thirty years old is really old for any industry—it does resonate."

Recommended Wine

92 **Onesta 2012 Bechthold Vineyard Rosé (Lodi).** Orange-pink in hue, this beauty shares notes of crushed strawberry that are perfectly in balance with its dry, elegant style. —V.B.
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$18

