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An Interview with Mike Officer: Old Vines, Zinfandel and California's Viticultural Heritage



[Guest Blogger](#) 27 Apr 2011 5:48 PM

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The Guild of Sommeliers is proud to introduce a new monthly feature in our blog section, a winemaker "Q & A". Every month, we will conduct a new winemaker interview and present new perspectives on various aspects of viticulture and wine production, and we hope to involve our membership by soliciting a certain number of questions in advance on the site. Each winemaker will also have the opportunity to follow and respond to your thoughts in the comments section of this blog. We welcome any feedback, and hope you enjoy the new addition to our stable of blogs.

This month, we are featuring Mike Officer, Owner and Winemaker of Carlisle Winery & Vineyards, one of California's premier producers of Old Vine Zinfandel, Syrah, and more. Mike is passionately committed to the preservation of old vine sources in Sonoma County, and is a founding member of the Historic Vineyard Society. We recently sat down with Mike to talk about the value of these historic vines.

What does the term "Old Vines" mean to you? How do you define it?

An excellent question and one in which I have been frequently asked! In the past, I used to borrow from Justice Stewart's oft-quoted line and reply, "It's like pornography. I know old vines when I see them." But as one of the founders of the Historical Vineyard Society (HVS), playing it so loopy-goopy was no longer sufficient. The definition of "old vine" had to be addressed. After much debate, HVS agreed that any vineyard or block in which one third or more of the vines are at least 50 years old qualifies as "old vine".

In your opinion, does the term "Old Vine" retain any meaning for the average wine drinker?

I suspect many consumers equate the phrase with higher quality.

What is the Historic Vineyard Society?

The Historic Vineyard Society (HVS) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, educational organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of California's historical, old-vine vineyards. These vineyards represent our viticultural heritage. They are national treasures. Yet, unfortunately, too many of these vineyards have been ripped out, either for development or to be replanted to more fashionable varieties. HVS hopes that by highlighting these magnificent and endangered vineyards, they will live on to produce for future generations.

The Historical Vineyard Society was founded by David Gates, vice-president/viticulturist of Ridge Winery, Morgan Twain-Peterson, owner/winemaker of Bedrock Wine Company, Tegan Passalacqua, winegrower/viticulturist of Turley Wine Cellars, Mike Dildine, consumer and old-vine advocate, and me. Jancis Robinson is on our board and serves as an advisor.

Why start a new organization? Doesn't old-vine Zinfandel fall under Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP)?

There are two reasons for HVS being independent from ZAP. One, not all old-vine vineyards are Zinfandel and two, not all ZAP member wineries have old-vine vineyards. Nevertheless, ZAP has been very supportive of our organization and efforts.

Has the society considered advocating for a classification and protection system, such as the new Barossa Old Vine Charter in Australia?

Absolutely! We have exchanged e-mails with Sam Holmes, CEO of the Barossa Grape & Wine Association, regarding the Barossa Old Vine Charter. Our goals are very closely aligned.

What is the effect of vine age on the ripening process?

Older vines typically ripen a little bit later than younger vines but there are other factors, such as disease level and crop level, which figure much more prominently into the ripening process.

What is the effect of vine age on the character of the finished wine?

There seems to be two camps. One camp says old vines produce superior wine; the other says vine age doesn't matter. As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. I think what old vines bring to the table is better balance. In vineyards with young vines and old, we often pick and ferment the two separately. The juice chemistry of the two lots can be amazingly different. The old vines typically show much lower potassium, higher acidity, a better ratio of tartaric to malic, and lower pH. It all adds up to something a little more special in the bottle.

How do you manage yield with old vines?

Generally, there's very little yield management needed in an old-vine vineyard. Once the vines are old enough, they pretty much become self-regulating. Nevertheless, as a grower, one has to consider the timing of the growing season, disease pressure, the vineyard's history and location, and even the individual vine and variety. Any of these considerations may lead to a reduction in yield. For example, we typically remove wings and any clusters causing congestion to minimize Botrytis pressure. Also, in some years, old vines of some varieties such as Alicante Bouschet and Grand Noir can set huge amounts of fruit, up to four clusters per cane! We'll take those back to two clusters per cane to ensure they ripen before winter rains.

What old-vine vineyards do you currently work with?

I feel very fortunate, even privileged, to be working with some of the finest old-vine vineyards in the state. In Dry Creek Valley, we work with Ray Teldeschi Ranch, planted c. 1885, and Rich Mounts Ranch, planted c. 1950. In the Russian River Valley, we have our own vineyard, Carlisle Vineyard, planted in 1927. Additionally, we lease and farm seven acres of Montafi Ranch, planted 1926, and Two Acres, a mostly Mourvèdre planting from 1910. Also in the Russian River Valley, we purchase fruit from Papera Ranch, planted 1934, Saitone Ranch, planted 1895, Dommen Ranch, planted in the 1930s, Fanucchi Wood Road Vineyard, planted c. 1906, and Martinelli Road Vineyard, planted c. 1880.

In Sonoma Valley, we source fruit from Bedrock Vineyard, planted 1888, Monte Rosso Vineyard, planted 1886, Rossi Ranch, planted 1910, and Pagani Ranch, planted 1890. While it just misses the northern Sonoma Valley AVA boundary by 100 yards or so, we've also added Rowe Vineyard this year. Rowe was planted c. 1906.

Are all of these vineyards dry-farmed?

Most of them are indeed dry farmed. Some have drip lines but with emitters only at positions where replants are being established (to replace dead or missing vines). Once the new vine is sufficiently hardy, the water can be cut off. Papera Ranch has the Rolls Royce setup. In each row there are two drip lines controlled independently of one another. One is for watering any replants; the other line is for the old vines. The lines for the old vines may or may not be used during the growing season. If they are, it's typically only once or twice, just to give the vines a drink of water before a significant heat wave and hopefully minimize premature fruit dehydration.

What rootstocks are commonly found in turn-of-the-century vineyards?

*The vast majority of old-vine vineyards are on *Vitis rupestris*, commonly known as St. George, a native grape of southern and western United States. *Vitis aestivalis*, also known as Lenoir, was occasionally used as a rootstock in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as *Vitis californica* and *Vitis arizonica*.*

Is there any disease in these historic vineyards? What effect does vine age have on disease resistance?

*Disease in old-vine vineyards? Unfortunately, most often yes. Think of an old-vine vineyard as a geriatric ward in which each vine is a patient with its own particular ailments and needs. Although there are a multitude of grape vine diseases (bacterial, fungal, viral, nutritional), most commonly we see fanleaf, leafroll, and canker/dieback diseases such as *Eutypa*. Fortunately, and this is in part how these vineyards have survived for so long, St. George rootstock is quite hardy. It is resistant to *Phylloxera* and fairly tolerant of many viruses. Of course, there's also the scion (what's grafted on to the rootstock) to consider. Some varieties, such as Zinfandel, seem more tolerant of disease. Others, like Petite Sirah and Alicante Bouschet, are much more susceptible.*

What distinct varieties have you identified in the Carlisle Vineyard?

When we purchased Carlisle Vineyard (formerly known as Pelletti Ranch) in 1998, I knew there were the usual suspects (Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, Grand Noir, Carignane, Syrah) interplanted amongst the Zinfandel. But upon closer examination, we have identified the following 28 varieties to date:

*Zinfandel
 Syrah
 Petite Sirah
 Peloursin
 Alicante Bouschet
 Grand Noir
 Petit Bouschet
 Carignane
 Tempranillo
 Merlot
 Cabernet Sauvignon
 Mission (aka Criolla Chica)
 Criolla Mediana
 Abouriou (aka Early Burgundy)
 Blue Portuguese
 Mourvèdre
 Aubun
 Trousseau noir
 Trousseau gris
 Ribier
 Flame Tokay
 Clairette Blanche
 Chenin Blanc
 Albillo Mayor
 Palomino
 Chasselas
 Muscadelle
 Colombard*

*There are also at least three different Muscats, one black and two white, something very Refosco-ish, several different *Vitis labrusca* varieties, and another dozen or so vinifera varieties we have yet to identify. We will be taking tissue samples this growing season to identify the remaining unknown varieties. We're excited to see what we discover!*

Describe a classic selection of "mixed blacks".

A classic mixed black selection would depend on the location of the vineyard. In warmer areas such as Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys, where Zinfandel can sometimes be a bit acid-deficient and soft, one typically sees Carignane (for its bright acidity) and Petite Sirah (for its tannin and structure) representing the majority of the mixed black component. But

as you move to cooler, more color-challenged areas such as the Russian River and Sonoma Valleys, teinturiers such as Alicante Bouschet and Grand Noir make more of an appearance. Of course, there are numerous exceptions. Both Papera and Saitone in the Russian River Valley have plenty of Carignane, despite the Zinfandel from both vineyards being quite high in acid. Nevertheless, if I had to characterize a classic selection of mixed blacks in a Zinfandel vineyard, I would say it would represent 12 to 15% of the vineyard and largely consist of Petite Sirah, Peloursin, Alicante Bouschet, Grand Noir, and Carignane. And although usually white, you have to include a couple of Muscats. They are so delicious to eat when you're out in the vineyard!

Does the field blend present a struggle at harvest, or do the classic mixed blacks generally ripen at a similar pace?

Many of the mixed blacks can be certainly be ripe enough to pick with Zinfandel. However, there are two varieties, Alicante Bouschet and Grand Noir, that in my experience can be problematic. Both of these teinturiers are very late ripeners, even just to achieve a very modest 22.5 Brix. Although old-timers probably weren't concerned with sugar in these varieties (they most likely planted them purely for color, perhaps even to lower overall sugars in tank), in some vintages we have picked and fermented them separately, sometimes by as much as four weeks later. The following spring, once the wines are through with malolactic fermentation, we will do bench top trials to see how much of the Alicante/Grand Noir we want to back blend into the main lot. This can certainly yield a wonderful wine but it is significantly more work. We also miss out on what we believe to be the good juju that results from co-fermentation. Hence, more recently, we have been farming these teinturier varieties more aggressively, trying to bring them into a window of ripeness with the rest of the vineyard.

Does the current craze for Pinot Noir adversely affect the survival of old vine vineyards in Russian River Valley? What is the average price per acre for old vine Zinfandel vs. young vine Pinot Noir?

I'm a great lover of Pinot noir. Most of my winemaker friends are Pinot noir producers. But unfortunately, yes, Pinot noir's popularity has on occasion been to the detriment of old-vine Zinfandel, especially in the Russian River Valley. One of our greatest old-vine Zinfandel vineyards, the Barbieri Ranch planted in 1905, was ripped out and replanted to Pinot noir in 2007. Why? Because five tons to the acre of young vine, innocuous Russian River Valley Pinot noir at \$3500 a ton is a lot more attractive than two tons to the acre of distinctive, delicious old-vine Zinfandel at \$4000 a ton. It's been four years and I have still not been able to bring myself to drive by this vineyard. There was a treasure trove of mixed blacks in Barbieri, including some of the most amazing Grenache I have ever tasted. One hundred years of farming gone in a day. I don't think I'll ever get over it.

What is the role of White Zinfandel in the preservation of old vine Zinfandel vineyards throughout the state?

In the 1980s, it was White Zinfandel that kept many of the old-vine vineyards in the ground. In fact, some of our most prized old-vine Zinfandel vineyards, Montafi, Saitone, Papera, and Carlisle, went to White Zinfandel when there was no demand for the red version.

Under optimal conditions, how long can a grapevine actually live and bear fruit?

It really depends on the rootstock and cultivar. But if you're talking Zinfandel on St. George, under optimal conditions, probably centuries! Seriously, I'm not sure how long these vines can last. But look at vineyards such as Monte Rosso, Old Hill, Martinelli Road, and Bedrock. These vineyards are all 120 to 130 years old and still going strong. Two hundred years doesn't seem out of the question and as long as they remain relatively disease free and dead vines are replaced periodically, there's no reason the vineyard can't go on producing forever.

Besides Carlisle, can you recommend other producers that should be praised for their support and preservation of historic vineyards in Sonoma County, or California in general?

Bedrock, Ridge, and Turley, all founders of HVS, should certainly be praised for their efforts to preserve old-vine vineyards. Several other supportive wineries include Biale, Hartford, Martinelli, Ravenswood, and Seghesio. But any winery supporting an old-vine vineyard is worthy of praise.

What is your feeling on the criticism from sommeliers that Zinfandel is difficult in a restaurant setting due to its high levels of alcohol?

If the criticism is purely regarding high alcohol, then I think the criticism is a bit misplaced. Some of the top chefs in Napa and Sonoma Counties are huge fans of Zinfandel. At least one is even a producer of Zinfandel that is routinely in the low to high 15s. If he didn't believe it paired well with his menu, I'm sure he wouldn't be making it. Also, for years we have sold our Zinfandels to some of the finest restaurants in the Bay Area. All of these restaurants have very knowledgeable sommeliers and wine buyers. Some are even Master Sommeliers! I don't think they would be purchasing our wines year after year if they felt the wines weren't appropriate for their menus.

However, where I do see Zinfandel being problematic is when it is over-oaked, possesses noticeable residual sugar, or lacks sufficient acidity. But Zinfandel does not have a lock on being guilty of these three sins.

Do you do anything to moderate alcohol levels?

Zinfandel seems to have a naturally higher sweet spot in terms of alcohol compared to other varieties. Nevertheless, too much alcohol can be an issue with the variety. At Carlisle, although our preference is always to do as little as possible, our primary goal is to craft the finest wines possible, wines that are flavorful, balanced, and true to their origins. In order to keep alcohol in check, we address the issue through a variety of ways. First, we do our best to pick fruit before sugars get out of hand. With Zinfandel, much easier said than done! Our next opportunity to address the alcohol issue is once the fruit is in tank. If we feel sugars are too high, we will add a small amount of water to the must prior to fermentation. Essentially, we are replacing water that was lost through berry dehydration, something for which Zinfandel is notorious. If we feel the alcohol is out of balance post-fermentation we have two options. The first option is blending with something lower in alcohol, for example, Alicante Bouschet, Carignane, or Petite Sirah. If that's not an option, we're left with de-alc'ing. We haven't de-alc'ed often but when we do, it typically results in one of our finest Zinfandels as it permits us to find the perfect balance point.

Is the ripening process for Zinfandel's grape clusters unique?

Zinfandel experiences what we call differential ripening. In other words, on a single cluster, you can have perfectly ripe berries, green berries, and raisins. Throw in all the heterogeneity of the mixed blacks and you can imagine how difficult it is to get an accurate sugar reading in an old-vine Zinfandel vineyard. All part of the challenge of Zinfandel!

What are your favorite foods to pair with Zinfandel?

Uh-oh! Now we're getting out of my territory! Perhaps I have the palate of a troglodyte but I find Zinfandel pairs well with many foods, certainly more than just barbecue and pizza. Nearly all grilled meats seem to work. Braised short ribs are delicious with Zinfandel. If we have Mexican, my wife Kendall always insists on Zinfandel. Last month I had a delicious Zinfandel in San Francisco with hangar steak in a chimichurri sauce. And one of our favorite Zinfandel pairings at home is grilled salmon in a wild mushroom sauce. Dee-lish! Zinfandel seems much more versatile at the table than it's given credit for.



Carlisle Vineyard, c. 1927
