

2015 H. Mynor Zinfandel "Old Vines" (\$18)

Very often when customers come into the store looking for Zinfandel, they qualify their desire that the wine be from "old vines." Most customers are surprised to learn there is no legal definition of "old vines" as recognized by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, the government agency that regulates wine labels in the US. Typically a quality minded producer will establish their own guidelines for what old vines means to them, usually in years of age. Unfortunately, like the liberal use of the word "reserve" which can also mean nothing, less reputable producers qualify the statement by claiming that the vines used to make their wine are older than others, be it five years old or 50. Talking with several reputable winemakers, most consider old vines to be those at least 20 to 30 years old depending on variety. The significance of this to wine consumers is that old vines, by nature of their lower yield, offer more complexity and dimension than those made with younger vines. It is a topic of great debate among wine professionals but basically it breaks down into two topics, yield and depth and extent of root system.

To begin it is important to know that when a grape vine reaches 20 to 30 years of age, it is considered in it's mature phase, naturally less vigorous and producing a smaller crop. For decades in the post WWII era, most commercial wineries replanted at that age because the vines were considered to be unprofitable, meaning they cost more to farm than they produce. You have to remember that wine was much more of a commodity in those days and quantity was more important than quality. That really did not change until the 1990s when a younger, more quality centered generation of producers came of age, justifying higher prices with better quality. Only then did we begin to see the wines from old vines begin to sell for a premium because they offered more.

In addition to a lower yield, and what most winemakers claim is better balanced fruit, there is an intangible quality that relates to the definition of *terroir*. I have addressed this topic frequently but for new members it is basically the character of a wine that is not due to the winemakers efforts. In the case of old vines, they have very large root systems and many believe that extracts more micro nutrients and minerals from the soil, adding dimension to the final wine. There are some very qualified professionals who say this is not possible because science cannot explain the process. There is, however, another group of wine scientists who believe that the extraction of these elements in the soil happens due to a symbiotic relationship with microbial organisms that surround the roots, called mycorrhizal fungi. Whatever the reason, in many wines a sense of place, or *terroir* is very evident and it is particularly strong in old vines.

Of course, most of California's modern wine industry started in the mid-1960s, so there are very few really old vines in the state. When phylloxera wiped out significant plantings in the 1990s, it forced many growers to replant. However, there are still significant old vine plantings in places like Amador County and Lodi, particularly for Zinfandel. Which brings us to this example from Sean Minor, named in honor of his ninth great grandfather, who moved from Wales to the US.

The grapes for this wine come primarily from vineyards planted in the Dry Creek AVA of Sonoma County and Amador county. There are small pieces from both Lodi and other parts of Sonoma as well. The average age of the vines used to produce this wine is 50 years old. Because this is a blend of multiple sites, the concept of *terroir* is non-existent, but what is relevant is the concentration and balance of the wine. Winemaking for this wine is straightforward with the fruit being destemmed and fermented in stainless tanks, then aged in French oak barrels, of which 15% are new. The final blend also contains 15% Petite Sirah.

When you open this wine decant it for a half-hour and try to serve around cellar temperature, 55 to 60 degrees. It then reveals the overt Zinfandel qualities of muddled blackberries, blueberry preserves, cardamom seed, clove, cinnamon and a touch of balsamic syrup. On the palate, it is lush and round to start, with moderate acidity and tannins creating a frame into the relatively long finish. It does show a touch of heat on the finish, but what Zinfandel doesn't? Serve this with smoked brisket, carnitas or Cajun meatloaf.

2016 Bodegas Olivares Altos de la Hoya Monastrell (\$16)

My second selection comes from Selva family and their Bodegas Olivares Altos de la Hoya Monastrell. At the heart of this estate is the Finca Hoya de Santa Ana vineyard, which is more than 200 acres of incredible 100+ year old, ungrafted vines growing in the Jumilla region of Spain. This is an important designation because not only were these vines never grafted to American rootstock, the term is called self-rooted, and they are also receive no irrigation. For *terroir* freaks this is a Holy Grail wine, an example of what wine would have tasted like in the 19th century.

In term of grape growing, the region of Jumilla is quite extreme as it only receives about 10 inches of rain per year, almost all in the winter months. The soils are a mix of sand and limestone, so very poor in organic material. This is why

phylloxera never affected this region, as the little root louse does not live in poor soils. Of course sand also does not hold water so the vines are spaced at wide distances apart, up to 12 feet, so the roots do not compete for precious resources. This also severely limits the vine's production, with each plant producing the equivalent of less than a bottle of wine worth of grapes each year.

Winemaking at Olivares is designed not to screw up what nature gives. The grapes are destemmed and fermented in stainless steel, then moved to small French barrels for aging. They do not use any significant new oak because they do not want the wine to taste "woody" but rather benefit from the oxidative nature of the barrels, building a softer and more supple wine.

I would recommend decanting this wine for a half-hour before serving. Monastrell based wines are prone to being a little reductive and the extra air opens them up. Once you wait the appropriate time, this wine sports a nose of fresh cherries, boysenberry jam, dried black figs, black licorice and herbs de Provence. On the palate it is moderate weight, with very generous fruit to start which is then wrapped by moderate tannins and acidity into the finish. Drink this wine over the next two to three years with chili rubbed skirt steak, chicken mole or lamb curry.

Slow Cooker Carnitas

Some of you may remember this recipe from July, 2017, but it is so good with both wines that it was too hard not to repurpose. I also use this for tacos, quesadillas and burritos, but you can also serve with rice and black beans.

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| <p>1 (3- to 3 1/2-pound) boneless pork butt roast, lightly trimmed and cut into 2-inch chunks</p> <p>1 small onion, peeled and halved</p> <p>3 (2-inch) strips orange zest plus 1/2 cup juice</p> <p>3 (2-inch) strips lime zest plus 2 tablespoons juice</p> <p>5 garlic cloves, minced</p> <p>1 tablespoon ground cumin</p> <p>1 tablespoon dried oregano</p> <p>Salt and pepper</p> <p>2 bay leaves</p> <p>2 tablespoons vegetable oil</p> | <p>Combine pork, onion, orange zest and juice, lime zest and juice, garlic, cumin, oregano, 2 1/2 teaspoons salt, 1 1/2 teaspoons pepper, and bay leaves in slow cooker. Cover and cook until fork slips easily in and out of pork, 5 to 7 hours on high or 8 to 10 hours on low.</p> <p>Using slotted spoon, transfer pork from slow cooker to large bowl. Using potato masher, smash pork until coarsely shredded. Strain cooking liquid from slow cooker through fine-mesh strainer set over separate bowl and discard solids.</p> <p>Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add pork to skillet. Whisk cooking liquid to recombine, then add 1 cup to skillet with pork. Cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated and pork is evenly browned and crispy in spots, 10 to 15 minutes.</p> <p>Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer pork to serving platter and moisten with 1/4 cup remaining cooking liquid, or more as needed. Serve.</p> |
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Ham Croquettes

Just like a good gougères, there are few appetizers that go well with red wine better than a ham croquettes. If you are lucky enough to live near a good Cuban restaurant you can buy them or, for a fraction of the price, make them yourself. This version is really good and easy, so give them a try. Yes, you can also bake them in a 450 degree oven too. This is also a great way to use up leftover ham from holiday dinners.

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| <p>4 tablespoons unsalted butter, room temperature</p> <p>1 tablespoon finely chopped onion</p> <p>1 cup whole milk, room temperature</p> <p>1/2 cup all-purpose flour, divided</p> <p>1/4 teaspoon nutmeg</p> <p>Salt and pepper to taste</p> <p>1 tablespoon dry cooking wine</p> <p>1 pound ground ham</p> <p>2 large eggs, room temperature</p> <p>1 cup bread crumbs</p> | <p>In a saucepan, melt butter at medium-low heat. Add onion and cook for 1 minute. Whisk in 1/3 cup of flour and once incorporated, the milk, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Continue to whisk until it becomes a thick sauce (a roux). Add in the cooking wine and ground ham to the sauce. Mix together slowly until all is combined. Reduce heat to low and let simmer for 5 minutes.</p> <p>Transfer the filling to a bowl. Let it rest to room temperature then refrigerate for 2 hours. The mixture has to firm so you can form into logs and coat evenly. After 2 hours, remove the filling from the refrigerator. Form logs from the mixture that are approximately 3" long and 1" wide. Repeat until you have all the croquettes done. Set aside.</p> <p>In a bowl, whisk eggs and set aside. In another bowl, mix the remaining flour and bread crumbs. Dip each croquette in the egg wash and then coat in bread crumbs. Let the croquettes rest at room temperature for 5 minutes before frying. In a large pot or pan, heat enough vegetable oil to cover the</p> |
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croquettes completely. Fry each croquette until golden brown, approximately 3-4 minutes. Remove croquette from oil and drain on paper towel lined plates