

The Prestige of Pre-Phylloxera Vines



© Tenuta delle Terre Nere | Some of these gnarled old vines are more than 100 years old. Pockets of pre-phylloxera vines are far and few between which makes Etna all the more extraordinary.

By Tom Hyland | Posted Tuesday, 18-Sep-2018

Producers around the world market their wines in specific ways to make them more desirable to consumers. This is especially true regarding vine age, given the belief that older vines produce wines of higher quality. Often wine labels display this information; in France, the term *vieilles vignes* is used, in Italy *vigne vecchie* conveys this fact, while in California and other New World territories, terms such as "ancient vines", "century vines" or simply "old vines" are the descriptors.

The exact age of the vines vary; generally the term old vines refers to more than 25 years of age, but often these wines are at least 40 or 50 years old. In California with some [Zinfandel](#) plots and in Australia for Grenache, vines planted more than 100 years ago are still being used today by a select group of producers. Yields are very small, which makes working with these vines expensive, but the resulting return in terms of richness and complexity in the finished wines make the results that much more valuable.

Of all the ancient vines still being used today, those identified as pre-phylloxera – some of these vines date back to the 1890s – are perhaps the most treasured. Phylloxera, often thought of as an epidemic, is actually the name for a microscopic insect (aphid) that feeds on vine roots and leaves. During the latter part of the 19th Century, phylloxera caused damage to vines throughout much of Europe, especially in France and [Italy](#); millions of acres were destroyed, and replanting, primarily with American rootstock, as it was believed to be phylloxera resistant, was implemented.

So while a huge percentage of vines affected by phylloxera in Europe were ripped out, a few precious acres were not. There is a small amount of these plantings in France (most notably, two plots in Champagne used by Bollinger), and a few in Italy: a [Barbera](#) vineyard in [Piemonte](#) used by Elvio Cogno, and most famously today, in the Etna district of Sicily. (One producer in Etna told me

that he believes there may be some pre-phylloxera vines in the hills of Tramonti in [Campania](#), in the Amalfi Coast district, but he has not fully investigated this issue.)

The fact that wines are produced in Etna on such poor stony soils, comprised of volcanic ash, pumice and sand make Etna Rosso wines so intriguing. This is extreme viticulture, one of the most intense expressions of terroir anywhere in the world. Add in the fact that a few producers are working with pre-phylloxera vines – bush trained vines known as alberello ("little tree") that are ungrafted, planted on their own roots, and not on rootstock, as in the norm in most countries – and you have a recipe for highly distinctive wines that are highly sought after by sommeliers, wine critics and connoisseurs alike; indeed these are some of the most highly anticipated new releases each vintage.

Most of these pre-phylloxera vines are located between 600-1000 meters (2000 to 3200 feet) above sea level on the northern slope of [Etna](#), yet exact numbers of total acreage of these vines are not known. At Passopisciaro, one of the district's most famous wineries, located in the town of Castiglione di Sicilia, proprietor Andrea Franchetti notes that while he does have some pre-phylloxera vines, "it's difficult to say exactly how much, as we haven't tagged them and studied them. We treat them just like we treat all the other old vines we have."



© Tenuta delle Terre Nere | Marco de Grazia takes special pride in his pre-phylloxera vines.

At Pietradolce, also in Castiglione di Sicilia, Michele Faro notes that half of his approximately 27 acres of vines are pre-phylloxera, yet only account for 30 percent of his bottled wines. Marco de Grazia, proprietor at [Tenuta delle Terre Nere](#) in the village of Randazzo, records that he has two plots of pre-phylloxera vines for a total of little more than one-half hectare (approximately 1.2 acres).

The principal variety used for Etna Rosso is [Nerello Mascalese](#), the cultivar that has become the dominant red variety in Etna; a small percentage of [Nerello Cappuccio](#) is also employed in some blends. At Passopisciaro, a celebrated Etna producer, proprietor Andrea Franchetti who only works with Nerello Mascalese, comments that this is a late-ripening grape. "This is important, for the vines are planted at relatively high altitudes, even up to 1000 meters above sea level," he remarks. He explains that temperatures on the north side of Etna where his vineyards are located are over 15°C cooler than on the coast, "and that cool weather prepares for elegant, full wines," in his words. Nerello Mascalese has red cherry and plum fruit and floral aromas that give Etna Rossos a Burgundian sensibility, yet the tannic structure is often reminiscent of a Nebbiolo-based wine from Piedmont.

Marco de Grazia was instrumental in re-introducing the world to these wines when he released his 2006 vintage of [Etna Rosso Prephylloxera "La Vigna di Don Peppino"](#); the vines from this plot are now between 130-140 years old. There are several factors about these ancient vines that de Grazia wants people to understand, one being that Etna is not unique when it comes to phylloxera. "There is no evidence whatsoever that volcanic soil resists phylloxera, and in fact, phylloxera was as devastating on Etna as elsewhere in Europe," de Grazia explains.

"Moreover, the interested public must understand the very simple but, somehow, overwhelmingly overlooked fact that pre-phylloxera vines have not only survived phylloxera, but also two World Wars and their dramatic consequences, and many many generational changes, which often are as damaging as phylloxera," notes de Grazia. He goes on to explain that the reality that a few vines in the Etna district did survive phylloxera has much to do with the fact that this was a remote area, "isolated from Europe and overseas trading areas as possible," in his words.

As far as producing wine from these vines, do the vintners work these vines in a different manner in the vineyard or in the cellar? "The vines are worked exactly like other adjacent vines. For vineyard work, what is important is not the age of the vines – unless this implies particular vulnerabilities or lack of vigor, which is not the case here – but the quality of the soil," de Grazia remarks.

At Pietradolce, a relatively new producer (founded in 2005), proprietor Michele Faro comments that the grapes have small clusters and berries, with "the fruit concentrated not just in terms of juice, but also in terms of quality." As for treating the vines, Faro says that "we try and leave the pre-phylloxera vines as 'wild' as possible. Apart from cutting the grass from under the vine, and a light leaf trimming, they are left alone." Faro notes that in the cellar, the fruit from the pre-phylloxera vines is fermented in small (4000 liter) cement tanks – these help preserve maximum varietal character – while other fruit from younger vines is treated in stainless steel tanks.

As mentioned perviously, the finest wines from the finest vineyards – known as contrade in Etna (contrada, singular) have become legendary in a short period of time. How do the producers feel about the wines made from these ancient vines? "Compared to the 60 year-old adjacent vines in exactly the same soil and climate, and to the wine produced from the adjacent vines, vinified in the same way, the wine from the pre-phylloxera vines has – in different degrees and nuances depending on the vintage – a finesse and a sophistication, discretely expressed and deeply lingering that is not found in its neighboring sibling," remarks de Grazia.

Faro is emotional when discussing these vines. "More than a story, I always say something about these pre-phylloxera vines. For me, they are like monuments, and we have to protect and respect them as we would the ancient monuments of our cities."

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