



**T**he vines grew close to the ground, straggly and twisted by age, and while they looked healthy enough, this was no manicured vineyard. There were no straight rows, there were plenty of gaps and weeds grew tall between some of the vines. The fruit was also quite difficult to find. It was hiding in the heart of those bush vines in small bunches of tightly packed grapes.

“This is the oldest Chenin Blanc vineyard in South Africa and I think you are the first journalist I have brought to see it,” said André Morgenthal, formerly of WOSA, South Africa’s wine promotions organisation, and now in charge of the Old Vines Project.

Mrs Kirsten’s tiny vineyard is in the Jonkershoek valley at the foot of the Bothmaskop Mountain and it was planted with Chenin Blanc vines sometime between 1905 and 1920 to produce grapes for the family farm. Mrs Kirsten died some years ago and the vineyard slowly sank beneath the weeds, neglected and unpruned.

It was rediscovered by the Old Vines Project whose mission is to bring old vineyards back to life and preserve not just that particular patch of vines, but to revitalise the soils, produce a crop and get a decent price for the grapes which are then made into wine.

But why would anyone spend time rescuing a patch of vines that are quite so old? After all, yields fall as the vine gets older and it is much easier to rip out old vines and replant with new.

“I believe that these old vines represent part of South Africa’s heritage and it should not be lost,” said viticulturalist Rosa Kruger who has become the Indiana Jones of old vines in the Cape. She encourages farmers to contact her about plots of old vines that they have on their properties, then visits and assesses their potential.

“Most of these vines were planted long before we had irrigation in vineyards. These vines have seen droughts come and go and somehow they have learnt to survive. The roots may have gone down deeper, or perhaps they have spread out across the land, to make the most of whatever moisture is available, but they have adapted to their particular location.”



With South Africa suffering its third year of drought, perhaps the genetic material of these vines holds a secret about the way vines can survive in dry conditions.

Older vines are generally believed to make better wines, but Kruger shakes her head at this.

“I have never said this, but I do believe that they make different wines. Old vines adapt to their location and after a time the clonal variation disappears because the vine acquires

**HARD YARDS:** These straggly vines produce grapes for South Africa’s most expensive Chenin Blanc; inset, winemaker Ian Naudé, with viticulturalist Rosa Kruger and André Morgenthal.

a new identity linked to its location and climate. I would like people to pick up a glass of these old vines wines and say ‘this is from South Africa.’”

It is a huge challenge ahead for the Old Vines Project because many of the old vines are in small uneconomic plots and so farmers are keen to pull them out. But Rosa has contacts across the industry and she puts farmers in touch with winemakers who often incorporate these concentrated, individual-tasting grapes

into their flagship wines. With love, care and support, the vines can be coaxed back into producing more grapes.

“We are also filling in the gaps where some vines have died,” added Kruger. This is trickier than it sounds because new plantings come from the existing vines, and are checked to ensure they are disease-free before propagation. Because of such work, that straggly parcel of Chenin Blanc that I walked through has gone from producing a few boxes of grapes to an almost-economically viable vineyard.

In South Africa old vines are now categorised as being at least 35 years old and there will soon be a sticker approved by the Old Vines Project which will verify

# Never too old to try

*As neglected vineyards across South Africa are brought back to life, **Christine Austin** raises a glass to the ways of the past.*



## wine club march offer

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any statement about old vines. Many established winemakers have been discovering and using old vines to add intensity of flavour and nuances to their wines for several years. These wines will never be at the cheaper end of the price range. Old vines produce fewer grapes and so prices are inevitably higher, but so is the quality and individuality of the wines.

Until we start to see those old vines stickers on the shelves, here are some of my favourite

South African wines made from old vines:

**Bellingham “The Bernard Series” Old Vine Chenin Blanc 2016, Majestic, £13.49/£10.99 on multi-buy:** From 40-year-old vines, this is a distinctive, complex wine with notes of peach and passion fruit followed by savoury, oaty flavours on the palate, ending with freshness and length. This is an excellent wine to start exploring old South African vines.

**Mullineux White Old Vines 2015, Swartland, Berry Bros (London), £22.25:** From 70-year-old, mainly Chenin Blanc vines with Grenache Blanc, Viognier and Semillon in the mix, this is a rounded wine full of white peach and apricot notes, dry and fresh-tasting with a silky texture. Excellent with chicken and fish dishes.

**Naudé Old Vines Cinsault 2014, Handford Wines (Kensington, London, [wine@handford.net](mailto:wine@handford.net)), £32.95:** “I think this is the best Cinsault I have tasted,” said Rosa Kruger to winemaker Ian Naudé and I have to agree. Made from a 55-year-old vineyard, this is elegantly stacked with raspberry and wild strawberry fruit, combined with rose petals, savoury complexity, and ends with a long, cinnamon-edged finish. Delicate, persistent and perfectly balanced.

**Boekenhoutskloof Semillon 2015, House of Townend, £32.99:** Sourced mainly from Semillon vines planted in 1902, with additions of grapes from younger vines (1936 and 1942), this is so much more than just a Semillon. It has intensity, finesse and brightness of style. I also tasted the 2005 vintage which had become savoury honeyed with touches of lemon curd on toast.

**Mev. Kirsten 2015, Eben Sadie, Hedonism (London [hedonism.co.uk](http://hedonism.co.uk)), £114:** The product of those rescued vines at Mrs Kirsten's vineyard and the most expensive Chenin from South Africa. Concentrated and delightful. 

## off the shelf

**Tierra y Hombre Sauvignon Blanc 2016, Chile, 12.5%, Marks & Spencer, down from £8.50 to £6.50 until April 2:**

A lively, zesty, guava, pineapple and herby style of wine. A great aperitif.



**Paul Cluver Gewürztraminer 2016, Elgin, South Africa, 13%, Booths, down from £12.50 to £9.38 on multi-buy until March 13:**

Bursting with aromatic spice and backed by floral notes, this goes perfectly with spiced chicken.



**Exquisite Collection New Zealand Pinot Noir 2016, 13%, Aldi, £6.99:** Not on offer, but even at its full price this is terrific value for money. Soft, cherry-spiked fruit, perfect with duck.



**Les Dauphins Vinsobres, Rhône, France 2015, 14%, Waitrose, down from £11.99 to £8.99 until March 20:**

From one of the top villages of the Southern Rhône, this is packed full of pepper-dusted, dark plum fruit.



## on the grapevine

**Natural choice:** Firth & Co will hold a Natural Wines dinner on March 15 at Bridge Cottage Bistro, Sandsend, Whitby, when Andrea Asciamprener will present a range of wines that have been made without quite so much winemaking help as other wines. Expect lower sulphur levels, some talk about organic viticulture, and excellent food into the bargain. For tickets, which cost £35, ring 01609 770875.

**Just the tonic:** Latitude Wines will hold a tasting of more than 30 gins on March 29 at Headrow House in Bramleys Yard, Leeds, from 7pm until 10pm. There will be gins from as far away as New Zealand and the west coast of the USA, plus many

from closer to home. Your £20 ticket gives you vouchers that you can exchange for tastes. Call into the Latitude shop in The Calls for more information or check the company's website, [latitudewine.co.uk](http://latitudewine.co.uk)

**Canada by the bottle:** As a frequent visitor to western Canada, I was delighted to welcome a new book on the subject of Canadian wines, written by Rod Phillips and published by Infinite Ideas. *Wines of Canada* (£30) is a serious, detailed look at the history, regions and individual producers of

wines, from Nova Scotia to Vancouver Island, a distance of 3,000 miles, or around the same distance as from Bordeaux to Georgia.

It is hardly surprising then that these diverse climates produce vastly different wines, from tiny vineyards in Newfoundland to producers of world-class ice-wines in Ontario and glorious deep-flavoured

Bordeaux blends in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. With Canada now playing host to more than 700 wineries nationwide, this is an essential guide if you are planning to visit.

