

# Mixing it up

## Tim James



A thought experiment in paradox, going back to ancient times, explores the metaphysics of identity: Is an object whose component parts have all been replaced over time fundamentally the same object as it originally was? Classicists think of it as the paradox of the Ship of Theseus; others, as concerning Grandfather's Axe (which had both the both handle and head replaced but was still, well, Granddad's). But for wine lovers—and notably for such organizations as the Old Vine Project in South Africa—the paradox can take on a significant and practical dimension when it comes to vineyards. Because they inevitably develop gaps that get filled with infant vines.

Phylloxera in the late 19th century ensured that there are now scarcely any seriously old vineyards in the Cape—just a few late-century plantings of Cinsault, Semillon, and Muscat de Frontignan. But the past two decades have seen a remarkable growth in interest in less old but still “old” vines, mostly planted from the 1960s onward. The explosion of high-quality, new-wave winemaking in the Swartland this century, for example, was largely predicated on the region's treasure house of Chenin Blanc, planted to cater for both “sherry” and the demand for fruity, off-dry white wines in the 1960s and '70s.

A search for viable older vineyards was started in the early 2000s by Rosa Kruger, then viticulturist for Anthonij Rupert Wines. This developed into the Old Vine Project, which not only promotes wines made from old vines (and encourages the planting of vineyards designed to grow old) but documents all vineyards older than 35 years and links farmers to eager winemakers. The aim is to save the best of those old vines for vinous, even more than for cultural, reasons.

Many older vineyards that Rosa discovered were sadly neglected—some even abandoned—but even that degree of survival is surprising. Most were on farms supplying cooperatives and merchants,

### How much replacement of vines can be allowed before the vineyard is no longer (entirely or sufficiently) old?

and the dwindling yield of older vineyards wasn't recompensed by a higher price for more intense and complex fruit. Remarkably, many wines that are now internationally recognized as among the Cape's finest come from vines whose produce used to vanish into vast blending vats. Occasionally, pride or sentiment kept the low-yielding old vines in the ground, but rarely could a farmer afford the extra care needed to maintain them.

Now, promising old vineyards mostly get the attention they deserve and are frequently rehabilitated with much care and expense, while farmers get the prices viability demands. With vineyard care, the paradox enters. The OVP's bottle seal, issued in partnership with the certificating authorities, not only guarantees that the vineyard is over 35 years old, it also gives the officially recorded planting date (a much more rigorous system, as the latest edition of the *World Atlas of Wine* points out, than for Europe's *vieilles vignes*, *alte Reben*, *vecchie vigne*, etc). How much replacement of decrepit or dead vines can be allowed before the vineyard is no longer (entirely or sufficiently) old? The matter is being debated right now: Should 5 percent of younger vines be allowed, or even 15 percent?

### Anti-mono tricks

The grape variety used to fill those gaps seems a less contentious matter, given that most vineyards are monovarietal (since local legislation requires for single-vineyard designation). But perhaps not. Andrea and Chris Mullineux recently released two old-vine Leeu Passant Cinsaults, from the Cape's two oldest

red-wine vineyards, the Wellington one planted well before 1900, the Franschoek one from 1932. At the April lockdown Zoom release tasting (most of the audience had been sent bottles), Chris mentioned that neither vineyard was varietally pure—the Franschoek one, while registered as Cinsault, included up to 15 percent of other grapes; the whole vineyard is harvested and vinified together, with no attempt to banish the interlopers.

Rosa Kruger's guess is that this degree of interplanting might be true of many—even most—old vineyards. That's a source of exultation to another consultant viticulturist, Jaco Engelbrecht, who sees it almost as his duty to rebel against the regimented monocultures of conventional wine growing: “Mono means boring. Sure, we can't mix up the whole South African vineyard scene, but someone has to mix up something!”

The most radical old field-blend vineyard that Jaco knows of is one he cares for in Paarl. It seems, he says, “that someone in 1977 took around seven varieties and just mashed them up in the shed and told the people, ‘Plant this.’” At harvest time, “some old Chenin Blanc grapes are golden in color and very ripe, while the Crouchen Blanc sits almost green with high acidity.” Part of the crop goes into These Old Bones, a splendid wine ushered gently into bottle by Tremayne Smith for his The Blacksmith range.

And Jaco does his anti-mono trick whenever he can, surreptitiously filling in a vineyard gap with something that sensible people think shouldn't be there, to help create “something magical and special”; happiest when there's a rare farmer wanting a wholly interplanted vineyard—“hopefully, in 50 years, they'll wonder who was the crazy fool [not his F-word of choice] who planted this!” Planting now for the old vineyards of the future, evading paradox as far as possible, is a vision seemingly shared by the orthodox and the crazy. ■