

My new favorite word is CENOSILLICAPHOBIA. It means “fear of an empty glass.” Well, for the last few years I’ve eliminated this fear whenever possible. Over the weekend a discussion began about “old vines.” What does it mean when someone says, “This is wine made from old vines”? To tell the truth, it doesn’t mean much.

The normal life span for a grape vine is 35 years. Yet we continually read articles about vines over 100 years old. In America wine makers advertise “old vines”; in France, “vieilles vignes”; in Portugal, “vina velha” or “videiras velhas”; and in Austria, “alte reben”.

There is no legal definition of old vines in America or Europe. The general consensus is that a vine that exceeds its normal life of 35 years is old but there is no strict rule. By the same token, when you see wine advertised as made from “old vines” rarely does it mean that 100% of the wine is from “old vines.” The whole idea of “old vines” is just that – an idea not a legal or technical definition of wine.

The exception is Australia. In the Barossa area there is an old vine charter. It says:

- A) an old vine is 35 years old or older;
- B) a survivor vine is 70 years old or older;
- C) a centurion vine is 100 years old or older; and,
- D) an ancestral vine is 125 years old or older.

So my first point is that the term “old vines”, unless it’s in the Barossa, doesn’t mean it’s a legal definition.

Second, old vines don’t guarantee any improvement in quality. The thought is that old vines make more concentrated grapes and so more concentrated grape juice means better wine. In general, vines over 35 years of age yield one to three tons of grapes per acre. Younger vines in healthy vineyards can yield 15 tons per acre.

Older vines ripen earlier and usually produce lower alcohol levels. They often have smaller berries with more skin surface to juice which leads to better color and more tannins. The theory is that all this leads to more complex wine that will last longer in your cellar. So is the older better? Not necessarily.

In America, the old vines are usually in mixed vineyards. Vineyards planted with Zinfandel, Barbera, Petit Syrah, and Carignane. Does this “field blend” make the best wine? Doubtful, isn’t it? And without knowing the blend or the percentage of the wine from “old vines”, there is no standard to measure by. In addition, what if the terroir (the place) the grapes are planted in isn’t the best? Or they are handled badly in the wine making process? So many factors determine great wine beside the vines’ age.

Here’s another factor to put in the mix. Stag’s Leap Vineyards won the Paris tasting in 1976. The vines were 3 years old.

How about in Europe? Every country has old vines. Unlike America, they are usually planted in the best spots. Even though there is no regulation as to what is called “old vines” there seems to be more integrity in what is labeled old vines and these “old vine” wines do seem to have more complexity.

In South America, the two biggest wine making regions, Chile and Argentina, have their own unofficial definition. By the way, there are lots of old vines in South America because they never suffered from phylloxera. In Chile, the opinion is that “old vines” means vines over 60 years old. In Argentina “old vines” are so prevalent that they aren’t rare at all. In both countries, wines made from these “old vines” seem to be more complex and concentrated.

So what does all this mean? The term “old vines” has no regulatory influence except in Australia. Where there is no regulation, there is almost always economic abuse. If you try “old vine” wine and you like it, drink it. If you don’t, buy something else. As always the consumer rules. I like old wine that’s well made. The vines are only a piece of the puzzle.

Abigail Van Buren said, “Wisdom doesn’t automatically come with old age. Nothing does – except wrinkles.” It’s true some wines improve with age. But only if the grapes were good in the first place.