

DRINKS > WINE

# What Does 'Old Vine' Wine Mean, and Is It Really Better Than Young?

Wine pros break down one of the most commonly used terms in the world of high-end wine.

By **Brian Freedman** | Published on February 20, 2025



PHOTO: EDWIN REMSBERG / GETTY IMAGES

“Old vine” is a commonly used term in the world of high-end wine. It seems to imply something regal about a wine, a greater sense of depth, concentration or profundity of character.

As with most everything that concerns wine, the reality of how old vines can influence a wine is far more nuanced. Terroir, climate, farming methods, and winemaking all play a role in how grapevines express themselves. “Old vine” shouldn’t necessarily be a catchall term to indicate a certain quality.

“[In Italy] there is no [official] definition, but above 40 years old is usually considered ‘old,’” says Bernardino Sani, CEO and winemaker at [Argiano Winery](#).

In California, the [Historical Vineyard Society](#) defines old vines as those planted more than a half-century ago. By their definition, vines that are 49 years old don’t qualify.

**RELATED:** [What Is Reserve Wine, and Is It Better Than Regular Wine?](#)

## The planting of old vines versus young

“As vines grow, their root systems penetrate deeper and wider in the soil,” says Steven Rasmussen, co-proprietor, alongside Felicia Woytak, of [Palisades Canyon](#), a producer in Napa Valley’s Calistoga AVA. The winery, whose winemaker is Graeme MacDonald, specializes in head-trained, dry-farmed Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and old-vine Petite Sirah, some planted as far back as 1964.



“Through their roots, old vines access minerals and nutrients not accessible to newer vines that are more shallowly rooted,” says Rasmussen.

According to Rasmussen, the older vineyards were planted with wider spacing between vines. “This gives each vine more soil, and access to more minerals and water, with less competition from neighboring vines,” he says. “Those additional minerals and nutrients impart increased layers of flavor to the grapes. Because of this, old vines express their terroir to a greater extent than new vines.”



PHOTO: NANCYBELLE GONZAGA VILLARROYA / GETTY IMAGES

How old vines are farmed has a significant impact on how they express themselves.

“The farming plays a big role,” says Sani. “If you have old vines with massive use of irrigation and fertilizers, there is almost zero difference in the quality.”

Sani also emphasizes the importance of using the correct rootstock. Clonal material is also a contributing factor, as is the character of the vineyard itself. This is the reasoning behind Argiano offering both its classic Brunello di Montalcino as well as one from a specific parcel of its Vigna del Suolo vineyard. The character of the latter vineyard, as seen through the lens of 55-year-old vines, is unique enough to warrant its own bottling.

There is also the issue of chemical usage in the vineyard. The combination of dry farming and the minimization or elimination of synthetic fertilizers helps old vines achieve their full potential. “[The wines] will probably have a complexity and a sense of the place that the younger vines do not have,” says Sani.

## **Old vines in an ever-changing climate**

In addition to being more deeply rooted, both literally and figuratively, old vines have other benefits, especially in a world where climate change is resulting in more extreme weather.

“Our old vines are veterans of all weather conditions over many seasons,” says Rasmussen. “Their deep roots, thick trunks, and hardy character make them less susceptible to drought, heat, and other climate variances. As a result, they are more consistent producers and will make great wine even in years where new vines may be adversely affected by unfavorable weather.”

## **Adapting to each grape variety**

In general, the fruit from old vines tends to be more concentrated and expressive. But not all grape varieties respond in identical ways to vine age. “Depending on the fruit quality, you adjust the winemaking techniques,” says Sani.

Some changes may be to modify the maceration of the juice and skins, or perhaps to adjust the duration of oak barrel aging. In the end, the wine’s acidity, tannic structure, and style are all considerations for the winemaker, as are the approaches that they believe will best express those vines.

For all of the factors that impact wines made from old vines, there is one element that connects them. “Older vines tend to be more terroir-driven, whereas youthful vines will be more variety-driven,” says Rasmussen. “As they age, they increasingly reflect their terroir.”

The expression of terroir, from Calistoga to Montalcino, from Mendoza to Barossa and all points in between, is one of the defining characteristics of what makes a wine not just great, but interesting, too. And old vines help frame that sense of place in sharper, more concentrated relief.

---