



TEXT ANDREW CAILLARD MW

OBSERVATIONS

# Hidden Menace

Phylloxera has plagued the Australian wine industry in the past and it still has the potential to devastate our old vines warns Andrew Caillard MW.

**AUSTRALIA'S REMARKABLE** living heritage of old grape vines is an important symbol of our fine wine identity. There is no other country in the world that possesses so many surviving 19th-century vineyards. This narrative is immensely powerful in building Australia's fine wine credentials in a very competitive market, dominated by the grand cru classé wines of Bordeaux and the postage-stamp-sized vineyards of Burgundy. The combination of our 19th-century legacy and generations of effort, underpin and validate many of our greatest wines including Penfolds Grange, Henschke Hill of Grace and Best's Thomson Family Shiraz. The plantings of pre-phylloxera genetic selections, including MV6 Pinot Noir, Concongella Clone Shiraz, Houghton Clone Cabernet Sauvignon and Reynell Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, give Australian ultra-fine wine an aura of permanency and lineage. Increasingly scientists are observing that old vines possess a memory of place and are able to adapt to prevailing environmental conditions. When added all together, old vines, colonial vine stock material, epigenetics and generations of nurture give Australian wine a completely unique and compelling story. Yet this brilliant concoction of history is vulnerable to abuse and ignorance. Aside from urbanisation, economics and various vine pull schemes over the years, pests, diseases and viruses are a constant threat to the survival of our oldest vineyards.

The outbreak of the vine pest *Phylloxera vastatrix* (now named *Daktulosphaira vitifoliae*) in Europe gave colonial entrepreneurs a great opportunity to fill the dwindling supply of French wines, especially Claret and Burgundy, into the



British market. The abolishment of preferential duty of South African wine in 1860, the fall of ocean shipping costs and legislative changes in 1861, which created off-licences in Britain, encouraged entrepreneurs over the next 20 years to invest in wine production. Australia's exports to Britain quadrupled in the 1860s and had doubled again by the mid-1870s. But the same rapid transmission of people and materials by steam ships, brought new problems to the Australian colonies.

Phylloxera was first observed by vigneron in 1875 and officially at Fyansford, Victoria in 1877. Yet it had already been noticed as a potential threat to the economy of the Australian colonies. South Australia first legislated the Vines Protection Act of 1874. But the Victorian legislature's response to the discovery in 1878 with Vine Disease Eradication Act was to order the wholesale destruction of vineyards in the Geelong and Bendigo regions and the prohibition of transporting vine stock. The far-sighted Phylloxera Act legislated by South Australia in 1899 prevented the importation of vine stock

material for 70 years, although by the late 1960s it was recognised that new virus-free vines and new varieties needed to be brought in under strict supervision.

So serious was the phylloxera problem that it featured as a topic of conversation in the intercolonial conference of 1880 between New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, one of the early forums that set the agenda for Federation. "A federal court of appeal for all Australia, intercolonial railways, intercolonial free trade, a uniform tariff, the eradication of the phylloxera, the Chinese question, the rabbit pest etc" (South Australian Register, 11 December 1880) were all discussed. Among the delegates were Sir Henry Parkes, regarded as the father of Federation and George Swan Fowler, a South Australian member of parliament with an interest in agriculture, especially wine and jam making. He would some years later, around 1888, establish the Kalimna vineyard in the Barossa Valley and plant cabernet and shiraz for the lucrative dry red wine export market to London. To this day the surviving 135-year-old Block 42 cabernet sauvignon, the oldest of its kind in the world, symbolises the ambitions, successes and unique voice of ultra-fine Australian wine.

Phylloxera remains a genuine threat to Australian vineyards planted on their own roots, rather than on American rootstocks. South Australia and Western Australia have yet to record the appearance of this pest. The sloppy unhygienic movement of machinery across regional or state borders and the increasing foot fall of wine tourists wishing to hug an old vine will probably bring this controlled threat to an accelerated reality. And then how will we all feel? 🍷