

These old vines are a comfort in uncertain times

Vineyards planted over a century ago that are still producing incredible vintages are a symbol of survival and reassurance.



At Glenrowan's Eldorado Road, the previous owner Dulcie Brack's old shiraz vines persists in a dryland vineyard with no irrigation.

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In a small suburban park near my house in [Melbourne](#), there stands a big river red gum that is at least 200 years old. There's a photograph taken in 1915 of the park just after it opened: even then, the gum tree was old and massive and dominated the landscape.

Before it was turned into a park by the local council and surrounded by residential bungalows, this land was a cow paddock, attached to one of the grand houses that had been built in the area in the 1860s. And before that, this was all open woodland, the big old tree just one of many on the country of the [Boonwurrung people](#).



Assessing the old vines at Chateau Tanunda in the Barossa.

I like to come and visit the river red gum whenever things get a bit overwhelming. I take comfort from the old tree, from the fact that it's still here, that it has borne witness to all the changes to the landscape and the people and the culture that have swirled around it over centuries. I like the reminder of permanence and survival.

In these incredibly difficult times, I'm also finding comfort in [good wine](#). (And beer. And whisky. A little too much comfort perhaps.) I'm not the only one: booze sales have skyrocketed over the past few weeks as millions of people are self-isolating, hunkering down, and seeking solace at the bottom of a glass.

Now that it's not so easy to go and visit the old river red gum whenever I want, I've also been thinking a lot about wines made from old vines.

Ever since I first became interested in wine, I've been in awe of how the humble grapevine can keep producing fruit, vintage after relentless vintage, for 100, 200, 300 years or more. I have always found it a special experience to drink wine made from one of these old vines and to think about its history.



Chateau Tanuda's gnarled old vines. The vineyard has some of the oldest vines in the Barossa and the world.

In my first book, *Red and White, Wine Made Simple* – itself published more than a quarter-century ago – I described the first time this deep connection to times past really sank in:

“In the dry cool of a late summer dusk, the Barossa Valley takes on an enchanted air. Walking back from the pub past an ancient vineyard of shiraz, the fluid purple light plays tricks with my eyes: the stubby old vines look for all the world like they're trying to claw their way out of the stony soil. Thick stumps of wood, weathered, twisted, arthritic, their spindly

black arms punctuated by tufts of foliage, half disguising jewel-like clusters of dark blue grapes.

“These vines have been producing fruit since the turn of the century. While war raged in Europe (twice) they soaked up the warm Barossa sun and converted the energy to sugar. Presidents and prime ministers came and went, and these vines sucked water from deep below the Barossa soil and bled it out again in the form of juice. Before my grandfather was born, these vines were making wine.”

One of the many Melbourne Food and Wine festival events that had to be cancelled last month was a tasting I’d organised of wines from Victorian vineyards first planted in the 19th century.

I was going to host the tasting at the [150-year-old Rippon Lea Estate](#), a National Trust property around the corner from the park where the river red gum stands. One of the wines I was going to pour for guests was an almost-50-year-old bottle of shiraz from Baileys of Glenrowan, established in 1870 in the state’s north-east.

Winemaker Paul Dahlenburg knows all about the magic of old vines. As well as making powerfully structured and rich red wines from the mature plantings of shiraz and durif at Baileys – some dating back a century or more – he also produces tiny quantities of shiraz under his own Eldorado Road label from a small block of shiraz vines planted in Glenrowan in 1890.



Eldorado Road's Paul Dahlenburg brings in the harvest.

When Dahlenburg first approached the owners of what was then a very neglected vineyard to see if he could lease it from them, they tried to talk him out of it, saying it was too run-down, that he'd be better off buying fruit from other vineyards in the area. But he was determined: this vineyard was over 100 years old. It was special.

My wine writing colleague Campbell Mattinson penned a beautiful story about the vineyard a few years ago that can be found on the [Eldorado Road website](#). The story tells how Dahlenburg painstakingly brought the old vines back to life, and now produces an extraordinary wine from them: a shiraz called Perseverance.

Survival of the finest

2017 Eldorado Road Old Vine Perseverance Shiraz [Glenrowan]

The almost 130-year-old shiraz vines in Dulcies Vineyard (named after Dulcie Brack, the former mayor of Benalla and owner of this property in the mid-20th century) yield tiny bunches of intensely flavoured grapes. The wine has sumptuous, velvety black fruit flavours, deep and dark, with an

underlay of sinewy tannins from the vineyard's tough, weathered granite soils. It'll age superbly over many years. **\$65** eldoradoroad.com.au

2018 Tyrrells HVD Old Vine Chardonnay [Hunter Valley]

Planted in 1908, the chardonnay vines on the HVD vineyard are thought to be the oldest in Australia, if not the world. The wine produced from these vines is wonderfully elegant and savoury, with a seam of chalky minerality running through it. The wine is made in limited quantity, with most sold direct through Tyrrells' Private Bin wine club and some making it out into retail. It will also mature beautifully in the cellar. **\$70** tyrrells.com.au

2015 Chateau Tanunda 150 Year Old Vines 1858 Field Blend [Barossa]

From a tiny patch of dry-grown grenache, mourvèdre and malbec bush vines planted at Springton in the Eden Valley in 1858, this is a very impressive, multi-layered wine. Big and powerful (it clocks in at close to 16 per cent alcohol), it's also fabulously fragrant, complex and satisfying, with seductive flavours of exotic dark spices and damp undergrowth and roasting meat. **\$500** chateautanunda.com.au