



Survivor vines that refused to wither

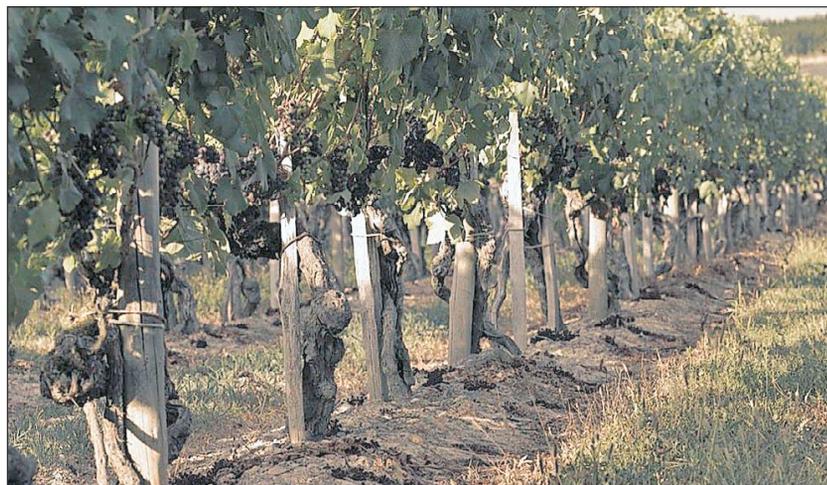
That nasty little vine-destroying louse, phylloxera, has a lot to answer for, totally disrupting traditional wine-growing practice through almost all of Europe and continents beyond in the latter decades of the 19th century. But not every vine, everywhere, succumbed.

In a few remote locations, pre-phylloxera vines still flourish on their own roots (to combat the pest, vines are now grafted on to resistant American rootstocks) and I've visited some of the very oldest French survivors, tended by eight generations of the Pedebornade family for 200 years.

Those vines – uniquely classified earlier this year as a historic monument by the French cultural authorities – are not alone in south-west France in pre-dating phylloxera.

Two weeks ago, the first modern bottles of wine from vines planted in 1871 were opened in Paris. The location was the hotel where Oscar Wilde ("work is the curse of the drinking classes") had lived and, in 1900, died – a time when those very vines could have been the source of the

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■ Plaimont Producteurs' tannat vines planted in 1871

Picture: Michel Carossio

wine he drank.

The 2011 wine is enjoyably drinkable, rich purple-red, with dark wild-fruit scents and flavours, gently rounded by oak. Wine-making, says Olivier Bourdet-Pees, managing director and technical head of Plaimont Producteurs, has involved the minimum intervention possible, to let the historic vines show just how much character they can still impart.

The vines grow very close to the headquarters of Plaimont Producteurs, the far-sighted, quality-conscious co-operative responsible for very nearly every bottle of wine, white as well as red, from the Saint Mont appellation. The two-metre deep sandy soil is the reason for their survival – the louse can't survive there.

Carefully tended

They, like other ancient pre-phylloxera vines owned by co-operative members, have been carefully tended in recent years, gradually being lifted from their ground-level ramblings onto more conventional supports. Just a few didn't survive and, in Paris, their gnarled trunks provided an evocative backdrop to the smooth, smart bottles.

But, unusually, these are not a higgledy-piggledy mix of varieties. Ninety-nine per cent are tannat, the robust, generous variety which gives Gascon reds much of their character. So the good 2011 harvest offered the right opportunity to make a commercial wine rather than use the grapes in research projects. Only five barrels – just 1,342 bottles – were made.

This year, the vines have delivered more grapes, so there is one barrel more.

You won't find Saint Mont Vignes Préphyloxériques 2011 on high street shelves, although a few bottles will come to England, as Plaimont deliberately shares the vintage between all the countries which buy its wines. The price is yet to be fixed, but it will reflect the rarity of the wine – in France, it is €55.

But there are other Plaimont Saint Mont reds available, for happy drinking from somewhat younger vines. They're wines which marry dark fruits with serious flavour and structure, are reliable irrespective of vintage and age well. Nicolas/Spirited Wines shops should have a choice, including the fine, claret-challenging Chateau de Sabazon, around £16, and En la Tradition, £8.35. At Majestic, two or more bottles of Les Hautes de Bergelle are just £6.50 each; Adnams has Les Bastions, £7; and the Wine Society offers L'Empreinte de Saint Mont at £11.50.

This is far from the end of a story of understanding, preserving and using old vine varieties which goes back already some four decades.

Plaimont's visionary leaders rightly deplore the increasing reliance on the same few varieties (approaching 90 per cent of France's plantings now) and are already including the fruit of once-lost vines in their present wines.

Such bottles, alongside those from the 1871 vines, "are the symbol of the work which must represent the future of our appellation", says Olivier Bourdet-Pees.

No wonder trattoria is no longer in vogue

The recession seems to be exacting its toll upon London's middle range restaurants. McDonald's profits are up, Le Gavroche is permanently booked ... but

the friendly little place around the corner is decidedly feeling the pinch – and none more, seemingly, than the Italian trattoria. This might be partly due to the chains – Jamie's, most intrusively, but also Spaghetti House, Café Pasta, Strada and Giovanni Rana (not yet part of a chain, but this excellent and low-priced restaurant near Regent's Park – reviewed here some months ago – I am sure soon will be). Nor do supermarkets help the cause of the mama and papa-run local Italian. Waitrose very recently upped the game with a range of ready meals devised by Heston – I have sampled the lasagne, and have to say that it is excellent (as is, on quite another tack, his shepherd's pie). In the lasagne we have – among many other ingredients and seasoning – egg pasta, beef, pork, onion, tomato, white wine, parmesan, double cream, extra virgin olive oil, celery, sherry vinegar, umami paste, beef stock, garlic, star anise ... dear me: and all for under £4: how can the trattoria compete?

Sardinian

So when I went to lunch at Pane Vino in Kentish Town – a long established place with strong Sardinian overtones – I was not too surprised to find the place empty, nor the proprietress/chef/front of house/waitress rather sadly resigned to the prevailing situation. The restaurant is as decently positioned as anything can be amid this dismal high street – opposite the Tube, but next to



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