

SevenFiftyDaily

The Impact of Own-Rooted Vines on Wine

From terroir transmission to flavor expression, winemakers discuss the draw of ungrafted vines



Vines at Clos St. Jacques. Photo courtesy of Champagne Bollinger.

Protecting Vinous Heritage

One of the world's best-known wines from own-rooted vines is a bit of a fluke. [Champagne Bollinger's Vieilles Vignes Françaises Champagne](#) draws its unique Blanc de Noirs character from two walled vineyards—Clos des Chaudes Terres and Clos Saint-Jacques—in Ay, France, that have somehow dodged the phylloxera bullet for more than 100 years.

“Vieilles Vignes Françaises is very characteristic of traditional Champagne,” says Denis Bunner, the deputy *chef de cave* at Bollinger. The vintage wine, which is only released in exceptional years, draws its intense power and concentration from a small set of high-density, own-rooted vines that are pruned in the traditional *en foule* technique, which was used across Champagne before the phylloxera outbreak. Essentially, when the vines are cut back each year, the second-year growth is buried underground, adding layers to the root structure, which Bunner says “refreshes the [root]stock.”

“It is very interesting to taste once in your life,” he says, with a laugh, “because the wine is so present that you forget the bubbles.”

What exactly makes the wine’s profile so unique is likely a combination of factors, but according to Bunner, the ungrafted vines are the main contributor: “That is the magic of Vieilles Vignes Françaises—because all the [other] Champagne has been grafted.” Bunner adds that the ungrafted Pinot Noir vines provide a varietal intensity he has not found elsewhere.

How these two Bollinger vineyards have endured is also a mystery, but they may be on borrowed time. Through the 1990s, Vieilles Vignes Françaises included grapes from a third pre-*phylloxera* vineyard, but eventually *phylloxera* found it and devoured the ancient root system. Bollinger’s attempts to replant the vineyard on own-rootstock were unsuccessful, and a similar fate could await the *en foule* vines of Clos des Chaudes Terres and Clos Saint-Jacques.

A Better Wine or a Better Story?

The power of own-rooted vines may be tangible to those who get their fingernails dirty in the vineyard, but to an ordinary consumer perusing a wine list, does it matter?

For Bollinger’s Bunner, own-rooted vines carry something even more important than a story: They hold the heritage of a *terroir*. “We are very proud of Vignes Françaises because this is the real taste of Pinot Noir as it was at the foundation of Bollinger. We use the same viticultural method, the same vinification method. Nothing has changed.”

Regardless of the scientific evidence and theory behind own-rooted vines, perhaps their greatest significance is the emotional weight they carry.

