

## Soft pruning conference

*Sunday, December 10th 2023  
Hotel Post, Lech, Austria*

There are few people who understand grapevines as deeply as Marco Simonit. The founder of Simonit&Sirch has spent more than 30 years developing his innovative, advanced pruning technique, which is now used across major wine regions from Barossa to Bordeaux. Premium wineries call him and his team to consult on their vineyards, nurture and prune their vines, especially old vines whose grapes produce some of the most valuable and beautiful wines.

“Humans need the vines but vines don’t need the humans.”

-Marco Simonit

The Simonit&Sirch pruning method can seem complex and technical at first glance but as his co-presenter, UK wine writer and biologist Dr. Jamie Goode declared at the start of the Arlberg Weinberg seminar: “What he has got to say is really exciting.” Many people take pruning for granted, he noted, adding that he was full of admiration for Marco’s work.

Simonit positions himself in the middle of two worlds – the human and the natural worlds. “Vineside” as he puts it is where he spends much of his time. In the vineyard, you need to understand soil, terroir, microclimate, and on the human side, the goals of the winery and what kind of wine is being produced.



## New approach

When Marco talks about bush vines in the south of Italy, it comes as no surprise to discover that he likes to sketch and has a minute eye for detail. What is needed, he says, is a new approach to the chronology of the vine, noting that in any situation with living things it is important to both hear and observe. He points out the one-, two-, three-, and four-year old wood in photos and emphasizes that the focus should be on the space and the branching.

Vine planting density is of secondary importance, Simonit says. There are amazing examples of vineyards with 1,000 or 2,000 old vines per hectare but also those with 10,000 vines per hectare. Instead, what is of paramount importance, is a deeper understanding of what happens ‘vineside’. Goode reiterated that point: space and chronology of healthy wood are the two things that really matter, not planting density.

*“My focus since 1988 is to understand better the relationship between humans and vines and pruning is one of the most invasive things in terms of the impact on the health of the vines.”*



One of the fundamental principles of the Simonit&Sirch pruning method is to make small cuts to the vine so that they are not left with large “wounds” that hinder the sap flow inside. Vines that have a lot of wounds might survive but the effort to domesticate the vine has been traumatic, leading to dead wood. For Marco, the trailing system used, whether Guyot or Cordon, doesn't matter. Instead, the vineyard worker needs to follow the evolution of the architecture of the vine.

## The dangers of bad pruning

Both Simonit and Goode agree that flexibility is key – as is an eye to the future. How is the vineyard going to look in 30- or 50-years' time and how are the trunk and arms of the vines going to develop over decades? When large cuts are made to a vine, there is less live wood as the vine essentially abandons this part known as the desiccation cone. There is also a greater risk of fungi, including the de-

velopment of the grapevine trunk disease esca. The consequences of this disease are “very dangerous”, given that diseased vines do not have a good chance of becoming older. And when the points of the vine die, production is lost, resulting in huge economic consequences for the vineyard owner.

Genetics also plays a part when it comes to old vines. Simonit cites the example of one of his clients, Château d'Yquem, who used the same pruners and the same pruning technique for several years on both its Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc vines. However, after 20 years, 30% of the Sauvignon Blanc vines had died while all the Semillon vines had survived.

While terms like “biodynamic” and “natural” wines are much spoken about today, less is said about bad practice farming, which results in more inputs being needed such as water. Simonit has experience tending to both biodynamic and conventional vineyards but for him the biggest difference is the human intervention.



Marco Simonit explains the impact of pruning on the vine (c) Anna Stöcher

*“I love biodynamic practices but you can help your vines become older even if you are conventional.”*

And simply pulling out vines and replanting parts of an old vineyard is not a successful outcome either because of the different quality and quantity of the vines in a single vineyard. Marco likens this situation to trying to care for a teenager and an old man at

the same time. The quality of rootstock from nurseries is also variable. One audit conducted by Simonit&Sirch in Provence of 100,000 vines in 2022 found that at least 30% were not well grafted or of the right diameter.





When it comes to the future of pruning, Marco highlights the shortage of people around the world who are available to work in vineyards and the lack of skills. Education is important, particularly when so many workers are immigrants and may work only for short periods of time.

To get the best outcome, he suggests wineries invest time to find a tailor-made solution and develop their own standard operating procedures to teach and coach their workers before they go out into the vineyards. Inexperienced workers are “very risky” for vines.





## Limitless lifespan?

When it comes to middle aged vines, is there a point where they are beyond help even from Simonit&Sirch? If the vine is still alive, Marco says he can help. His work doesn't have to start with young vines because it is possible to restyle older vines. And when it comes to the lifespan of old vines, he believes the only limit to age is the quality of the work in the vineyard. His campus in Friuli, Italy has 36-year-old vines with homogenous shoot sizes. If the vines can be in this shape after 36 years, there is no reason for them not to live to 60 years old and beyond.

In addition to making small cuts on one side of the wood, the amount of protective wood left on the vine is one of the fundamental principles of the Simonit&Sirch pruning method. This portion of protective wood stops the development of the desiccation cone, making the vine more resilient.

*“You can find solutions in your home; you can observe the reactions of the vines”*

More resilient vines are also less susceptible to climate stress. The changing climate around the world is evident in drought, heat strike, sunburn and changes in grape ripening patterns. But here the right pruning technique can help. Building up living wood in the vine increases the efficiency of the water that is available. In winegrowing regions where heat is a problem, a natural canopy can be built on the vine to protect the grapes from the sun. Sharing his wealth of knowledge comes naturally to Marco Simonit.

“During the Covid-19 pandemic, he established online pruning courses, in part to build a community of pruners around the globe. He is also conscious of the big social impact his work can have. Upskilling workers doing what has traditionally been considered a manual labour job, not only leads to better outcomes in the vineyard but also higher pay and better living conditions for the workers themselves.

So why, ultimately, might the old vines that Marco nurtures so carefully make better wine? They have a developed root system. Higher carbohydrate reserves in their trunks and roots which is important especially at the beginning of the season. They may be able to adapt to the environmental conditions they find themselves in and even perhaps contribute something to each other, similar to the way in which trees can share resources (although the science behind this has not yet been demonstrated in the vineyard). “There are some very good reasons why old vines might be better,” Goode said in summary. “In practice they make great wines from old vineyards very often.”



Bottles for the Old Vines Tasting (c) Anna Stöcher

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 SIMONIT&SIRCH: [SIMONITESIRCH.COM](http://SIMONITESIRCH.COM)  
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