



What I Learned about MN Varieties in Vermont and New Hampshire

I had a wonderful and educational tour of vineyards and wineries in Northern Vermont recently thanks to an invitation from Dr. Lorraine Berkett at the University of Vermont and Dr. Becky Grube at UNH. It was a good chance to experience the University of Minnesota cold hardy hybrids in action, in the field and tasting rooms.

I was very impressed!

This matters for wineries in cold regions such as NE and north central Pennsylvania where these varieties make wine culture possible where it previously was not. While these grapes are not high end vinifera competitors, they make attractive and delicious wines. As one would guess for cold regions the best are white wines but the reds are getting better.

Our hats are off to Peter Hemsted and his team at UMN for developing these varieties, and to Elmer Swenson, who was the original pioneer breeder. The best of these wines are almost completely lacking in “grapey” flavors that indicate their native species heritage. If well grown and made, they may even fool some vinifera snobs.

The wine industry in Vermont is just gaining some traction. There are seven commercial wineries in the state but the potential for many more. Agriculture and agri-tourism are huge industries in Vermont and cheese is one of its main products and attractions. What goes better with cheese than wine?

These MN varieties are hardy to -30F and below so they can stand the winter chill and most have a short vegetative cycle so they ripen quickly. It was the first week of August and the Marquette at one vineyard was past 50% veraison. It is very important to develop and maintain a healthy and balanced vine in this environment where numerous stresses can challenge the vine (cold, frost, hail, rain, drought, etc). Site selection and sound viticulture planning is probably the best way to enhance vine sustainability. Achieving a balanced vine is very important to successful viticulture in cold regions. Excellent drainage (natural and applied) and moderate fertility will help to grow better wine. A proper soil evaluation can reveal these qualities.



Marquette at Veraison

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Understanding the performance of the MN varieties will help you to plan how to adapt the best viticulture to each one. There isn't a lot of accumulated information about these varieties but there are enough growers with a few years of experience to really help you.

All of New England has had a dreadfully soggy growing season to date. July had 9" of rain and one day I was there it rained 3" in some places. I expected to see disease problems everywhere. What I saw was virtually nothing in these cold hardy AND disease resistant MN varieties. Their fortitude is even more impressive given the relatively few sprays used and sometimes inadequate spray delivery technology. For this reason alone, these varieties should be considered, perhaps even outside of cold regions. It also has a lot to do with the hard work of my host, Lorraine Berkett, the plant pathologist for grapes at UVM, educating growers about disease control. We saw a little bit of black rot on fruit and tissue necrosis that looked like botrytis with concentric rings of spores.

Vines were almost always trained on a high wire cane system, either single canopy or GDC. This is a very appropriate method given the naturally droopy growth habit of these varieties. The best vineyards were shoot positioned once or twice and had evenly spaced shoots cascading down to the ground. This greatly enhances canopy performance. Some leaf removal definitely helped exposure for aeration, sunlight and spray materials. We encountered the usual problems with weed control and in some cases it was reducing vine vigor to the point of concern. Vines varied in size dramatically for different reasons.



I noted the direct connection between availability of funds and the quality of viticulture. Quality is another word for labor. At this level of production, small farm wineries, you just have to have the labor to do the work in the vineyard when it's needed. This takes planning, organization and execution. It is also important that you know what you are doing so you can pass on correct instructions to the crew. Guessing often ends up as mistakes, sometimes irreconcilable in the wine.

We tasted some very impressive wines. These wines tasted great and were, in most cases, very well made. As one might guess, the whites were better than reds and such a cold region is made for whites. Aromatic white varieties displayed attractive floral aromas and fruity flavors and no Labrusca character.

La Crescent was consistently a very attractive aromatic white wine with tons of fruit and reminiscent of an edelzwicker-type blend of Gewurztraminer-Riesling and other Germanic varieties. It would be a killer tasting room wine. The best we may have tried was a 2007 from Champlain Valley Vineyards. Ray Knutsen has crafted a delicious white wine with zesty flavors and acidity with wonderful balance.

Probably the best wine I tasted was a blended white called Black Sparrow made from a blend of Prairie Star/Frontenac Gris/La Crescent. It made me think of a NZ Sauvignon Blanc (although Chris likens it to a Pinot Gris. Sorry, it's better than that). It was a wine that could be poured with pride anywhere.

A real revelation was the late harvest and ice wines. At Shelburne Vineyards we tasted the 2007 Vidal ice wine, a true version of this classic style made in accordance with Ontario ice wine standards. It was concentrated yet silky smooth with lots of peach, apricot and honey flavors. The Rhapsody is made from Arctic Riesling, a variety I guarantee you have not tried yet this was a delicious, Riesling-like wine with intense, peachy flavors. The later harvest La Crescent has a wonderful floral bouquet and pear and apple flavors. These are wines comparable in quality to those being made in Ontario, which has used them as the foundation stones for their hugely successful wine industry. The same could happen here. Granted, these wines are very challenging to produce but they have the conditions and grapes to do it. Wow! These are really nice wines! Not by Vermont standards, by anyone's standards.

Uh, yes, we can make very high quality white wines here from the MN varieties. These commercial examples are my first experience and I consider it to be a revelation, epiphany, wake-up call, or whatever you want to call it. It is exciting because it creates possibilities and opportunities.

I'm not sure what to do about red wines. I was unable to taste a varietal Marquette although UMN samples in the past have displayed great promise in terms of ripeness, non-grapiness and balanced acidity. I'm guessing that blending is the secret but I don't yet know with what grape. As Marquette is more widely grown and made, they will figure it out. Frontenac seems to be a weaker red variety now, perhaps best suited for a nouveau-style wine, blush or port. There was excitement about St Croix but I did not taste a varietal example.

Andy Farmer is operating a very well managed nursery in Poultney, VT. We visited his fields and they are immaculate. Northeastern Vine Supply would be a good source for these plant materials. His vines were lush and healthy and very well tended. Lincoln Peak Vineyards is also a source of MN grape plants.



The people here are either brave or crazy or both. But one cannot help admire them for their fortitude and persistence under challenging conditions. They are true pioneers, forging a commercial wine industry with real and really good wines in a place where it was not realistically possible even a decade ago. It is thrilling to be here and share in their enthusiasm.

Viticulture and enology have a long way to go but they have gained a toe-hold with the MN varieties. Maybe on the very best sites (i.e. warm) more tender hybrids or even hardy vinifera

can be grown. The wines I tried are a positive indication of what can be done. I can't imagine that they will only get better with more experience in the fields and cellars.



Horticulture farm manager Terry Bradshaw in new NE-1020 variety trial vineyard

UVM and UNH (as well as UMass) are doing their best to support the fledgling wine industry. UVM has planted a USDA NE-1020 wine grape variety trial. It is well executed and managed. It should provide valuable data about the MN and other varieties to wine growers in the region.

One can only hope that two states that rely so heavily on agriculture and tourism to drive the economy have the vision to realize what a potential gold mine the wine community can be to these industries. They really deserve the support of the land grant institutions and state legislator and agencies.

Burlington is a beautiful region, especially in the summer, with mountains, meadows and lakes. If you are interested in these varieties I strongly suggest a working vacation here to taste wines and walk the vineyards.

Many thanks to my hosts Lorraine Berkett and Becky Grube and their colleagues and staff for their warm hospitality.

Information resources:

Lincoln Peak Vineyards: <http://www.lincolnpeakvineyard.com/index.php>

Shelburne Vineyards: <http://www.shelburnevineyard.com/>

Northeastern Vine Supply: <https://www.nevinesupply.com/index.html>

Cold Climate Grape Production web site at UVM: <http://www.uvm.edu/pss/grape/>

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