



Winegrowing in the Endless Mountains

If you go far afield in the wine world there are always interesting surprises around every bend. I recently spent a couple of days with wine growers in the Endless Mountains region, northwest of Scranton. This is a region of hills, forests, small towns and hunters but, hey, why not wine? There is an industrious, motivated, passionate group of vintners here that are going to make a firm statement on the wine scene in Pennsylvania and around the region.

Yes, it is cold here. The low winter temperature often dips to -15F in Tunkhannock, arguably the center of this emerging region along the central section of the Susquehanna River. It gets colder as you go west and higher up. The growing season is a short one, about 150-160 days so we aren't ripening Cabernet Sauvignon here. But who needs another cab anyway?

What they are doing exceptionally well here, as you would expect, are the aromatic white wines, taking their lead from the Finger Lakes but focusing more prominently on hybrid varieties, both traditional and modern. It is good to play to your strength and the climate has funneled the varietal selection into whites, which is not a problem because, as it turns out, there are so many intriguing and delicious flavors to be discovered that it can only be described as an embarrassment of riches.

The viticulture blessing of these varieties is that they are short season and cold hardy, just what the doctor ordered for this climate. You may cringe at the thought of the acidity in these wines yet it is entirely possible to make very well balanced, even delicate whites from these varieties. There are other viticultural virtues growing these varieties including their relative disease resistance which means much less spraying. In many ways, they almost seem to take care of themselves as long as they are placed on a suitable trellis system. Not that they come completely without complication – Frontenac has magnesium deficiency problems and there is a tendency to overcrop. But compared to growing vinifera these varieties are a viticultural stroll in the park. There are plenty of viticulture questions still to be answered, in no small part because these varieties are so new to commercial wine grower. Some are very basic, such as the best row and vine spacing, high or low training, the need for divided canopies, optimal yields for quality for each variety, determination of full grape maturity, and the best sites for these new varieties. I saw drip irrigation on the hybrids which is a pretty clear indication that they are aiming for quality based on this investment.

Vinifera also has a presence here. The 8-acre Sugar Hollow Vineyard is growing Cabernet Franc, Riesling and Chardonnay. Nimble Hill and Grovedale are also growing Riesling and Chardonnay. These grapes will test the mettle of these meticulous growers to get the fruit ripe and sustain the vine through the winter. Under these conditions, the margin of error is small and viticulture must be perfect to achieve consistent quality. It is all part of the grand experiment.

There is a lot of creative work going on here. This is the frontier so everything is wide open, there are no rules. I have always believed that getting to good wine is a matter of filling a

knowledge gap and gaining experience. Here there is a learning curve as steep as a space shuttle launch. Information is sought, digested, synthesized and utilized with astonishing speed and effectiveness. Wineries bring in grapes from the Finger Lakes, Long Island and other parts of Pennsylvania for blending and varietal wines that cannot be grown here. That's no problem. It simply fills a void in the wine portfolio. Blending is also a major tool that is well used here. Two of the best white wines I had, a Nimble Hill Vidal-Riesling and a Grovedale Seyval-Chardonnay were both bursting with flavor and fruity aromas to the point of sensory overload. One thing a cool climate does very well is preserve the purity of fruit.

Many of the new MN and Swenson varieties are only now gaining notice in a commercial wine setting. I was fortunate earlier in the year to spend some time in northern Vermont and taste a few, among the most memorable was a Prairie Star blend that was a dead ringer for Sauvignon Blanc. I tasted some amazing wines here. Probably not wines that you will ever find in a New York City wine shop but wines that 90% of wine consumers could and will fall in love with. One of the most amazing was a St Pepin ice wine¹ made by Ed, an amateur wine maker that had all the concentration and intense flavors of an Ontario or German ice wine. A Frontenac Gris at Grovedale was an explosion of pineapple fruit with good roundness and balance. The Prairie Star at Birdsong was full of ripe fruit flavors. I wish I had taken better notes on the wines but I was too busy being pleasantly surprised by them. Veteran white hybrids like Cayuga White, Vidal, Vignoles and Seyval are also being used. The wine makers here are developing a great sense of balance for these wines, especially using acid and sugar to accentuate flavors. They are making excellent wines from dry to sweet and everything in between.

The Endless Mountains are a good example of how modern grape breeding has opened up vast new regions to wine which before could not sustain or ripen fruit. For me, the limit of viticulture is having to bury vines - if this is necessary then God did not intend for vines to grow in that place. But where vines were buried before, now they can stay perched comfortably on their trellises. What is amazing about these Swenson, UM, Cornell and other hybrids above even their viticultural virtues is their lack of grapey flavors. I would guess that in blind tastings against conventional white varieties that they may cause puzzlement from their unique flavors and quality but would stand up well against all other qualitative criteria for a fine wine.

The viticulture is still in its infant stages here but the wine making has progressed dramatically. Keven Durland, the wine maker at Nimble Hill, is a new talent that is setting the tone and standards for this region. I do not have words to describe his enthusiasm, it is off the charts. But he combines this with great attention to all wine making details. Many of his skills were acquired working as an intern with David Whiting, one of NY's finest wine makers at Red Newt Wine Cellars on Seneca Lake. The new Nimble Hill winery is functional, spotless and sports a small but well-equipped winery laboratory. Keven is working with Steve Grazaitis at Laddburg Hill Winery to acquire a microscope so they can do more microbiology work with their wines (Steve works at a hospital). Best of all, the wine makers in the area share their knowledge liberally and generously, helping newcomers to improve and the benefits are immediate and obvious.

Wherever wines are made there is enthusiasm for red wines. I remember being in the cellar of Zind-Humbrecht with Leonard and tasting through many of the best white wines I have ever tasted in my life. But finally we arrived at a small room with barriques and his eyes lit up as he

¹ This wine was made cryogenically by artificially freezing the grapes but there is certainly the potential for true ice wine in this region.

thiefed some light, fruity Pinot Noir into my glass. It was the wine that really got him excited and I hardly knew what to say. Well, with new hybrids like Marquette and St Croix the wine growers in the Endless Mountains can certainly do better than light and fruity but there is a long way to go to find a nice balance to the wines. The Frontenac was so redolent of pure cherries that you might as well call it a cherry wine. The St. Croix was dense and concentrated with nice flavors. In most cases, I encountered varying levels of “eastern twang” in the reds but I think that clever blending could bring these wines a long way towards balance. Even so, many wine drinkers would love these wines and they are no better or worse than their fickle and underachieving vinifera cousins in warmer regions to the south.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the extraordinary leadership that this region has to guide it through this process of discovery and evolution. As in most groups, new and old, there is always a core of important individuals who set the agenda and guide the process. Here, that core has been incredibly effective in pushing this small industry forward. They make sure that I get their needs onto my agenda and that I visit the region regularly. They arranged the entire tour along with meetings and meals. It is superbly executed. There is simply no underestimating the value of visionary and effective leadership.

There are plenty of challenges ahead for this industrious and emerging region. The viticulture must continue to evolve to insure consistent fruit ripeness and maximum vine survival. Exactly where the best sites are and what the best varieties will be is still very uncertain. They face many of the same questions and problems about vine nutrition, canopy and crop management, vineyard floor management as other growing regions. But they have the advantage of core varieties that seem particularly well-suited to the climate. They can continue to play around the edges with vinifera, but the hybrids will be the bread and butter.

Of course, there is no point in making great wine if there is no one to enjoy it. Marketing and promotion of the region and its wines will be an important part of continuing growth and success. Fortunately, they are well situated to be effective in this area being located only 2 hours from Philadelphia and New York in beautiful country. A loosely-knit wine trail exists but more effort needs to be put into an effective trail such as Seneca Lake or the Lehigh Valley. I have little doubt that they will find partners in ag and rural development, and local travel and tourism bureaus who will be anxious to help them. I would encourage wine growers around the region to visit the Endless Mountains, especially if you are growing these hybrids. The best way forward is through effective collaboration and areas like northern Vermont and Quebec could be great learning partners.

As a result of this visit, I believe that these new hybrid varieties in the hands of skilled wine growers offer great wine potential. The efforts here help to validate them and give them commercial credence. It is great credit to these hard working and passionate pioneers. So what if someone plants another cab vineyard in Napa and makes another ho-hum \$250 cult wine? These pioneers are expanding our horizons and bringing us great flavors from a new region and expressing a unique terroir which is absolutely their own.

Mark L. Chien
State-wide Viticulture Extension Educator
November, 2008