Blue and Black Heirloom Grape Varieties for the Northeast

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This article outlines some recommended blue and black heirloom grape varieties that I have grown and evaluated for the past fifteen years. My farm, Cedar Cliff, is located in Athens, NY, which is on the west bank of the Hudson River about fifty miles north of Newburgh, NY. These quality heirloom varieties were bred in eastern Massachusetts and in the Hudson Valley between 1840 and 1880. Here we will detail some of those varieties that are suitable for cultivation in most of New England and the Middle Atlantic States except for its coldest regions. These varieties are used primarily to produce red wines.

All of these varieties are productive, winter hardy, fungus disease and drought resistant, and tolerate wide swings in temperature. Because of their resilience in the field, they need fewer, and sometimes much fewer, inputs of costly labor, spray material, other supplies, or cultivation considerations than most commercial varieties that are currently grown today. Consequently, they can be grown profitably on most viable vineyard sites in the Northeast. They may indeed be candidates for those interested in organic grape cultivation or very low spray programs. Further, since they are locally developed heirloom grape varieties, they should command heightened interest and demand by wineries and the wine consuming public.

Bacchus *(riparia, labrusca)* was created by the noted grape hybridizer James H. Ricketts (1818-1915) of Newburgh, NY. It is a seedling of Clinton that was first exhibited in 1879. It is vigorous to very vigorous, healthy, productive, very winter hardy, and very resistant to fungus diseases and insect damage. Bacchus adapts to a wide range of soils, but does not thrive in soils that are droughty or which contain too much lime.

It is self-fertile and flowers very early to early. However, it ripens late in the season. The clusters are small to medium, below average in length, slender, often have a single shoulder, and compact. The thin-skinned berries are slightly smaller than medium size, black, and glossy in texture. Its virtues include its very high winter hardiness, freedom from fungus and insect damage, ease of propagation, high productivity, and capability to bear grafts. Its sugars at harvest are between 22˚and 25˚ Brix.

The red wines produced by Bacchus are big, dark, fruity and flinty with muted native-American *labrusca*-type flavors that can be improved with wood aging. The wines have big middle acids and tannins to provide its wines with great body and presence. The wine is not overpowering, so it can be utilized in blends.

Barry (Rogers No. 43) (*labrusca, vinifera*) was bred by Edward S. Rogers (1826-1899) of Salem, MA in 1851. It is a Carter x Black Hamburg hybrid. The color is black to dark purplish-black, glossy with a heavy blue bloom. Barry is a vigorous variety that is winter hardy in a manner similar to Delaware or Baco Noir. The variety is productive and susceptible to somewhat susceptible to fungus diseases, especially powdery mildew. Its female flower blooms by mid-season and it is sterile with reflexed stamens. Its best pollinators include other mid-season self-fertile varieties such as Concord, Cottage, Empire State, Delaware, Iona, and Winchell. Barry is harvested late mid-season to early late season, after Concord or Baco Noir.

The berry is large to very large with a thin skin that adheres to the pulp. The attractive cluster is compact, medium to large, short, very broad, slightly tapering to cylindrical, that sub-divides often with double shoulders. In sum, it grows well and has a soft and appealing Concord-like taste with little or no Muscat flavors.

Black Eagle *(labrusca, vinifera)* was hybridized by Dr. Richard T. Underhill (1802-1871) around 1862, possibly along with his nephew Stephen W. Underhill (1837-1925). It comes from a seed of Concord fertilized by Black Prince. This is a self-infertile variety, but easily pollinates in a mixed vineyard. It buds out late and its leaf pattern looks very much like *vinifera*, but its thick leathery leaves are olive colored like the *labrusca* Concord. Its female flowers open by mid-season and it ripens by mid-season like Concord. The variety is vigorous in the field on heavy loam soils, has good cold resistance, and is moderately susceptible to

fungus diseases. The clusters are large, long, tapering, and single or double shouldered, moderately compact to moderately loose. The berries are oval and black with a glossy thick bloom. The flavors are integrated and full with a combination of soft Native-American *labrusca* and some Muscat elements.

Concord *(labrusca)* is a purebred Native-American *labrusca*, the seed of a wild grape that was planted by Ephraim Bull (1805-1895) of Concord, MA in the fall of 1843. Concord was introduced to the public in 1854 and spread rapidly throughout most of America's fruit-growing regions to become the leading blue grape grown in the eastern United States as early as 1865. It continues to this day to be the most widely planted blue grape in the eastern United States and Washington State.

It is a vigorous to very vigorous variety that is very productive on many different soils and in different climates. Concord is very winter hardy and relatively resistant to fungus diseases and insect damage that ripens by mid-season to late mid-season.

The fruit quality of Concord is not high; it lacks richness and delicacy of flavor and does not make very good wine (except for sherries and ports) when compared to other *labrusca* varieties. However, as a table grape, the cluster is of good size and attractive. This article covers Concord because while it is widely grown in the Northeast, it is seldom seriously covered in survey articles. Also, Concord is mentioned here because it is so commonly grown that it is a great reference grape to compare it to other grape varieties covered in this article, as it relates to their winter hardiness, flowering time, ripening time, disease resistance, and productivity.

Cottage *(labrusca)* is Ephraim Bull's second most successful hybrid grape variety after Concord and in some ways is its superior. Cottage is a seedling of Concord and was introduced by Bull in 1869. Cottage resembles its seedling parent Concord in many ways,

Concord *(labrusca)* is a purebred Native-American *labrusca*, the seed of a wild grape that was planted by Ephraim Bull (1805-1895) of Concord, MA in the fall of 1843. Photo credit: Linda Pierro, Flintmine Press.

but distinguishes itself in others.

Cottage is a very vigorous growing variety with thick olive-colored leathery leaves similar to Concord. The canes are thinner and more spindly than Concord and it develops a thicker canopy. Cottage is more particular to the soils in which it thrives, unlike Concord, which thrives in most soil types; hence, this characteristic can limit the productivity of Cottage when compared to Concord. Otherwise, it is a very vigorous, healthy, and winter hardy that has moderately good fungus disease resistance, but it is not as resistant to fungus diseases as Concord.

Cottage fruit is of better quality than Concord, with a less foxy native-American *labrusca* flavor. It is richer and more delicate in flavor that lends itself to the production of better quality wines. Cottage wines have a more muted foxy *labrusca* flavor profile, with tannins that are more balanced and a softer acid structure. This variety ripens at about the same time as Concord, or earlier, but tends to ripen unevenly and drops its fruit when ripe. The clusters are somewhat smaller than Concord, with similar sized berries that are a dull black color. This is not a table grape. It can make acceptable wines, especially when used as a base for ports and sherries or for semi-dry country red wines.

Eumelan *(labrusca, vinifera, aestivalis)* is a chance seedling that grew in the yard of Mr. Thorne of Fishkill Landing (Beacon), New York around 1847. The vine is vigorous, very winter hardy, and productive. Its clusters and berries are well formed and of good size. The round, medium-sized berries are a very attractive black to blue in color with a fine bloom. The cluster is loose, large, and rather long and slender, slightly tapering to cylindrical with one shoulder.

The flavor of the grape has little foxiness and is rich, sweet, and vinous, which makes a good and hearty red wine. The sugars can reach 24˚ Brix with low acid. Eumelan ripens late early to early mid-season, but since it hangs on the vine well and does not crack or shell, it can be harvested mid-season to late mid-season. Some of its disadvantages are its moderate susceptibility to fungus diseases and sterile female flowers. The flowers bloom late, but with a compatible pollinator, Eumelan does pollinate easily. Eumelan can produce relatively complex flinty red wines with good body and fruit in the nose and taste for an heirloom variety. These wines are good on their own or used in blends.

Herbert (Rogers No. 44) *(labrusca, vinifera)* is a quality Rogers black heirloom grape that can be used for wine or the table. It was used extensively by the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station grape breeding program to develop Steuben, Corot Noir, Noiret, and Geneva Red (GR-7). Like most other Rogers hybrids, it is a Carter x Black Hamburg cross. Its color is dull blue-black to black with a thick blue bloom.

Herbert is vigorous to very vigorous for a *labrusca-vinifera* hybrid and is productive that produces a quality black grape. Its growth habit is open and airy which helps to keep fungus diseases in check. The variety is winter hardy to moderately winter hardy and its fungus disease resistance is good. The bloom date is mid-season, and as with most Rogers hybrids, it has a self-sterile female flower with reflexed stamens. Its pollinators can be other mid-season self-fertile flowering varieties such as Concord, Delaware, Empire State, Iona, Winchell, or Worden, but not any of the self-infertile Rogers hybrids even if they bloom in mid-season. It pollinates well in a mixed variety vineyard to produce full clusters.

The berry is round oval, and very large to medium large, but is irregular in size. The skin adheres to the flesh of the berry somewhat. The cluster, like most first generation Rogers' hybrids, is large to medium large, broad and tapering. The cluster can be rather long, with one shoulder and moderately compact to loose. The harvest date is mid-season to a bit earlier, along the lines of Concord and earlier than Barry. Herbert is a dual-purpose grape, with an emphasis on wine with sugars at 19˚ to 21˚ Brix. Overall, its taste is of a soft Concord variety with a few Muscat flavors.

It is my hope that growers and wineries in the Northeast who are looking for "new" grape varieties to cultivate and wines to produce will consider these locally developed heirloom blue and black wine grape varieties. Further, that those interested in low or no spray programs to produce grapes organically will consider these grape varieties. This article is based on the author's over forty years of experience growing cool climate grapes in Athens and Middle Hope, NY and making wine from them; and *Grapes of the Hudson Valley and Other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada,* by J. Stephen Casscles (Coxsackie, N.Y.: Flint Mine Press, 2015). This book has much more specific information on many of the grapes covered by this article. (the book is available at www.flintminepress.com). The author's email address is cassclesjs@yahoo.com.