



VINEYARDS AND WINERIES IN MINNESOTA

By David A. Bailly (1987)

Grapes have been grown in Minnesota since the earliest of times. The *Vitis Riparia* is a grape native to the southern half of Minnesota and flourishes along the many riverbanks of the Mississippi and Minnesota watersheds. The native Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwa (Chippewa) ate the fresh berries and used the dry fruit as part of the pemmican. However, no evidence has ever surfaced that fermentation into wine was ever practiced in the pre-pioneer period. The early settlers called it the frost grape, as it was best when picked after the first hard frost.

With the opening up of the Minnesota Territory to settlement in the 1850's, grape growing was tried along with all other horticultural pursuits. Varieties developed on the eastern seaboard such as the Concord were somewhat successful in the southeast corner of the state. Photos from the turn of the century show lush vineyards in and around Winona and La Crescent. The fruit was commercially used for fresh fruits or preserves. No wine was made except for personal use. However, these eastern varieties were not quite hardy enough and the coldest of winters, together with the growth of the California fresh fruit industry, eventually did the industry in. By the 1930's grape growing was limited to backyard vineyards for family use only.

Keen horticulturists realized quite early that cross breeding with the native *Riparia* was necessary if one hoped to have a vineyard that would survive for any prolonged period in Minnesota. Shortly after the Civil War, Lewis Swelter of Carver County crossed the *Vitis Labrusca* (Concord) with the *Vitis Riparia* and developed four named varieties: 1. The Beta; 2. The Swelter; 3. The Monitor; 4. The Dakota. Nothing developed anywhere in the world has proven to be as cold hardy as the Beta. It is the benchmark by which all subsequently developed vines are gauged for winter survival. Commercially it is too strong in flavor, high in acid and low in sugar to be competitive as fresh fruit or for winemaking. It is still grown today, however, for preserves like jellies and jams.

Maxwell J. Dorsery (1880 - ?) worked in grape breeding at the University of Minnesota between 1911 and 1921 and developed a number of varieties that have survived down to the present day, including the Blue Jay (M-69) and the Minnesota 78. The latter is the first variety that is Minnesota winter hardy and which does not have a *Labrusca* dominance.

Arthur Noble and A. N. Wilcox continued Dorsery's work at the University for some time after 1920 working with as many as 5,000 different seedlings. Their goal was to develop a winter hardy *Labrusca* type fresh fruit grape. However, of the 20 or so varieties that had the most promise, all were thought by them to be too *Labrusca* in flavor or too spicy for fresh fruit.

In addition to the above, numerous amateur breeders have from time to time developed vines of varying degrees of winter hardiness. The problem with all of these breeding programs was that the *Vitis Labrusca* was used in the breeding program. The *Vitis Labrusca* group of grapes has a particular characteristic that dominates in any breeding programs. The best that could ever have been hoped was that a Minnesota adaptable "Concord" would emerge. As this variety was a poor substitute for the noble grapes of France and California, there was little hope that the Minnesota breeding programs would ever be commercially successful.

The first attempt to develop a winter hardy grape for northern climates in a style more compatible with traditional European and California grapes was by Elmer Swenson, formerly a technician with the Horticulture Research Center of the Department of Horticulture Science and Landscape Architecture of the College of Agriculture, University of Minnesota. While with the University, and since his retirement in 1981, he has developed a number of crosses that are *Labrusca* free and some that make wine equal, if not superior, to some of the French traditional varieties. To date, their vine characteristics and winter hardiness are being studied, with no clear verdicts. The grapes he has released so far are 1. The Edelweis; 2. The Swenson Red; 3. The K-Grape; and, 4. The St. Croix. The wine quality and winter hardiness of these vines are still being studied. It is now felt that the Edelweis and Swenson Red cannot be grown in Minnesota without some winter protection. The K-Grape and St. Croix have not been tested enough for final evaluation. In 1975, Patrick Pierquet, formerly a research assistant in the Department of Horticultural Sciences and Landscape Architecture of the College of Agriculture, University of Minnesota, surveyed the various clones of the *Vitis Riparia* growing wild throughout the Upper Midwest and in Manitoba, Canada. The "best of these were brought to the University of Minnesota to be part of their permanent collection. The better vines from these two groups are being recrossed by Swenson, the ongoing program at the University of Minnesota and various amateur breeders. In addition, grape breeding programs exist at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, Wisconsin and the University of South Dakota at Brookings, South Dakota. The latter has released the Valiant, which may be as hardy as the Beta but is too *Labrusca* dominated to be of much commercial value.



These people seem to have solved the problems for winter survival, wine quality and good vine characteristics, but not all in the same vine. With adequate funds, it appears to be just a matter of time before they will put all of these qualities together in one vine and Minnesota will have a true wine grape adaptable to our winter. Until then, the Minnesota developed method ("Alma Method") of growing vines will be standard cultural practice for wintering the vines.

In other parts of the world, trunks are trained straight up to a head three to five feet off the ground. To give such vines winter protection, the vine would have to be bent over and brought down to the ground for cover. To do this the trunk would have to make a big loop and a good part of the trunk would not be able to be covered. The "Alma Method" is to train the trunks laterally along the ground for several feet and then gradually up to the first wire at about a 45-degree angle. When the vine is cut off the trellis in the fall, the entire trunk has a natural tendency to lay flat on the ground. Until the new hybrids come along, the "Alma Method" will be the principal cultural practice enabling wine grapes to survive Minnesota winters.

European immigrants brought to Minnesota their winemaking tradition. For whatever reason, this centered on the iron mining "Range" of northeastern Minnesota. The Italian and eastern immigrants would band together and ship in truckloads of grapes from California which would be processed in communal "wineries". These were never bonded premises but simply winemaking equipment shared by a number of immigrant families. The last of these was destroyed by fire about 1973. The now famous Mondovi family of California had their wine roots on the Minnesota "Range".

Minnesota bonded winery license no. 1 was issued just after prohibition to a group of St. Paulites headed by Phillip L. Memmer and Dr. Herman Kesting. They operated a small winery in West St. Paul until 1949 under the label Old Sibley House. The wine was made from fresh grapes shipped in from out of state. No local agricultural products were used.

In 1972 bonded winery license no. 2 was issued to Leland Gohlike for a small winery in the caves along the St. Croix River at Stillwater, Washington County. Mr. Gohlike had planned to make wine from concentrates. He produced a small quantity of wine but it never sold commercially.

The first wine made in which Minnesota grapes were used in part was in 1976 when David Macgregor commenced his operation with bonded winery no. 3.

Lake Sylvia Vineyard was owned by David Macgregor and was located in South Haven in Wright County. The winery was located in a former creamery at Maple Lake, Wright County, and was bonded for the 1976 vintage. The wine was aged in small oak cooperages and was on the market from time to time between 1977 and 1982 under the label Lake Sylvia Vineyard.

The capacity of the winery was about 2000 gallons. All the wines were dry table wines made from fresh grapes, some of which were grown in Minnesota. Macgregor has a vineyard consisting of seven acres, of which one-half acre is Vinifera (Riesling and Pinot Chardonnay). The balance is mixed French, Minnesota, Swenson and Macgregor hybrids. His production of grapes was not sufficient to sustain the winery and he would ship in fruit from out of state, blending it with his Minnesota grapes.

In 1983 David Macgregor became part of a co-op winery of a number of Minnesota wine growers in as diverse places as Redwood Falls, Welch, Aitkin and Rush City. In 1985 the name was changed to Northern Vineyards and the winery moved to Stillwater, Minnesota on the St. Croix River. Wine is sold only at this location, primarily to the tourist trade.

The first commercial wine made exclusively from Minnesota grown grapes was at the Alexis Bailly Vineyard in 1977. Located three miles south of Hastings and one mile west of U.S. Highway 61 in Dakota County, it is owned by David A. Bailly, a Minneapolis lawyer, and managed by his daughter, Nan Bailly. It holds bonded winery license no. 4. The property consists of 20 acres, of which 12 acres are planted in Foch, Millot, Seyval Blanc and several dozen miscellaneous hybrids. The winery was built in 1976 and is the first and only building built in Minnesota solely for winemaking purposes. It is made entirely out of local stone and Minnesota pine. It produces 4,000 to 8,000 gallons of grapes wine each year.

The winery is named after Alexis Bailly, an early French fur trader who came to Minnesota in the 1820's and was run out of the territory in 1834 for selling "high wine" (watered-down whiskey) to the Indians. He later returned to the state and founded the nearby village of Hastings, Minnesota.

The motto of the winery is "where the grapes can suffer" and is taken from a quote by Baron Phillip Rothschild who criticized California wines because the climate was too good. The Baron maintained that great wine can only be made when the grapes suffer from drought, storms, snow, cold, etc.

Until 1983, the winery made dry table wines from grapes in the style of French country wines. In 1983 they made the first dessert wine ever made from Minnesota grown grapes, which is fortified to 19% alcohol and with 8% residual sugar. All of the wines are made with Minnesota grapes and distributed only within the state, with the exception of a few restaurants across the country. The winery has won national awards for its Minnesota grown wine in 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984 and 1985. It is generally agreed that its red wines are among the better produced in the United States (and most surely among the best produced outside the west coast).



1983 also saw the issuance of bonded winery no. 5 to James Bird of Crystal, Minnesota (a metropolitan suburb) for a 5,000-gallon capacity facility. He is producing a sparkling wine that is a blend of grapes and apples. In addition, he has had a small nursery where he propagates and sells rooted cuttings of French hybrids and locally developed vines.

Bonded winery no. 6 is the Scenic Valley Winery of Lanesboro, Minnesota, which was bonded in 1984. Lanesboro is quaint old village in the rolling hills of southeastern Minnesota on the Root River. The winery is owned by a group of local investors who hope to develop the area into a major tourist area. They are making a number of sweet and semi-sweet fruit wines that are sold only at the winery.

The Minnesota Grape Growers Association was founded in 1975 and currently has over 150 members. For the most part, these are people who work small vineyards of under one-half acre growing French hybrids and experimental varieties developed under the various Upper Midwest programs, or by amateur breeders. The Association's principal contribution is a periodic newsletter and an annual symposium. The newsletter documents efforts by its members in the use of new and different cultural practices for growing grapes in Minnesota and/or the development of new and interesting varieties. As the work of this small group of people is somewhat unique in the world, the newsletter has been very popular outside of Minnesota and even outside of the United States. In addition, the annual symposium attempts to focus on grape growing and winemaking problems that are unique to very cold winter climates.